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Santos Alfaro Ayala hugs his mother during Mass April 13 in Guarjila, El Salvador. Alfaro, a Catholic husband and father of two, offered his testimony of being unjustly detained for almost three months, as part of a government crackdown on gangs that has resulted in the imprisonment of innocent people. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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May 2, 2024

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Moments before the consecration of the host, Santos Alfaro Ayala got down on his knees, head tucked, hands together, almost the way he had shown the 60 or 70 people gathered how he had entered a place he never imagined he'd see: a prison cell.

In front of the group of Catholics gathered for Mass in the village of Guarjila (pronounced war-hee-lah) in northern El Salvador April 13, Alfaro told of his wrongful imprisonment of almost three months. In mid-January, he was in the office of the nonprofit where he works with youth when detectives arrived and told him they had questions. Having nothing to hide, he went with them.

He would not return for 88 days.

After several hours of questioning, the Catholic husband and father of two asked to go home to his family, but was told he was being detained. That day, his name was added to the more than 76,000 men and women detained in El Salvador under the "[state of exception](#)," measures implemented in 2022 limiting certain personal freedoms including the right to due process. The government has said the suspension of freedoms is necessary to combat gangs. The measures were supposed to last 30 days, but El Salvador's legislative body has extended them for more than two years.



Santos Alfaro Ayala kneels April 13 in Guarjila, El Salvado, near a display of St. Oscar Romero and Blessed Fr. Rutilio Grande, to whom he prayed during his nearly three-month wrongful imprisonment. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Alfaro says he doesn't know the circumstances that led to his mid-January imprisonment. He suspects that someone who didn't like him called a government anti-gang hotline falsely accusing him of gang affiliations.

But that doesn't matter, he told the group, because he considers what subsequently happened, his liberation, a miracle credited to the intercession of El Salvador's St.

Oscar Romero and Blessed Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande, along with other Salvadoran martyrs.

Few people detained under the state of exception have left government detention alive.

In Alfaro's case, his employer, church members, friends and other local villagers began a campaign, collecting signatures to demand that the government release him and vouching for him as a Catholic leader who has inspired youth in tiny Guarjila to stay out of trouble. His detention made [national news](#). But during a court hearing, when he saw that the judge was unmoved by the long list of character witnesses and letters vouching for him, "I understood that no human being could help me get out," Alfaro said.

He was sent back to detention.

That's the moment when he turned the experience into "a spiritual exercise," he said. He prayed, constantly, trying to accept what was happening while also asking God to release him in time to celebrate the feast of Blessed Rutilio Grande on March 12. The date came and went. Then he asked God to release him by March 24, the feast of St. Oscar Romero. Nothing happened.

Holy Week arrived.



Villagers in Guarjila, El Salvador celebrated on April 13 the release of community leader Santos Alfaro Ayala. Alfaro, a Catholic husband and father of two who works with youth, thanked his Catholic community for their prayers and letters of support during his detention. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

By then he had developed an infection and found himself shivering and feverish in a crowded cell.

"Jesus Christ suffered much worse," he told himself and vowed that he would continue to honor God, deciding to fast for Holy Week, even though by then he had lost a considerable amount of weight.

He kept asking God for help, wondering how his wife and children were doing. He knew he wasn't alone. There are all sorts of people in his detention center, he said, "entire families, blind people, people whose legs or arms have been amputated,

people dying of diabetes or hypertension," some with mental illness. The innocent mixed in with those who are not.

The only thing that's clear in El Salvador is that its citizens overwhelmingly support the government's measures, no matter how much they harm the innocent and their families. They credit them with giving them a new lease on life, free of gangs.

An April 2024 [survey](#) by Iudop-UCA said Salvadorans gave the measures a rating of 8 out of 10 and the majority says they feel safer than before. Many seemed to indicate, though, that they had little knowledge of the freedoms that have been taken away, including the right to legal representation for detainees, or being told what they're being charged with.

Seeing little hope in the legal system, Alfaro said he turned his gaze to divine advocates.

"I held on to Romero. I held on to Rutilio and I asked [Jesuit Fr.] Jon Cortina, 'please, turn their hearts toward mercy,' " Alfaro told National Catholic Reporter.



Santos Alfaro Ayala hugs his mother as his aunt and Bishop Oswaldo Escobar Aguilar look on at an April 13 Mass celebrating his release after being wrongly detained for three months. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

In early April, he heard someone call his name. Half-clothed, he ran over to see the guard. The guard told him he would be freed, but it took several more days before he was let go.

"My heart was almost beating out of my chest," he said. "And then I cried. I told them [the prison guards] 'thank you, because I have nothing to complain about. You treated me like a human being, you didn't beat me.' Yes, I ate on the floor out of a bowl like an animal but it was no problem at all."

On April 13, three days after his liberation, his Catholic community in Guarjila organized a Mass and dinner giving thanks. The local bishop showed up. Alfaro's elderly mother Maria del Carmen Ayala Dubon showed up, as did her twin, and other members of the family, who cried as they heard his testimony before Mass.

"God has placed his hand on our beloved brother Santos," said Bishop Oswaldo Escobar Aguilar of the Diocese of Chalatenango, who celebrated the Mass in a field. "God did with Santos what he did with the apostles on many occasions, liberating them from prisons."

Alfaro said without his community of faith, "who put their hands in the fire" for him, writing letters, giving testimony of his character, and most important, praying for him, he would not have been freed. He wanted to be an example for them, not of hate, but of love and faith.

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"Miracles really do exist, but they exist when a people cry out ... out of love, not out of tradition, not because it is a religious custom, but out of love for others," he said to them. "God loves me. God loves you and I can't express how much I appreciate the gesture of love you showed me. It is your cry that brought me back to Guarjila."

Salvadoran Vice President Felix Ulloa, in a January interview with The Associated Press, acknowledged the government has [made mistakes](#) in the state of exception.

But he said the measures have also ensured the security of the majority of the country's citizens. Many of the wrongfully imprisoned, around 7,000, have been freed, he said.

Alfaro said he holds no ill will toward anyone for what happened and will instead focus on praying for the innocent.

"Each day, I give thanks to God for giving me this experience, for bringing me back to my family and to see all of you again. With the help of God, we will continue to build a community full of love, one in which we trust others, free of envy, with no hate toward others," he said. "A community in which we all love one another. For me, that's what's most important and maybe that's what I was meant to bring back from there."

A version of this story appeared in the **May 6-June 6, 2024** print issue under the headline: In El Salvador, a Mass of thanksgiving for wrongfully jailed father.