A voice in the wilderness that echoes still

Fr. Michael Rodrigo (omi)

Years have gone since the assassination of Rev. Fr. Michael Paul Rodrigo (omi) yet the glow of his personality radiates his prophetic character even today allowing its all-time validity. In fact his voice is still alive that his name and fame is highlighted in various fields making it more important and necessary in this era than the time of his death occurred in 1987.

His was 'a voice in the wilderness'. Voice is the characteristic feature of a prophet. So he raised his voice for the sake of the people of God without being worried of their religious identity. For him all were sons and daughters of God and all what he wanted was to give Jesus Christ to them. His was 'a voice in the wilderness'. The realities of the wilderness were not lacking in dark period of 1987-1989 in whole Sri Lankan society. Undoubtedly they were doubled in areas like Buttala which was even a wilderness physically. Our lives are still under the same conditions and our society seems more or less a wilderness even today. So his voice echoes even today not only in the remote corners of Alukalawita in Buttala where he was rooted during the last period of his life between 1980 to 1987, but also in the major cities all around the whole island and should be spread across the oceans in the lineage of St. Oscar Romero and all of that caliber.

I'm sure it was not merely who killed him and directly involved in the murder were happy and satisfied with his death, even the ones who were really challenged by his life.

Whom did he challenge? Practically he first challenged himself. Fr. Mike who hailed from Dehiwala, studied at St. Peter's College and had his higher education in Rome and Paris which later made him a scholarly lecturer at the National Seminary in Ampitiya opted to come down from all his ways and life styles to make himself available as a true missionary under Bishop Leo Nanayakkara (osb) yet another great man in the newly carved out diocese of Badulla. So he could change himself totally and put all his theories into practice.

Once he has said a priest dies on his priestly ordination day, which means the life of a priest is essentially a sacrifice. He believed it and finally proved it by shedding his blood mingling it with the Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus within the chalice as he was shot dead while celebrating the Holy Mass at his Subaseth Gedara. He always emphasized that the life of a priest is a victim. A victim like that of Christ offered on the cross. He always compared it with a burning candle that provides light to others and fades away without keeping anything for itself.

He challenged the other priests and continues to challenge even today's priests. First he did it as a lecturer at the National Seminary to those who were in the priestly formation and then he did it through his entire life showing that the priesthood is not only celebrating the holy mass, administration of sacraments, conducting rituals, construction of churches and so on. The priest needs to be the sacrifice he offers on the

altar. It is profoundly recited at the preface of the Eucharistic prayer exalting Jesus as both the priest and the sacrifice, yet most of the times it is limited to Jesus Christ, easily forgetting that the priest who offers it is also the 'Alter Christ'. So his challenge to priests is valid even today.

Priest though represent the ordinary humanity still are a set apart group who on their own have said yes to the calling and the mission. So he is a shepherd and precisely should be a good shepherd who goes in search of the sheep specially to find the ones who have gone astray from the flock. Fr. Mike has set a fitting example by going in search of them rather than waiting till they approach him. Priest is a prophet not merely upon the pulpit whose sermons are so exemplary and meaningful. His entire life should be a mirror of the prophetic role. Preaching about justice and truth should be seen even in practical life as Fr. Mike bore witness to the prophetic vocation without being a prey of cheap popularity and various external characteristics.

He challenged all those who were against the humanity and the beautiful creation of God. He raised his voice against them and it ended up in their attempt of shutting his mouth. Though they seemed successful then, what we see today is that dead Fr. Mike is more powerful and impressive. He realized that the role of a priest is not only for religious affairs and limited to the church, but it should over-pour and reach towards the entire society and even cover the creation and the whole universe. Years before 'Laudato Si' he could say that the nature is the common home of everyone so that the beautiful creation should be protected and must not be polluted or harmed.

He continues to challenge the present society, present priesthood and religious life and even all the followers of Christ in common. We witnessed the canonization of Oscar Romero of El Salvador recently and undoubtedly Fr. Michael Rodrigo is also in the same footpath. So hope, wish and pray that the relevant authorities may take up the necessary steps to initiate to present him as an officially declared martyr and a candidate for the sainthood in the Church.

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