

The Martyrdom of Rev. Nicolas Van Kleef, C.M.

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US Eastern Province



Account of the Martyrdom of Fr. Nicolas

On 6 May 1989, I left Puerto Armuelles where I was assigned in my pastoral work, and went to Concepción, Bugaba. The next day presidential elections were scheduled, and I needed to vote in a precinct in Concepción, located in Daniel Octavio Crespo College. The days before the elections you could feel the tension on the streets because of the Military Dictatorship.

I was staying at the Parish House. Early in the morning I went to vote hoping to return to Puerto Armuelles the same day. I intended to celebrate Mass in one of the banana farms which were under my care.

Before I left to vote I had breakfast with Fr. Nicolas Van Kleef. He was an early riser, even though, it took him a while longer to get ready in the morning because he was a paraplegic. That Sunday morning, 7 May, as usual, he had Mass for the community of Santa Marta. I went to vote around 7:00 a.m. I left Nico home. He would leave a little later for Santa Marta which was only 15 minutes away from the house on Concepción hill.

As I arrived to the voting precinct there was a delay. Members of the army were there with their rifles drawn. The people waiting to vote were calm.

On two occasions, as I waited in line to vote, two people approached me and told me at my ear that they had killed a priest in Santa Marta. Those days one heard all kinds of rumors, so I did not give too much importance to what I heard. I knew I had left Nico in the Parish House and so I did not give much credibility to the news.

But I began to get concerned about the rumor. It was 9:00 a.m. and the voting precinct was still not opened. I left the line and told the people near me that I would return. I hurried up to the Parish House. I did not want to believe that Nico was dead. As I ran I thought I would never get there. The nine blocks seem interminable.

When I arrived I found Fr. Kevin Lawlor speaking to a man in front of the house. I waited for a while. I noticed Kevin's serious and alarming demeanor.

I asked him: "Is it true what I hear about Nico?" He shook his head without saying anything, and then he said: "What are we going to do?" I said: "Let us go to the Defense Ministry Headquarters" (it was just one block away).

We arrived there and saw hundreds of troops getting ready to guard the voting precincts.

I asked for the lieutenant on duty. We waited for a while. When he finally appeared I said to him: "They killed Fr. Nico." He did not say anything, but kept his eyes on the floor. "Where is Father? Where is the boy who accompanied him? Where is Father's automobile?" To all these questions he only said that he needed time to investigate, and he left. In the meantime, another young official appeared, I believe he was the captain, who told me that he did not have authorization to give me any information. "Tomorrow," he said, "the commando will release a declaration on the case." I was furious and angry, and told him I could not wait until tomorrow. Realizing that he would not give me an answer, I asked him for his own identification, but he refused. Fr. Kevin, silent and sad, had stood at my side all this time. Suddenly the lieutenant returned and told us that Fr. Nico was in the Regional Hospital in David. The forces in the Department of Defense had taken him there. The young man who accompanied Nico, as well as Fr. Nico's automobile, were also there. I became aware that in order to save this young man's life we needed to act fast.

Immediately we left for David looking for the Bishop, Msgr. Daniel E. Nuñez, who had been informed of the tragic event. Meanwhile, the news about Fr. Nico was spreading very fast. We took Bishop Nuñez with us, and went directly to the headquarters of the fifth military zone. There we talked to the colonel on duty who told us that Fr. Nico was improving according to what he had heard. I answered him: "How can he improve when half of his face was shot

out by an AK-47.” I added that our presence here had to do with the tragedy that had happened in Santa Marta.

We wanted to know who was the soldier who shot him. He told me, visibly disturbed, but without looking at me, that the soldier who shot him had been suspended from the Arm Forces, and that he had been arrested.

We demanded to see the young man who accompanied Fr. Nico (we were afraid for the young man’s safety, since we knew what G-2, the State Security Forces, were capable of doing). We also demanded the return of the automobile, (this would be evidence, which we were afraid they would erase), where Fr. Nico was shot, and a copy of the declaration that the young man had made, either in writing or on tape.

The colonel agreed and sent somebody for the young man. He also ordered someone, presumably an officer of the G-2, to return the automobile to us. The G-2 official told him that he was not authorized to do this, to which the colonel angrily answered: “Give the car to the priests.” In regard to the young man’s declarations, he told us that there was nothing in writing or on tape.

Before we left I asked about what orders were given to the soldiers who were guarding the voting places. He told me that these soldiers were not allowed to carry arms, nor point them at anyone. At that Bishop Nuñez, known to be a very calm person, exclaimed in a loud voice: “Lies, you are intimidating the people.” The colonel did not respond and left.

