

Fleitas Castillo, Rafael Domingo

(1904–1986)

CARLOS RAFAEL SCHUPNIK

Carlos Rafael Schupnik Fleitas, M.A. (Andrews University, Silver Springs, Maryland), worked in Venezuela for 30.5 years as a minister, pastor, department director for youth, communication, and evangelism. He was also executive secretary, field president, and religious liberty department director *et honorem* in both Venezuelan unions. He is the author of a denominational history book about the work in Venezuela, *Aquí Obró Dios*, coauthor of a book on Pathfinder honors, author of articles for the magazine, *Prioridades*, and author of devotionals for the radio in Colombia and Venezuela.

Rafael Domingo Fleitas Castillo was a pastor and a director of publications for Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico.

Early Life and Family

Rafael Domingo Fleitas Castillo was the fifth of 12 children born to Froilán Fleitas and Enriqueta Castillo. He was born in Camaguán, Guárico, Venezuela, on December 20, 1904. He studied his elementary and secondary school years in the same town. Rafael demonstrated an excellent ear for music and played the transverse flute and the clarinet his whole life.¹

From a very young age, Rafael showed an inclination toward religious matters, which led him to serve in the Catholic Church as an altar boy. Then, a Puerto Rican Adventist colporteur, Rafael López Miranda, arrived in town, sowing the seeds of evangelism. The local priest, unhappy with the work that the Adventists were doing in that place, sent Rafael Domingo and some other little boys to disturb the meetings of the “Sabbath keepers,” or Protestants. The boys would throw rocks at the roof of the house where the gatherings were held. But their antics had no noticeable results. God touched the heart of Rafael’s mother, Enriqueta Castillo de Fleitas, who had begun attending the meetings. Rafael soon began attending with her.²

Rafael and Teodorito Rodriguez, who were friends and wanted some spending money, heard that Mr. Lamas needed help. José Antonio Lamas owned a thriving business, selling cloth and other items that could be purchased in the town. Given the amount of business he had, Brother Lamas needed help, so he hired Rafael and Teodorito.

Having accepted the gospel, Lamas was a strong pillar in the church at that time.³ At the end of each day, Mr. Lamas would sit down with his two employees and exchange opinions about all that had happened during the day. He would talk about religious topics such as Exodus 20. He included the text “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. . . . Thou shalt not bow thyself down to them nor

serve them." As Rafael could not find a good explanation for this, he became uneasy about all the years he had spent worshipping and adoring the images that the Catholic Church contained.⁴

At the first opportunity, Rafael went to the priest and asked a question: "Tell me, Father, does our Bible say the same in Exodus 20 about not having other gods and not bowing to them?" They checked, and effectively, it said the same thing. "Oh! But Father, why does our church have so many saints? And besides, they are worshipped by everyone!" The priest's explanation was surprising: "Don't worry, son, this is just so that all those gossiping women will have something to do." The answer surprised and disconcerted Rafael. With such an answer, he was motivated to keep researching and studying in depth all that the prohibited book said.⁵

On April 22, 1921, the village Seventh-day Adventist church was organized in Camaguán, where Rafael Domingo was born. Enriqueta de Fleitas, his mother, was 1 of the 21 people who were baptized by Pastor William E. Baxter. Among them were Julio García and Pedro González, Rafael's uncle.⁶ Rafael was baptized next, and, shortly after, he began to work as a colporteur, which would become the focus of his work for the denomination: the ministry of the printed page.⁷ Sometime later, he was jailed in his hometown with Julio García and Alberto Acosta, also newly baptized, for still unknown reasons. Thanks to Richard Greenidge, who had an influence on General Juan Vicente Gómez in Caracas, the president of Venezuela gave an order to free the prisoners immediately. When the order arrived at the jail, the prisoners refused to leave without an explanation of why they had been jailed in the first place. The magistrate responded, "I am leaving the door open. If you want to leave, leave, and if you don't want to, you can stay here." It goes without saying that they left. Rafael then worked as a colporteur in Maracaibo and Caracas in 1924 and 1925.

Education and Marriage

At the beginning of 1926, Rafael traveled to Argentina to study at the River Plate Adventist College to become a missionary. He worked as a colporteur and earned Bs. 25,000 (VEB) for his tuition. This money could have bought him a nice house in downtown Caracas. While he was studying in Argentina, Rafael took advantage of his time off to work as a colporteur in other countries of South America: Uruguay, Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina. He always earned at least two scholarships per vacation. Among those with whom Rafael worked and studied were Nicolás and Enrique Chaij, the Rifel brothers, Daniel Hamerly Dupuy, and Braulio Pérez Marcio.⁸ He worked on the university's newspaper with some of them. Rafael developed a friendship with all of them that he maintained through correspondence for many years.⁹

In another anecdote, on one of Rafael's colporteur trips, his colleague had a heart attack and died in his arms. That experience marked his life. The name of his colporteur friend is unknown, but one source says, "On August 17, 1930, that dear young Christian, Esteban P. Cairus, a student and teacher at River Plate Adventist College, died."¹⁰

For seven years, Rafael was far from his birth country and family. But during these years, he completed his studies. As soon as he graduated, he received two calls to be a director of colporteurs. One was from Ecuador Mission and the other from Venezuela Mission. Wanting to return to his own country and reunite with his family, he accepted the call from Venezuela Mission and started his job in April 1933.

