

Fr. RAFAEL SANCHEZ RIVERA, S.D.B.

St. Mary's Parish
Los Angeles, California

On May 23, 1992, at around 3:00 pm, after 72 years of life, 55 as a professed member and 45 as a priest, our beloved Father Rafael Sanchez Rivera, S.D.B. quietly went to his eternal reward.

Examining Fr. Sanchez's few belongings, I have found much evidence that he was prepared and ready to answer the final call of the Lord. On his desk I found a detailed list of significant dates in his life handwritten by him, perhaps as an aid in preparing this letter. A

few days later I received from our Provincial Office more details from Fr. Sanchez's personal file in San Francisco. I would like to present this information I found in his own words:

"I was born in Alcaracejos, in the province of Cordoba, Spain, February 3, 1920. When I was thirteen, my father passed away. My mother struggled to push her three sons and one daughter through school and onward.

"My father had begun to work as a miner quite young and consequently died at only

thirty-six years of age.

"When I was twelve I went to the Salesian minor seminary in the Salesian province of Andalucia, in the south of Spain. Four years later I entered the Novitiate in San Jose del Valle, on the outskirts of Jerez de la Frontera. Finishing the novitiate I made my first profession on September 12, 1937. I completed my philosophy studies in this same place and during those three years I assisted in the Oratorio Festivo.

"On finishing philosophy I taught for three years in different schools of the province. On October of 1943 I began my theological studies in Carabanchel Alto, close to Madrid. It was in Madrid where I was ordained on June 22, 1947.

"My first assignment as a priest was in Mexico. Since at the time it was not possible as a Spaniard and priest to enter Mexico directly, the provincial of the Mexico-Antilles province redirected me to Laredo, Texas, in hope I could enter Mexico later. I prepared my documents to go via Lisbon and New York in the first days of 1948.

"But just before leaving Spain I was notified by my provincial that there was a change of plans. I would go to the Dominican Republic instead. Who would have known that thirty four years later I would finally go to Laredo --- not to go on to Mexico, but to become pastor of San Luis Rey Church!

"In Santo Domingo, in the Dominican

"Fr. Sanchez left inspiring examples in the minds of all . . ."

Republic, I was for three years principal of Colegio Don Bosco. From there I was transferred in 1950 to Cuba, where I spent ten years in various duties in the Salesian Seminary and also at 'Artes y Oficios' in Camaguey, one of the finest professional schools in the country.

"When Fidel Castro's government suppressed private schools, many Salesians left Cuba for other assignments in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. I was assigned to Puerto Rico where I arrived on October of 1960. In Puerto Rico I was principal of a school in the city of Santurce for two years, then was sent to the parish of San Juan Bosco in 1962. This marked the end of my ministry in schools and the beginning of parish ministry in which I find myself to the present.

"In 1964 I was given permission to practice my English in the United States. I was sent to Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Raymondville, Texas.

"When I finished the year there I was asked to go to St. Mary's in East Los Angeles,

where the Salesians had just been offered this parish. There the majority of the parishioners spoke Spanish since 80% were born in Mexico. I was there for fifteen years, nine as assistant pastor and six as pastor. After this I spent one year on sabbatical attending an ongoing formation course. In August 1981 I at last arrived here in Laredo --- to my new duties as pastor of the parish community of San Luis Rey."

This is brief autobiography that Fr. Sanchez left for our provincial archives outlining his life and ministry. However, he has not

revealed the richness of his great and varied pastoral service as a religious and priest.

In his religious life, Fr. Sanchez has left inspiring examples in the minds of all who knew him. He was always available to perform whatever tasks were entrusted to him. We would often hear him say that he had no preferences to places and occupations. He had an amazing gift for adapting to all circumstances, giving the impression in all his assignments that each place was of his liking and satisfaction.

The Salesian virtue of WORK was one of his strengths. He would always be found hard at work at the tasks his ministry required. A friend and co-worker says this about him,

"His leadership in Cuba was stamped with the seal of his great organizational capacity and insightful solutions to problems. He was always present where he was needed and would go to where he was called. He liked to meet people in their own homes. He would share their times of joys and happiness. At the news of his death, many who had been touched by his words and personal visits came forward

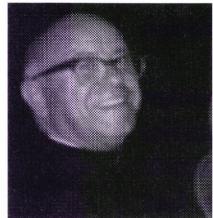
to give thanks and bid farewell."

This leads us to mention another characteristic of Fr. Sanchez: his charisma for people. He had a gift for making himself loved by all. He was interested in their problems and knew all by name. He was keenly aware of their problems. He worked hard in helping them to improve their lives. Through his efforts many marriages received the blessing of the Church, and through his words many received the help they needed in times of crisis.

He was a pastor who remained close to the needs of his parishioners.

During his years as pastor of both St. Mary and San Luis Rey, parish groups flourished: The Legion of Mary, Holy Name Society, Christian Renewal Programs, Youth Programs, etc. He was in tune with all and tried to help all.

Like all good Salesians he lived and pro-



"...his charisma for people..."



"The loss of Father Sanchez encourages us to ask the Lord for more helpers. . ."

moted a deep, heart-felt devotion to Mary. Among Mexican people he promoted devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the Guadalupanas Association flourished in his parishes. One of his first actions as pastor in Laredo was to erect a monument in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. At his prompting, people have gathered at this monument every Saturday at dawn to pray the Rosary.

In the last year as pastor in Laredo, he began enlarging and renovating the Church. His liturgical vision helped to tactfully incorporate the renewed liturgical directives into this project.

San Luis Rey Parish in Laredo, was the last place where Fr. Sanchez ministered as pastor. His final year there saw his fragile health decline even further. He began to lose weight alarmingly. His doctors could not diagnose the cause of his weak state of health.

His superiors granted him some time of rest. He chose to spend the time with his family in Spain. His sister Maria became his special helper and confidant. Rafael, however, was not able to recuperate fully.

Perhaps sensing death was near, he cut short his stay with his relatives and returned to St. Mary's in Los Angeles, his old home --- and again made himself available to the needs of this parish. At the parish he quickly found many old friends from his previous fifteen-year stay. This gave him a temporary boost, but his infirmity slowly depleted his strength. Walking upstairs became difficult. His doctors still did not know what was wrong. He

became weaker by the day. On April 19, Resurrection Sunday, he attended a celebration. But friends noticed something bothering him. The next day, his right leg was paralyzed. Then the other became affected. He was taken to a hospital.

For three weeks he received care at St. Vincent's Medical Center, Glendale Adventist Hospital, and finally White Memorial Hospital. He asked that his sister be brought to his side. She came from Spain at once, and remained with him until the day of his burial.

A long procession of friends came to see him in his last days. Friends from Cuba and other Salesian houses began to wonder if the upcoming feast of Mary Help of Christians would bring special intervention by our Blessed Lady. Indeed it did. On May 23, already May 24th in his native Spain, Fr. Sanchez passed on. So peaceful was his departure that two parishioners praying the Rosary at his bedside scarcely noticed the moment he went to join Mary Help of Christians in heaven.

His death surprised many, many friends both in Los Angeles and in Laredo, the two places he served his final twenty-five years. Hundreds attended the services at St. Mary's led by Fr. William Schafer, the Provincial, and many brother Salesians. His body lies at Salesian Cemetery, Richmond, California.

May this great Salesian rest in peace.

The loss of Fr. Sanchez encourages us to ask the Lord for more helpers to help continue this mission and fill the vacancy left by this remarkable priest.

AVELINO LORENZO, PASTOR
AND THE PARISH COMMUNITY OF ST. MARY'S

