

A LIFE PERMEATED WITH LOVE

Ricardo Falla

I was born in Guatemala City in 1932 into an upper-class family, and raised on our plantations, where I used to play with the children of our indigenous workers. The brothers and sisters of the Marianist order were my teachers in my childhood. I graduated from high school in 1948; did two years of college at Georgetown (1949-51), the novitiate in El Salvador (1951-53), juniorate and philosophy in Ecuador (1953-58). I did my regency in the Seminary of San Salvador (1958-61), studied theology at Innsbruck (1961-65), and did my tertianship in Murcia (1965-66). I studied anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin (1966-71). I was Director of Political Sciences at the URL in Guatemala until about 1974. Then I was at the CIASCA, in Guatemala and in other Central American countries until 1979, researching methods of organization among rural working-class people. My research has not been published. I was in Nicaragua from 1980-82. And then I was in Ixcán, living in the war zone, from 1983-84. From 1984-87, I was in Mexico and Nicaragua writing about what I had heard and seen in Ixcán. I made a second trip to Ixcán in 1987, and stayed until 1992. I published *Massacres in the Jungle*. In December of 1992, the army discovered that I was there, and I had to leave. *History of a Great Love* was published. I went to Honduras and joined the ERIC - a team dedicated to thought, investigation and communication - 1993-2001. "Mitch" found me there. In 2001, I went back to Guatemala, and stayed in Santa María Chiquimula, Totonicapán, a Quiché parish, and I there have remained there till the present. I assist with the pastoral work and write about the indigenous youth.

We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Rom. 8, 23

Looking back on these almost 73 years, my life seems to me to have been a continuous series of crises, each one of a different kind. The first was in my adolescence, when God began to set his seal on my heart, and I discovered my vocation to be a Jesuit. I joined the Order in Santa Tecla, El Salvador, after several years of opposition from my father, who had sent me to the U.S. to study. My mother had died by then, an emotional blow that would remain within me all the days of my life. My training in the Order involved strict discipline, intense studies, and a somewhat forced piety. After “CA” we went to Quito (Cotacollao), where we enjoyed immensely climbing the summits and snow-capped volcanoes of that marvellous country. We were living alongside Quechua communities, and, as we climbed Condor’s Gorge, we passed through their villages, but we didn’t speak to them. We found them puzzling.

I continued with my education, taking my teacher’s certificate in the Seminary of San Salvador. The seminarians came from both rural areas and the urban middle class. I loved them spontaneously; I felt I understood them, and that I could identify with them. But there wasn’t any authentic social consciousness within me at that time.

Later, a strong change took place within me when I was at Innsbruck, where I had been sent to study theology. We took a trip to the snow-capped mountains nearby, and we skied, though we skied badly. I met Jesuits there who were far better than I in many respects. One of them who told me about the worker-priests and their experiences influenced me greatly. He was convincing enough to make me give up skiing in favour of assisting the Galician immigrants who had come there to build the highways. That changed my vision of the world, turning it about 180 degrees. The tourists passing by would give us cigarettes. My world was turned upside down. I had always looked upon the street laborers from the inside of an automobile. Now, I was one of them. My reality had been turned inside out. My life would never be the same again.

And then there came Rahner. He became my passion. We arrived at Innsbruck when Vatican II was just starting. There was a storm brewing within the Church. I had come there with a mentality that allowed no room for bending the rules, a mentality that I had been steeped in during my novitiate. And suddenly I discovered that among my theology classmates there was a movement of subversion against the rules. The rule of not eating in our rooms; we did it anyway, because we were hungry. The rule of attending classes; we didn’t like them and often we didn’t go. The rule against

going to the movies; we liked movies and we went often. Ellacuría was one of the most subversive, and later Coreth told me in confidence that he was on the verge of being recalled to his province. But all this subversion required a justification. This is where the writings of Rahner came into play for me. They liberated me spiritually and intellectually. "Ah," I said then, "in the Society, the foundational charisma is to be found in the discernment of the spirit, and the rule of obedience should be a consequence of the former." I felt suddenly free. I felt profoundly Jesuit, and profoundly of the Church. A new theology opened up to me, one that is not learned by rote memory, but is rather one that springs from reflection, questioning, creativity, and entertaining new ideas, although to others they may seem heresy. (We were also a bit presumptuous.)

While studying theology, I discovered the *Popul Vuh*, the sacred text of the Mayas: and I studied it carefully, though I did not understand it very well. My interest in anthropology was born at that time. My Provincial sent me to the U.S. to study, and there I received my doctorate, though I spent each summer vacation in Guatemala, labouring in the countryside. At one point, I stayed with the Yaruros in Venezuela. Another change was developing inside me. The cultural shock of two and a half months spent on the savanna with the Orinoco tribes was an experience that has stayed with me to this day. These were people who still used bows and arrows; people who made do without matches, or advanced agricultural methods; people who hunted deer disguised as white storks, with a primitive system of familial relations, such as the ones described by Lévi Strauss. These were people who had never heard of Jesus Christ. They were also people who habitually consumed drugs, ingesting hallucinogens and dancing all night. There I was, embedded among them, like an alien being to them, though they treated me with kindness. In that place were the seeds of the Word, in that place was human intelligence, in that place were vice and lies... and in that place was humanity in its origins.

