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COVID-19 Claims the Life of the Father of Colombian Bioethics

Fabio Garzón Díaz, PhD*

“I can make out solid ground (Heaven). I am on the last leg of my journey—the trickiest undoubtedly, the most difficult, and the most exposed to every manner of temptation. I want to cross the finish line. So, I ask the Lord daily to give me grace to arrive at a safe harbor. A shipwreck here would be fatal” (1). These words were written by Father Alfonso De Jesús Llano Escobar on August 21, 2018, on his 93rd birthday. Sometime around 12:15 pm on Wednesday, December 2, 2020, he passed away. It does not matter if he died from COVID-19 or “old age,” as Carlos Eduardo Correa, provincial of the Society of Jesus in Colombia, said. What does matter is that a great man of science and faith, a great human being, and the father of Colombian bioethics has been taken from us.

I met Fr. Llano at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Pontifical Xavierian University, Bogotá, in 1989. I was in my sophomore year of philosophy, and Fr. Llano was the Head of the Ethics Program. I recall his three great intellectual passions: Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s work (1881-1955), which focused on the study of the human development stages and proposed an optimistic evolutionism based on cosmogenesis, biogenesis, and noogenesis. Equally intense was his effort to explain the book *Insight: A Study*

of Human Understanding by another Canadian Jesuit, Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan (1904-1984). The key to Lonergan’s thought, he would tell us, is the concept of “self-appropriation,” that is, the personal discovery and personal adherence to the dynamic structure of research, knowledge, judgment, and decision. Through self-appropriation, we can find the foundation of each type of search and the basic model of the research method in each field. Finally, his third and greatest love was bioethics.

The point is that Fr. Llano, as part of the Jesuits’ tradition, had outstanding academic training, beginning with his formal philosophy and theology studies at the Xavierian University. Then, he pursued two doctorates, one in philosophy at the Gregorian University and the other in moral theology at the Lateran University, Rome, in 1974. This last doctorate marked the path he would follow the rest of his life: bioethics. His dissertation “Tension between the Magisterium and Theologians around Birth Control” was supervised by the German Catholic moral theologian and Redemptorist priest Bernhard Häring. In 1986, Fr. Llano left Rome to study Bioethics at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

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1 Original source in Spanish: “Ya divisó tierra firme (cielo). Falta el último trayecto. El más delicado, sin duda alguna, el más difícil y el más expuesto a tentaciones de toda clase. Quiero llegar a la meta. Por eso le pido diariamente al Señor que me dé la gracia de arribar a buen puerto. Un naufragio aquí sería fatal”

From this first academic encounter on, I had the honor of accompanying Fr. Llano in many bioethical challenges. I participated in countless academic activities for doctor training at the Center for Medical Ethics (CEMA) of the Colombian Association of Medicine Schools (Ascofame, for its acronym in Spanish), together with his great friends, philosophers Rafael Torrado and Gustavo García Cardona. In 1991, Fr. Llano joined prominent academics, such as Pablo Pulido and José Alberto Mainetti, to found the Latin American Federation of Bioethics Institutions (Felaibe, for its acronym in Spanish). Next year, this Federation will complete 30 years of uninterrupted work, taking bioethics to all Latin America and the Caribbean countries.

Due to the need for its own headquarters for bioethics research, Fr. Llano founded the National Center for Bioethics (Cenalbe, for its acronym in Spanish). The Center's important actions include creating the first Specialization in Bioethics in a joint venture with El Bosque University in 1995. Later, in 1997, the Center moved to the Xavierian University, and the Institute of Bioethics was created, attached today to the Faculty of Philosophy. Fr. Llano served as director of the Institute for many years.

Fr. Llano's astounding legacy to the development of bioethics in the countries of our region is summed up wonderfully by Ricardo Andrés Roa-Castellanos: "History in its dynamics tends to be repetitive when the red flags in its records are ignored. The role played by Jesuit priest Alfonso Llano (1925) in bioethics within the Ibero-American context is a contemporary

sociological reflection of those universal moments that repeat over time; moments that perhaps disturb the calm to rediscover everything that ends up highlighting what actually matters" (2 p2).

