NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Cardinal Tagle leads Mass for missing, abducted people

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Quezon City, Philippines

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle at a Mass for Jonas Burgos and other missing activists warned abductors that while they might escape human courts, they will eventually have to answer to God.

"I appeal to those who are holding Jonas and the many others whose mothers are still searching for fathers, siblings, children: You will face up to God," said Tagle at the end of his homily for the Mass in Quiapo Church on Thursday ahead of the sixth anniversary of Burgos' abduction.

Burgos is among 206 reported cases of forcibly disappeared people during the nine-year presidency of Gloria Arroyo, which ended in 2010, rights group Karapatan said.

According to Amnesty International [1], "An enforced disappearance takes place when a person is arrested, detained or abducted by the state or agents acting for the state, who then deny that the person is being held or conceal their whereabouts, placing them outside the protection of the law."

Witnesses reported seeing four armed men and a woman drag Burgos from a restaurant in Ever Gotesco Mall in Quezon City, northeast of Manila, into a waiting car on the afternoon of April 28, 2007, the last time he was seen in public.

Carmelite Fr. Christian Buenafe, president of the board of Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, told *NCR* Burgos is an agriculturist who conducted seminars among farmers in Bulacan province north of Manila, where his family tends a farm. The military accuses him of being an officer of the communist New People's Army, but Buenafe said regardless of the charges, human rights must be respected when tackling allegations.

Church people have spoken out over the years against impunity and in defense of life and human rights through published statements, rallies and even preaching at Masses.

Thursday's Mass was the first Tagle has celebrated for Burgos, said his mother, Edita Burgos.

Since Jonas Burgos was seized, Edita Burgos, her other children and friends have been searching [2] for him and fighting legal battles to bring Burgos back, to declare his case one of enforced disappearance and to protect his rights.

On March 18, the Court of Appeals ruled [3] Burgos' abduction to be a case of enforced disappearance and declared Maj. Harry A. Baliaga Jr. responsible and the Armed Forces of the Philippines accountable for the disappearance. The court also said the National Police failed to exhaustively investigate allegations of the disappearance. The military denies they have Burgos in custody.

On Thursday, Burgos' family and friends, along with relatives of some of other missing activists [4] attended the gathering, "Six Years of Search: a Mass for truth and justice."

Tagle, speaking in Tagalog and English, urged people at the Mass to follow the lead of evangelists and spread the good news of God's truth, love and justice.

"Those of you who spread darkness, you might think you are able to escape punishment," Tagle said, citing the Mass' first reading. "The good news is ... you may evade human courts and processes, but you cannot escape God's justice."

He told relatives of missing people not to despair, but to celebrate: "There is sadness, there is grief, but there is also a God -- the one who raised up his son from the dead -- and who will make straight all that is crooked that man refuses to correct. He is our hope and also the one we should fear."

Tagle urged those feeling disheartened to "be steadfast." The Mass reading showed hope in God can boost one's faith, he said, noting it shows God did not only restore his son to life, but placed him on his right hand after humans killed him.

In her message before the final blessing, Edita Burgos thanked Tagle for taking the time to celebrate Mass and accompany relatives of *desaparecidos* ("disappeared people").

"Here we are [relatives of] *desaparecidos*, and we are giving thanks to God that you made yourself available for this occasion because it is not only Jonas, it is bigger than Jonas," she said, fighting back tears.

"It has been a long time, Cardinal, that we have been waiting for a bishop like yourself to give us words full of hope," Edita Burgos said.

She said she did not know how she lasted six years searching for her son, not knowing whether he was alive or dead.

"Six years, hour by hour, we hope to see him," she said.

She said a photo of Jonas Burgos published in newspapers in early April showed he was in government custody.

"It was obvious that he was hurting ... that he was being hurt ... that his mind was very confused," she said.

Her voice breaking, she told Tagle, "For our hearts that have been struggling from waiting for so long, your words of hope are like water ... After the Mass, the effect is like the wound is closing little by little.

"That is how intense, Cardinal, is the thirst that your flock is feeling," she added.

Edita Burgos, wearing a black T-shirt with her son's face printed on it, said she had prepared a message, but after hearing Tagle's reflection "had a change of heart" and opted to speak candidly instead.

To people in the church who shared her plight, she said, "We shall stay until such time when those who have abducted our children, our parents, our brothers and sisters will have returned the disappearing past."

"We shall share the good news and be examples of how to be able to pray for peace and to look for peace ... not through the way (perpetrators) are teaching us. We can never obtain peace if we use the violent means."

Outside the church, she told reporters she believes her son is still alive.

"If not, we should have found him a long time ago. They would have let us find (his body). We don't know, but we choose to believe he is alive."

She told *NCR* while she appreciates steps taken by President Benigno Aquino and his officials, she thinks the president can do more.

"He has already ordered the investigation, but maybe he can ask the (armed forces) to surface Jonas," she said. "Isn't he the commander in chief? If he orders it, they would probably follow."

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