After my studies, I returned to Guatemala and Central America. We began to question the political and social structures. We were a tight-knit group. There were people much more socially conscious and intelligent than I around me. There was César Jerez, who has since passed away, there was Juan Hernández Pico, who is still in the struggle, there was Fernando Hoyos, killed serving in the Guatemalan guerrilla front, and there were many others, some young, some old. We went to live in a marginalized zone, the then famous "Zone 5" in Guatemala. We were the "CIAS" of the "CA". We

were glorious; wherever we landed we made waves. Some were dedicated to investigation, others to action. Those who tended toward action pulled us in their direction. Eventually they became organically linked to the revolutionary vanguard and they left the Order, but we remained Jesuits.

This was the moment of my most profound and painful conversion. While engaging in a particular research project, I fell deeply in love with a companion of mine. Despite the repressive impulses tightening around us, I was happy, discovering love at forty years old. This may have been a reflection of the need to fill the void left by my mother's passing, for there was something similar in the indescribable tenderness that I found in her. I remember the first time she told me she loves me. I was astounded. How could she love me, ME! At that point, I was caught in a confusion of not knowing whether or not to leave the Order. I performed the Exercises in a sea of tears and sobs. There is where I learned that my tears were the very same ABBA of St. Paul, and the same ones appearing so many times in the autobiography of Ignacio. Nonetheless, there was an insistent calling within me heralding the imminent death of that love and my own death (absence of meaning). I was in anguish. And I decided to leave Guatemala around the end of 1979 to do the Exercises, but this time separated from her by a significant distance. Cabarrús was my spiritual guide, though it wasn't he who broke through to me, rather it was Jacob's angel. And I left her... This was a terribly upsetting experience for her and in her desperation she attempted suicide, cutting her wrists. But I wouldn't allow myself to be lead astray. My faith guided me, pulling me along. I don't know if I did the right thing. I think that I did. I think so, but I don't have any way of proving this, it's just that I felt as if I were making a pact with Yahweh, the unnamable, and that he would care for her better than I would be able to. She had said to me, "Falla, Falla, you're going to fall in love with another woman," but no, Yahweh would be my safeguard, so that nothing like that would ever happen. He gave me his word. He wouldn't fail me; and I wouldn't fail him, by giving myself later to another love.

From Mexico, where I had done the Exercises, I went to Nicaragua and I worked for two years in agricultural reform with the Sandinista government, until the chance came to go to Guatemala, to the jungles of Ixcán, which was a war zone. I was to be a pastor to the civilian population. I had to contact the guerilla forces in Mexico in order to make a clandestine entry into the country, and there I spent six years, on two separate occasions, supporting the communities of the civilian resistance who were hiding from

the army in the shadows of the mountains. It was a time of losing lots of weight, knowing hunger, fleeing this way and that from the hail of bullets, of changing camp whenever they burned out palm-leaf huts, and of living with all my possessions inside a backpack which I carried slung over my shoulders, eating only what the people would give me. There was no coined currency there. And the emptiness inside me caused by her absence followed me all over the mountains and made me weep in “sonorous solitude”, as St. John of the Cross says; but from there came my strength to resist alongside the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. And indeed we resisted; the army couldn't finish us off, and we refused to flee into Mexico.

My work was pastoral, but I didn't abandon my research, and during a return trip to Mexico I was able to write a book about the massacres in the jungle in which I vehemently denounced the army. Months later, the army discovered a cave in the mountain where I kept my papers, and they accused me of being a member of the guerilla forces (1992). I had to leave the jungle to explain to the bishops what had happened. They backed me up with their testimony, confirming that I was not among the guerilla forces, only a priest doing pastoral duties. But I was obliged not to return and my Provincial sent me on to Honduras, to a more monotonous line of work. He also sent me to the 34th General Congregation where I met many Jesuits from all over the world. At the end of the Congregation, they awarded me and another Jesuit from France the prize for the best poets; in my opinion, this was simply a nice way of saying that my contributions had been charming and clever, but truly insubstantial.

And now I find myself once more among an indigenous Guatemalan community, somewhat dispirited because I haven't the strength that I once had. These days I write about the youth, and I think that there is something in common which binds us together. The great Erikson said that identity crises repeat themselves throughout our lives. At this stage in my life I suffer the temptation of not wanting to grow old, throwing in the towel because it seems that I am getting too old to continue. I hope that the young people who read what I write live long enough to experience many such crises. That is the beauty of life, of a life permeated with love. And now there is nothing more to say.