Although his legacy should not be measured by the number of his scientific publications only, it is clear that, without his dedicated and persevering work on the development and consolidation of bioethics, today we would not have robust structural bases for the construction of a Latin American bioethics. As Roa-Castellanos puts it: "While some scholars stand out for their literary production, others transcend due to their talent for promoting organizational knowledge developments worldwide. A brief review of his work with a chronicle tone, given the intimacy between the author and the subject studied, can assess this bioethics pioneer's work in a different light or at least with new elements" (2 p2).

Parallel to his tireless endeavors in bioethics, Fr. Llano carried out highly fruitful pastoral work. In 1941, he joined the Society of Jesus and was ordained a priest in 1956. His fine, biting pen in almost 40 years of his Sunday column entitled "A stop along the way" posed many challenges to him, as he himself admitted: "Today I recognize that I am nostalgic for not having been able to fulfill that purpose since I was severely censored on many occasions and could not continue expressing my thoughts freely; in my soul, I am absolutely satisfied with having achieved the mission of raising awareness and awakening so many sleepwalking generations who were still dozing amid the turmoil of this earthly world" (1).

2 Original source in spanish: "La historia tiende a ser reiterativa en sus dinámicas cuando se ignoran las alertas de sus registros. El papel desempeñado en la bioética por el sacerdote jesuita Alfonso Llano (1925) dentro de Iberoamérica es el reflejo sociológico, para épocas contemporáneas, de esos instantes universales que se repiten en el tiempo. Instantes que quizás quiebran la calma para redescubrir aquello que termina por resaltar cuanto es, realmente, importante".

3 Original source in spanish: "Si bien unos académicos sobresalen por su producción bibliográfica, otros trascienden por su talento al impulsar los desarrollos organizacionales del conocimiento a nivel mundial. Un somero repaso a algo de su obra en clave de crónica, dado el conocimiento personal entre el autor y el sujeto estudiado, puede valorar de otra forma o al menos con nuevos elementos la obra de este gestor de la bioética".

4 Original source in spanish: "No obstante, hoy reconozco que siento nostalgia al no haber podido cumplir con ese propósito, ya que en muchas ocasiones fui duramente censurado y no me fue posible continuar expresando libremente mis pensamientos; me llevo en el alma una enorme satisfacción de haber logrado la misión de sembrar conciencia y despertar del sonambulismo a tantas generaciones que dormitaban aún en lo agitado de este mundo terreno".

Father Llano, on behalf of your countless followers, readers, friends, and even enemies, we thank you for sharing your long and fascinating life, vast knowledge, and sincere friendship with us. We are sure that the Lord has granted you what you most asked for: “grace to arrive at a safe harbor.” And I am convinced that your adventurous journey ended very well!

Fr. Llano’s bioethics works:

Regulación de la Natalidad

Dimensión Ética del Médico y de su Ejercicio Profesional

El Médico y su Familia

¿Qué es Bioética?

Objeción de Conciencia Institucional

Other works:

Un Alto en el Camino

100 razones para hacer un alto en el camino

Jesucristo según algunos teólogos católicos del siglo XX

Confesión de fe crítica

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1. Llano A. ¡Señor, que acabe bien! Le pido diariamente al Señor que me dé la gracia de arribar a buen puerto. El Tiempo [Internet]. 2018 September 6. Available from: <https://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/alfonso-llano-escobar/senor-que-acabe-bien-padre-alfonso-llano-cumple-93-anos-264700>
2. Roa-Castellanos R. Alfonso Llano SJ: incitación y recuperación institucional de la ética médica y la bioética en América Latina. Rev Iberoam Bioet, 2019 Feb 21;(09):01-06. DOI: 10.14422/rib.i09.y2019.011