Reflection: The Disappeared
From Painful Absence to Joyful Presence

Transcript of a reflection offered by Juan Carlos La Puente Tapia
at the #ICEOutOfNORCOR Interfaith Service in The Dalles, OR on April 28th, 2018

Well, my name is Juan Carlos. I was born in Peru. In Peru, because some people made decisions—the authorities made decisions or sometimes authorities do not make the right decisions—in Peru there are still 15,000 people disappeared from their families. Kind of the same thing in Colombia; 25,000 people have been disappeared. And in Mexico more than 150,000 people have been disappeared. Here, there are also people who are absent from their homes, who are absent from the places we gather. So I want to make an analogy of what is happening. Because authorities make decisions or do not make the right decisions.

I met my Marly A. in Peru. She's a woman who was looking for her brother for many, many years. And she ended up in the movement for claiming justice for people who were disappeared in Peru. One day she told me that the absence, the absence of her brother has been transformed into the presence of her love with many, many other families that were looking for their family members, for the people who were disappeared. So the absence was transformed into a presence. I have a friend in Mexico, Carlos Mendoza, and he told me (I also have been hearing this), but one thing that he told me that this kind of absence in Mexico has become a painful absence. There's a painful absence. But at the same time, without confusion, this painful absence is becoming a call for all of us. It's a calling. There's a painful absence in the homes of many families here in the United States that is calling us. It's a painful absence. In many, many places that we gather we know that there is nobody, there is a painful absence that some people are missing at the table.
Some people are missing in the places we gather. Some people are missing the rights we have. There's a painful absence. But at the same time, without confusion, it's a calling. It's a joyful calling to transform the whole thing that is doing this. And people who proclaim as Christians, we have something about the empty tomb. The absence. A painful absence. But at some point these painful absences can be transformed in a joyful presence and to strengthen, a strength, strong presence to fight, to gather and proclaim that the victims are, without separation and without confusion, living with us in our hearts. So when Ron called me yesterday and said, "Would you say something about who are present in this gathering," I want to prioritize the presence of all victims. That without separation are in our hearts. And we can say that their painful absence has become a strong presence in our hearts. [Amen] So we all who are present here try to gather and root your energy in the absence of many many people who are crying out to be with us, walking side by side. Because that energy is a communion of saints, starting from the starting point of the victim, because we look for them and we call them brothers and sisters.

One more thing just to finish. Sometimes I hear, "Why are we doing this, if it's not a winnable action?" [Laughter]. "What are we doing this if it's not a winnable action?" We are still in our minds calculating short term things. And we play the same game that the system of oppression is causing us. So we need to move towards Sacramental Action. Because the absence of the victim becomes a sacramental presence of strength. And Sacramental Action means that we do not play with the same tools of the system. [Applause] We are dismantling those tools which are causing oppression. We are enlightening the things that the system is trying to hide. And we are starting to speak things that the system wants to be unpronounced.

So a Sacramental Action is a prophetic action, that goes beyond our short-term kind of view. We are people of faith. It's different. And we hold all the power of all the voices in history. Of all the victims that are with us, trying to say we are a family, a human family. And we are. So when I call you who are present, please stay strong, rooting your voices in the voices of many many people who are absent in their homes. Or have been deported. Or are still crying out in that detention center. [...]