They brought the young man who had accompanied Fr. Nico to the moment of his assassination. He was pale, scared, but calm. He told us that his brother had gone with him from Concepción to David. He said that army soldiers took them to their headquarters. They did not hit them, but questioned them. This young man was 16 years old. As he was being questioned, the soldier kept hitting the wall with a stick, and warned the young man that he must say that what had happened to Fr. Nico was an accident and nothing else. Having his older brother on his side, he was brave enough to insist over and over again that it was not an accident. A few minutes later they gave us Fr. Nico’s automobile and we left.

Instead of going to the hospital, we went to the Bishop’s Office in David and met with the Diocesan Human Rights Committee presided by Bishop Nuñez, where the young man reported what had happened. That same day, Bishop Nuñez sent a letter to all the parishes and people throughout the diocese describing what had happened to Fr. Nico. I believed we needed to act fast since we feared for the lives of the young man and his brother. It is well known that many people had disappeared during the military dictatorship, for example, Fr. Héctor Gallego. We also wanted to

keep the automobile as proof of the crime, since there was blood and other things inside the car. I must add that two other priests accompanied us to the military headquarters. We mistrusted the authorities, and wanted to make sure that the young man's integrity and his family would be protected, as well as whatever other evidence we could gather related to the crime. It was our hope that, when the political situation changed, we could have a just investigation.

Some of us returned to the hospital and others went to the Parish House in Concepción. In the hospital we found out that Fr. Nico was in extremely critical condition, hanging on to his life. The doctors were doing everything possible to save him. Bishop Nuñez was allowed to see him and he could not contain his tears at what he saw. For the next few hours we did not get any information about Nico's condition. Later, the doctors gave us some brief information, but nothing official.

We knew that Nico was dying. Even one of the doctors said: "We cannot believe how he is still alive with such a wound; he should have died instantly." Well, that was Fr. Nico Van Kleef, a Vincentian Missionary with an indomitable spirit. Only Christ and the poor could soften his life. The fatal accident, which had put him in a wheelchair, had taught him how to endure pain and suffering.

Meanwhile, in the Parish House in Bugaba, the phone was ringing off the wall. People offered their sympathy and prayers, as well as expressions of anger for such an abominable event. Many people called from parishes throughout the diocese as well as from foreign countries. International Organizations for Justice and Peace, both civil and ecclesiastical, made clear their complaints and condemnation of the crime. They offered their condolences and solidarity with our parish and us. Many people came to our Parish House offering their condolences during this sad time.

The next day, Bishop Nuñez, meeting with his Presbyterial Council, received the news that Fr. Nico had died. The Presbyterial Council, presided by the Bishop, put out a press release denouncing the crime and making the Armed Forces responsible for it. They also offered forgiveness to those responsible for such a crime.

We worked through the bureaucracy to have Fr. Nico's body released to us, and to obtain the death certificate. It was no easy task for it took two days before a doctor could be found to sign the death certificate. Many people wanted to be present at the Funeral Mass. On Tuesday, 9 May, Nico's body was viewed all night in the Church of the Immaculate Conception. That night was truly a Vincentian experience of love and fraternal charity. Some people prayed in church next to Nico's body. Others offered hospitality to those present. Some volunteers prepared the stage outside where the

Funeral Mass would take place. A couple spent the whole night arranging white flowers on a big cross that would be placed on the stage during the Funeral Mass. Red and white colors, martyrdom and resurrection adorned the altar.

The next day, Wednesday, 10 May, Bishop Nuñez presided the Funeral Mass. Many priests and about 4000 people attended the Mass on a beautiful sunny morning.

Yet you could feel an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion among the people. In their midst, you could see strange men taking pictures and taping the Mass. They were observing everything and everyone. We knew they were from the government. I was asked to give the homily. I believe I was asked because, being a Panamanian citizen, they could not deport me. Others, especially foreign confreres, might have run the risk of deportation, especially if they said something against the government. My homily was a reflection, in the light of the gospel, of the witness of Fr. Nico's life, both in his Vincentian priestly ministry and in his tragic death. I emphasized Fr. Nico's vocation as a servant of Christ to the people of Panama.

On two occasions I had to stop, overcome by emotion. Several times I was interrupted by applause. It was a solemn and sacred celebration full of emotion. I saw people crying during Mass. At the end of the Mass, Fr. Nico's casket was carried to the hearse by a group of priests. From there the funeral precesion proceeded to Santa Rosa, to the church where Fr. Nico was pastor and next to which he would be buried.