Rafael Fleitas married Carlina Rodríguez, a native of the city of Caracas, Venezuela. They had met before he left for Argentina. Rafael had been instrumental in converting her and her mother. Carlina had accepted the Adventist message and had been baptized in 1925 in the first church in Caracas (today the Concordia Church). Carlina then went to study at the Camaguán Adventist School for four years. Their wedding was celebrated on April 24, 1935, in the Concordia Church, and Pastor Garner, mission president, officiated. Immediately, Rafael received a salary raise of Bs. 10. In July 1936, their first child, Fanny, was born; in May 1940, their second daughter, Nancy, was born; in June 1944, their son, Rafael, was born; and the youngest daughter, Zaida, was born in July 1946.

Ministerial Career

At the beginning of 1941, after more than seven years directing the colporteurs in the Venezuela Mission, Rafael accepted a call to become “Field Missionary” departmental secretary of the Upper Magdalena Mission.¹¹ He had to make a long and uncomfortable 10-day trip to move his family from Caracas to Bogotá. The family lived there until 1944, when Rafael was appointed to be the director of publications of the Colombia-Venezuela Union. At the end of 1945, he was ordained as a pastor after 12 years of dedicated service in publications.

In 1948, he received a call to serve as director of publications for the Mexican Union starting in 1949. For the following years, he worked hard for the Mexican Union.¹² In 1957, he was moved to the Central Mexican Mission, also headquartered in Mexico City. José Quintero was elected to occupy his position.

Two years later, he received a call to return to Venezuela as director of publications of the West Venezuela Mission, located in Barquisimeto. He decided to return to serve God in his own country after an absence of almost 19 years. He served there from 1959 until 1962. Then he went to occupy a similar position in the East Venezuela Mission, located in Caracas. He retired in 1969 after a successful career of 36 years.

Later Life

After retirement, Rafael occasionally worked as a colporteur. Due to his vast denominational experience, he was frequently invited to participate at triennial sessions and administrative meetings of the missions, as well as at colporteur gatherings.

When the Camaguán church was left without a place in which to worship, Rafael worked with his sister María Fleitas de Correa to gather funds to build a new church in that place. They worked so hard that with the help of

family, friends, and church members, in 1979, they were able to complete a new church building, worthy of the Adventist history of that place. This had been the first place in the interior of the country to receive the gospel. The church was named “Rafael López Miranda.”

On April 28, 1985, the Fleitas Rodríguez couple, together with their children, grandchildren, family members, and friends, celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. In May 1986, Rafael’s health was deteriorating and began to get worse. On August 4, 1986, he rested in the Lord in the city of Caracas, Venezuela. Rafael Fleitas was buried the next day in the East Cemetery of the city. His tomb is engraved with the phrase “Blessed are they that die in the Lord,” expressing the hope that we have of reuniting with him when the Lord returns in glory.

Contributions and Achievements

Rafael was the first Venezuelan to study at an Adventist university and the first Venezuelan to become a pastor in our denomination. Besides, he was the first pastor who went out of Venezuela to serve in another country, Colombia. Rafael was also the first native of the Colombia-Venezuela Union to serve in a foreign union, the Mexican Union.¹³ He was an instructor of colporteurs for the next generation, among whom are pastors and wives of pastors such as Rufino Serapio Arismendi and Guillermina Brito de Hernández.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Nancy Fleitas Rodríguez, interview by Carlos Rafael Schupnik Fleitas, 2006.

2. Nathaniel Garcia Robayna, "Sin temor al futuro," November 1989, <https://s9f6b946ad89087ae.jimcontent.com>.
3. Nancy Fleitas Rodríguez, interview by Carlos Rafael Schupnik Fleitas, 2006.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Nathaniel Garcia Robayna, "Sin temor al futuro."
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Venezuela."
8. Nicolás Chaij, *Milagros en mi vida* (Colombia: Asociación Publicadora Interamericana, 1998), 58.
9. *La Voz del Colegio* (Puiggari, Entre Ríos, Argentina: River Plate Adventist College, 1930), River Plate Adventist College archives.
10. Milton Peverini García, *Vida de Braulio Pérez Marcio Fundador de la Voz de la Esperanza* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2007).
11. "Upper Magdalena Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1942), <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1942.pdf>.
12. *Revista Adventista*, Inter-American Division, August 1996, 5.
13. Carlos Rafael Schupnik Fleitas, *Aquí obró Dios* (Venezuela: self-published, 2012).

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