



SPARK Social Justice
*A Project of the Diocese of Leeds: Justice and Peace
Commission*



SUSTAINING HOPE IN TODAY'S WORLD



A Talk and Homily from the SPARK Retreat Day on October 11th 2025

Given by Fr Luis Orlando Perez Jimenez SJ



Sustaining Hope: The Collective Strength of Mothers Searching for Their Disappeared Children in Mexico

I want to share with you a reflection that has grown within me after spending time with groups of mothers in Mexico — mothers searching for their children who have been forcibly disappeared.

Over the past sixteen years, more than one hundred and thirty thousand people have gone missing in my country. One hundred and thirty thousand lives — and behind each of them, a family, a mother, a story.



"Where are they?"

1. The Mexican Context

The disappearance of people began to rise sharply when the then-President of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, declared a “war on drugs” in 2006 — a war that two more presidents have continued. This war has been promoted and financed by the government of the United States.

And what has been the outcome? A country filled with pain, fear, and violence unlike anything seen in modern Mexican history — and all of it unfolding in what was supposed to be a time of democratic openness.



Those who tend to disappear are poor people, young people, often between sixteen and thirty years old, living in marginalised neighbourhoods. It is happening across the whole country.

Many of the disappeared were students in secondary school; a few were at university. Others were drivers, bakers, builders, or farm workers. Some were veterinarians, doctors, or computer engineers. Most had no political involvement. They were ordinary people — people like you and me — who simply lived their lives, loved their families, and had dreams for their future.

The groups responsible for these disappearances are of two kinds: people who work for the Mexican state — police, soldiers — and members of organised crime. And often, both sides collaborate. They protect one another and, together, maintain a system of almost total impunity.

There are different reasons why people are disappeared in Mexico. One of the main ones is forced recruitment by organised crime. When the Mexican government began its war on drugs, criminal groups hired elite soldiers to join their ranks.

These elite soldiers had been trained decades earlier — in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s — to suppress guerrilla groups, peasant movements, and students who sympathised with socialist or communist ideas. In those days, it was forbidden to think differently, forbidden to dream of a more equal society. And so, the state used methods that violated human rights — torture, extrajudicial execution, and enforced disappearance — to control the population.

We now know that many of those military leaders who later joined organised crime were trained by the United States at what was known as the School of the Americas.

The practice of disappearance was first used by the French army in Algeria, later perfected under Hitler's command, and then adopted by the United States and the Israeli army during the conflicts in Latin America.

Tragically, this technique continues to spread. Today, enforced disappearance affects more than eighty countries around the world.

Returning to Mexico — when the state launched its war on organised crime, those criminal groups felt the need to defend themselves. They began to abduct young people, forcing them into their criminal armies.

The first stories began to emerge from mothers in northern Mexico around 2009. "They took my son," they said, "and I don't know where he is."

Families were desperate, unsure where to turn. Some said the police had taken their sons. Others said the army had stood by and watched as armed men kidnapped young people — without intervening.

Little by little, these mothers began to speak to the press. They told their stories publicly, giving names and faces to the tragedy.



Other motives for disappearance include human trafficking, organ trafficking, and the use of fear to control territory. Disappearance has become a tool of social control. In many communities, people live under constant threat: “If you don’t pay the fee, someone from your family might disappear.”

Disappearance is the perfect crime. There is no body, no evidence, and therefore no one to blame. Authorities often refuse to investigate — sometimes out of fear, but often because they themselves are involved.

Sometimes, they even threaten the families. “Don’t look for him,” they tell mothers, “or something bad might happen to you.” And when mothers persist, officials respond coldly: “If he’s disappeared, it’s because he was involved in something.”

2. The Mothers’ Groups: Communities of Hope

And yet — despite the fear, despite the silence — these mothers have taken to the streets. They refuse to be silenced.

The love of a mother for her child can move mountains. It can face Goliath if it must.

When someone disappears, the first instinct is to go out and search. And it is almost always the mother who takes the first step. She mobilises her family, knocks on doors, speaks to the press, organises searches.



Mothers hold up photos of their children who have 'disappeared'



Family support is crucial. Searching is not an individual act — it is a family mission, sustained by an ethic of love, and above all, by deep faith in God.

And so we ask: how do these mothers keep their hope alive in the midst of so much danger, anguish, and poverty? How do they keep going?

2.1 Doña María Herrera: Weaver of Hope

Hundreds of mothers have come together in groups to search for their loved ones. One of them is Doña María Herrera, whose two sons — Raúl and Jesús Salvador — disappeared in 2008. While she was still demanding their return, two more — Gustavo and Luis Armando — were also taken in 2010.



Now in her seventies, Doña María has spent more than a decade speaking out with unshakable faith in God.