The trip took about 20 minutes. On the road there was a police blockade. Everybody had to stop, and we are asked to present documentation, such things as driver's licenses, while they took notice of the automobiles' license plates. They made our trip difficult. When we arrived at the Pan-American road, at the entrance to Santa Rosa, we stopped and decided to walk the rest of the way. Suddenly an Air Force jet flew over us to intimidate us. Some of us were afraid; others became angry. It was a final stroke of force and lack of respect.

Ahead of us, as we were walking, Fr. Nico's wheelchair took a prominent place. No doubt it impressed a lot of people. Behind the wheelchair someone carried the cross and then came the hearse with Fr. Nico's body, followed by many people. Suddenly it became dark and a rainstorm soaked all of us for 15 minutes. Nobody left. We arrived at the burial place, Nico's body was lowered and, amid prayers, people's pronouncements, flower offerings, etc., we concluded the ceremony. The previous four days had been long, emotional and trying. We needed to rest so that we could plan ahead. It was my intention to seek justice, not only for the soldiers who

killed Fr. Nico, but also for those in the Defense Department who were responsible for this great violation of human rights, as well as the violent climax that engulfed Panama in those days, and which culminated with the assassination of Fr. Nico Van Kleef.

Fr. Nicolas Van Kleef, the Missionary

Fr. Nico, inspired by his uncle Elias Van Kleef, who was working with the Mayans, arrived in Guatemala after his ordination. In 1965, he went to Varaguas, Panama, where he stayed for the next ten years. In 1976, together with Fr. Jan Hoogenboom, he continued his work in Alanje with the Missionary Team in Concepción. There he worked for ten more years, until he went to live in Concepción, Bugaba, where he ministered to ten communities having Santa Marta as their center.

It was when he came to Alanje that I got to know him. I would like to point out some special characteristics that I observed in Fr. Nico:

1. His witnessing in the face of pain. Any person who suffers a devastating accident that leaves him paralytic can hardly animate others in their difficulties. As a human being, Nico obviously suffered a lot not being able to walk. I knew that he enjoyed football very much. During Mass, on the occasion of the celebration of his Silver Jubilee in Volcán, he said, "When I was ordained I told the Lord that I wanted to preach the Good News with joy. It has been difficult to do that from a wheelchair, but I have tried." Immediately his eyes filled with tears. This was the only time I saw tears in Nico's eyes. He was trying to overcome his own emotions. Nico had a great sense of humor. With his magic tricks he made children and adults laugh. He always got involved in meetings, social gatherings, and always wanted to see people happy. He was especially mindful of the poor, and the youth. He always tried to lift up people.
2. His dedication to the Mission. Everyday he would visit the Parish Communities, celebrating the Eucharist, baptizing, hearing confessions, and presiding at Funeral Masses. He was very attentive to the social needs of the people: respect and promotion of women, fighting those vices which corrupted the youth, the construction of libraries in the community. He published catechetical pamphlets for the laity. He gave many conferences and talks in schools and colleges. He emphasized sports, and he did not shy away from denouncing injustices, especially against the poor. Fr. Nico loved the people, and in all the places where he served he formed authentic Christian communities. This was a tremendous work especially for a missionary in a wheelchair.

3. Importance of Ongoing Formation. Fr. Nico enjoyed theological discussions. Many times he called to share with me some article on the Church, or something else he had read. He knew how important it was to read and to keep up with new theological and biblical investigations. He would ask me about the Panamanian culture. He was a very intelligent priest with a critical and analytical mind, and he made great efforts to become inculturated. He received magazines and pamphlets from Holland and some Latin American countries, which kept him up-to-date on the current affairs of the Church in Europe and the world.

Conclusion

I would like to finish with two points that trouble me: one is an enigma, and the other is a challenge.

An enigma: Even though a trial took place and the soldier who shot Fr. Nico was sentenced, I will always wonder if he did it alone or if he received orders from above to do it. If the latter is the case, I ask myself: Who gave the order? The reason for this doubt on my part is that history has shown us that military dictatorships have always operated under the code of secret and blind obedience. We will never know who else was responsible. What we know is that during those years there were many rumors. For example: The security services had a list of all those persons, including priests, who were adverse to the regime. It is possible that they made a mistake with Nico, and that their intentions were to kill someone else, perhaps one of us. When we see what happened throughout 20 years of dictatorship, including the disappearance of Fr. Héctor Gallego in 1971, one can imagine what they were capable of doing.¹

A challenge: Our confrere, Fr. Nico Van Kleef, C.M., will always represent for us a Vincentian challenge in the service of the poor. Both his life and death are a witness to this challenge. He gave his life in the service of Christ and the poor. The Catholic Church has requirements and ways to officially recognize a person as a martyr. Fr. Nicolas Van Kleef is a martyr for two reasons:

1. If to be a martyr one has to die in defense of the faith, Nico did that. It happened one Sunday morning when he was inviting people to the Holy Eucharist. Because he insisted on that invitation he suffered martyrdom.

¹ Cf. *Labor de la Comisión de la Verdad - Informe Especial*, 2002, Impresos Tavial, S.A., Panamá, Defensoria del Pueblo.

2. We lived under a regime of institutionalized violence, which became apparent in concrete cases of violations of human rights, such as the right to life and dissension. When all doors are shut for the people, the only avenue for expression is the Church. We, Vincentian priests of the Missionary Team of Concepción, defended the people, and were being scrutinized because of our stand against the injustices committed against them. A clear example of this was the annulment of the presidential elections of 7 May 1989 when the military realized that they had lost them. Today we know of about 100 cases of people who disappeared or were assassinated during the dictatorship. To this day, those responsible have not been brought to trail.²

It is for this reason that we must place Fr. Van Kleef's martyrdom in the context of that situation of injustice.

The document *Justice in the World* from the 1971 Synod of Bishops under Pope Paul VI's Pontificate states in its last paragraph: "*The work for justice and participation in the transformation of the world are clearly constitutional dimensions of the preaching of the gospel....*" If this is true, it is clear that Fr. Nicolas Van Kleef died for the cause of justice in preaching the gospel. Fr. Nicolas Van Kleef is a martyr for the faith, and so are Fr. Héctor Gallego, Msgr. Romero and many others in this suffering Latin-American Continent.

Nico, because of his Vincentian priestly life even to his own death, is a martyr for the faith who challenges us Priests of the Mission to live more authentically our Vincentian vocation.

"Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of me" (Mt 5:11).

"If fact, the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God. They will do this because they have not known either the Father or me" (Jn 16:2b-3).

² *Ibid.*

“ANNOUNCING THE MASS”

To Nico Van Kleef

(Fr. Teddy Ríos, C.M.)

May - 1989
I arrive on the 7th.
It is morning
a Sunday.
A somber
hope,
invades the atmosphere.
A car goes around
a long way;
several times...
a message:
“In fifteen
minutes
Mass in the church.”
Suddenly, a uniform!
an arrogant voice.
“What are you doing?”
“I am announcing the Mass.”
An order!
a gun,
a canon,
the bang,
the shot,
the blood,
the life which slips away,
the death.
The fact — Good Friday on Sunday!
“I believe that you killed him!”
“He did not obey me!”
A paralytic,
a human being,
Christian,
apostle-priest.
It is Sunday
the day of the Resurrection
Alleluia!

POEM TO FR. NICOLAS VAN KLEEF, C.M.

(by Brother Cresencio Tenorio Abrego, C.M.)

I

Father Nico,
 your foot prints
are still fresh on our soil
 and the sierra hears your
 voice early in the morning.
 The crackle of your wheelchair
 sleeps away quietly as the soft
 breeze of the volcano resounds
 your words:
I WANT TO BE GOOD NEWS.

II

That abominable
 arm is now silent,
but not your words....
 Because they
 are made of hope,
 and the gospel wick is burning
 in the poor who heard you
 and trusted you.
 Your legacy
CONTINUES TO LIVE IN THEM.

III

Bleeding, bleeding, speaking loudly
 from a wheelchair announcing
 the Good News you are always
 triumphant.
 Though the indignant commander
 of violence is not gone, though
 unnoticed,
 in the present system,
 Nico, you are the valiant emblem
WHO WILL NEVER DISAPPEAR.

IV

Today it will not be with
rifles and guns to quench
and silent the battles of the
poor.
Nobody will silence you,
Nico, because you have risen
with Christ,
and your message
continues to be new and palpitates
in them

TO WHOM YOU DEDICATED YOUR LIFE.

V

The arm of taxation continues to kill
the innocent, the same as the
lieutenant.
With his rifle drawn,
Your voice is the right that every
poor person proclaims, the trumpet which
in heroic morning will not cease
to sound inviting

ALL THE HUMAN RACE

to the Resurrection.

(PRUDENCIO RODRIGUEZ DE YURRE, C.M., translator)