A few years ago, I accompanied her to a meeting with a bishop and several priests. She reminded them of the parable of the Good Shepherd — the shepherd who leaves his flock to search for the one sheep that is lost.

And then she asked, “If you are shepherds, why have you not gone out to look for the sheep who are missing?”

There was silence in the room — a heavy, uncomfortable silence. No one dared to answer.

Doña María said, “God is the first to go searching. God goes out not knowing where to begin, but still goes. That’s how we started too.”



I have reflected deeply on her words. Perhaps through Doña María's voice — and through the voices of hundreds of mothers like her — God is speaking to us, just as He once spoke through the prophets of old testament.

To “search,” in their experience, means organising spaces to share knowledge, to learn how to find their missing sons and daughters. These women see themselves as co-workers with the Good Shepherd, searching for His lost sheep.

2.2 Holding on to Hope: Networks of Grace

Through this work, these mothers have moved from distrust to rebuilding social trust, and above all, to sustaining hope.

I believe the key reason these mothers can keep hope alive is their encounter with God, made real through the presence of people of goodwill — those who choose to accompany them, to stand by them.



Families of the Disappeared gather in a church

When two vulnerable people meet and decide to help one another, something divine happens. That encounter becomes the ground on which hope stands.

The mothers have created networks of mutual support — spaces where lawyers, human rights activists, psychologists, priests, pastors, nuns, and academics come together. Each brings what they have — their “five loaves and two fish” — and somehow, generosity and mercy multiply.

These mothers are weavers of hope, channels of God's grace in our world. Through their hands and hearts, grace takes on a human shape.

Journalists, too, have joined their cause, giving them voice and visibility, helping to proclaim that this must stop.



These mothers have become builders of peace. As their cries grow louder, more people join them. And with every step, every search, more families begin to heal.

In this process, many of the mothers say, “I no longer search only for my child — I search for all of them.”

Their personal pain has become collective pain. Their grief has become solidarity. And that solidarity has become friendship — deep, life-giving friendship.

Without friendship, hope cannot stand. Friendship is the cornerstone of hope — the compass that gives meaning to the search.

3. God in the Mothers

The life of these groups of women can be seen as the mercy of God made flesh — embodied in the relatives who go out searching.

In uncertainty, God becomes the energy that moves them, the light that guides them through the wilderness and the mountains.

For me, walking alongside these mothers has opened my eyes to the face of God — the God who walks among the hills, the Good Shepherd who calls each of His sheep by name.

This experience shatters the idea that the Good Shepherd searches alone. He does not. He calls a new community to walk with Him — a community that, from within life’s chaos and suffering, finds meaning through collective love.

Some of the mothers have been trained to systematically search for mass graves



Mexico today is crucified by the violence of organised crime and by state violence. Power, money, and weapons have become new idols, demanding human sacrifice, promising prestige and respect through fear and terror.

And yet, in the midst of this idolatry, the Spirit of God moves within these women — giving them courage to search in dangerous territories, to dig into the earth with their bare hands, to uncover the bodies of God’s children hidden beneath the soil.

Thanks to these mothers, we now know that over seventy-two thousand bodies and human remains still need to be identified.

They have not only found bodies — they have found people alive, rescued from captivity, marked by torture, but still breathing.



To witness these searches is to come close to the mystery of God made flesh — God's mercy becoming concrete in the hands of these mothers.

More than forty relatives have been killed for daring to search. Their blood bears witness — a divine sign of love and sacrifice that reminds us that to give one's life for others is the highest form of love.

In those mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters who have died searching for life, we see a powerful message: human existence only finds meaning when it is given for others.

It is in that divine movement — of self-giving love — that the world is redeemed.

The mothers' actions awaken a deep ethical truth: this must never happen to anyone again. Every human life is sacred. Every life is precious in the eyes of God. Every life can be restored, can begin again. No one should ever be disappeared.

Through these mothers, God is teaching us how to build a more just world — how to move from despair to compassion, from paralysis to action, from grief to friendship.

Their lives show us how to transform impunity and lies into honesty and truth.

In these groups of searching mothers, God Himself searches for His missing children. And in their courage, in their defiance of fear, God is recreating reality — announcing that His lost sheep will return to green pastures, to fields of dignity and justice.

The prophetic actions of these mothers show us the path we must take.
It is time for us, too, to lift the lost sheep into our arms.
God is speaking. It is time to listen.
It is time to join His networks of hope.



Doña María Herrera meets Pope Francis



Homily from the Retreat Day mass

As this was a retreat, we chose readings to reflect on our Justice theme.

Readings: Isaiah 32:15–18 | Luke 1:39–56

In today's first reading, we heard about a *spirit poured out from above* — a spirit that renews, transforms, and makes everything new. A spirit that can help us become better people.



What strikes me most is that we never walk alone. God journeys with us — from deep within our hearts, from the very ground beneath our feet. He walks alongside us because His Spirit has been given to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. Our path to God is through Jesus, and it is in Jesus that we find this Spirit — that inner strength capable of renewing everything, even turning the deserts of our lives into “*fertile land*”, into “*forests*,” as Isaiah beautifully puts it.

Those two images — the *desert* and the *forest* — are powerful. A desert that becomes fertile land, then a forest bursting with life. But what exactly is this desert? And why does the Spirit care so much about transforming it?

The answer lies in the text itself. It's a desert because there is no justice. It's dry ground because life there struggles to flourish. Life is already present, waiting — it just needs the right conditions to grow abundantly.

The Spirit of God, we've reflected, is an unlimited source of human strength — the kind of strength that builds community. And it is community that can work to transform injustice. To change unjust structures, we need one another — people who choose to put their energy into creating fairer, kinder conditions for life. The essentials are simple: education, healthcare, and dignified work.

The poor of this land teach us that having the basics is enough. We don't need more than that. God's message, like His Spirit, is simple and direct — it goes to the heart of things. Those who are poor in spirit desire the basics that allow life to flourish: education, health, meaningful work. These are the foundations of peace. In the poorest regions of Latin America — and in so many places around the world — people long for education that nurtures their gifts, strengthens their creativity, and helps them organise and support one



another. They seek the kind of learning that builds community, resolves conflict, and heals divisions.

The education that turns a *desert* into a *forest* is the one that, in the light of Jesus of Nazareth, helps us imagine a new society — not built on competition, but on sharing; not on opposition, but on exchange.

Because the desert of ruthless competition is drying us out.

So too is the excess of individualism. The cry of the poor invites us to imagine a less individualistic, more communal world — a society of sharing, one that builds a “we.” A community capable of planting the *forest of togetherness*.

The illusion of the self as absolute blinds us to others. We’ve become trapped within ourselves, constantly gazing at our own image, almost hypnotised — wanting to be admired, as if we were idols.



Image by Dorothee QUENNESSON from
pixabay.com

Today, we ask God to move us — to stir something within us — to go out and meet others.

Like Mary, that young woman from Nazareth, who, as the Gospel tells us, “*set out as quickly as she could*” to visit Elizabeth in the hill country. What a beautiful image.

Mary goes to meet Elizabeth because she is full of God — full of His Spirit. She moves because she allows God to move within her. In other words, Mary is open to being led by that “*Spirit from above.*”

And that encounter — that meeting — changes everything.

The act of setting out, of letting someone wait for you, already begins to build relationship.

There is a quiet beauty in waiting — in preparing to receive another person — and then, the meeting itself: a greeting, a cup of tea, a roof and a table. Nothing extravagant.

Again, the Spirit of God is simple and grounded. It goes straight to what matters most.

Imagine Elizabeth’s joy — not in gifts or grand gestures, but in Mary’s presence before her. Two women meeting, two friends, their hope resting in God’s promise to transform their lives.



Mary's prayer — the *Magnificat* — overflows with gratitude. It draws our eyes toward those who suffer, toward those whose faces are hard to meet: the children starving in Gaza, the mothers in Ukraine mourning their sons, many of them now widows.

And when their faces meet ours, what can we say?

What prayer rises from our hearts?

Where is that Spirit from above calling us to go?

Let's bring to mind Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus — a contemplative nun who never left her convent, yet whom the Church honours as the patron saint of missions. Why? Because she prayed for missionaries and believed that her prayer sustained them in their work. She shows us that God builds the “we” through each of us, right where we are.

Not everyone can join peace missions or serve as doctors in war zones, or as teachers rebuilding classrooms for children in Gaza. Not everyone can be the psychologists who help heal the wounds of conflict, or the sisters who care for the sick in forgotten places. But perhaps we *want* to go. Perhaps God *is* calling us. Perhaps He's asking for our help. Only each of us can know, in the quiet of our hearts, what that invitation might be.

We can return, in our own prayer, to the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth — to their embrace, their friendship, their shared joy — and let that image move us.

We ask God today to invite us once again to live simply, to focus on what really matters, on the Spirit that builds the ‘we’ among us.

Today is a good day to ask that *Spirit from above* to come upon us once more — to move us to action, to move us towards simplicity, towards what is essential, towards building community, towards becoming *us*.

Let's ask for it with faith.

Amen.



Fr Luis is currently studying at University College London for a PhD. His thesis concerns the work he has done with Mothers of the Disappeared.

A trained human rights lawyer, he was ordained a priest in July 2018.

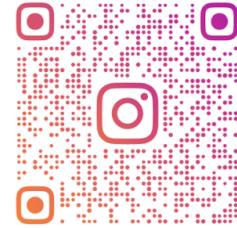


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