

## San Rafael Arcángel

By : RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON

Volume: 33 | No: 42

Page : 23

Issued : 10/27/2005

When I was born in 1936, the Catholic Church celebrated the feast of San Rafael Arcángel on Oct. 24. My father was born on that date in 1902 and was christened Rafael. I was to be the first born to my mother and father and so my dad wanted me to be born Oct. 24 and be named Rafael. Mother Nature didn't quite oblige and I was delivered Oct. 18, six days before the desired debarkation date. Undaunted, my father, who was very strong-willed, proceeded to register me as born on the 24th, and this has been my official birthday ever since.

The true date of my birth was a well-kept secret by my parents and immediate family for many years. One heard rumors I hadn't been born on that date but no official reckoning was forthcoming from my parents until I was in college when my mother told me I had been born on the 24th of October by decree of my father.

As election time approaches every four years, the various seers, astrologers, soothsayers, and latter-day prophets advance their predictions or visions as to the outcome of the elections. Astrology was the big thing in the '70s and Walter Mercado was the shining star of televised forecasts in Puerto Rico. In October 1972, my first race for governor, Walter took out his charts, plotted the stars, and came out with a strong prediction that Ferré would win the election. When this turned out not to be the case, Walter's credibility was shaken and prompt investigation followed into my family history and the truth that was hidden by my parents for so many years publicly came out. Now, here I turned out to have two birthdays, one on the 18th and another on the 24th.

Ever since, people have opted for one of these dates to celebrate my birthday, much to my dismay, because I never have been keen on celebrating birthdays, particularly my own. Now, I had two dates to cope with and to try to dissuade my family from making a fuss about either one of them. Matters turned out to be worse than I expected.

Birthdays are of particular importance to political parties. Not necessarily to celebrate the event but rather to use them as an excuse to raise funds for political campaigns. So, for the quarter century I headed the Popular Democratic Party, these huge events were organized in the various hotels of San Juan and in the old Convention Center where thousands of *populares* turned out to feast and party and to sing happy birthday either on the 18th or the 24th as best suited the fundraising people of the campaign.

But that wasn't all. I ran five times for governor and October is the month before the election date, which is the first Tuesday in November. During this month, the candidate follows a hectic schedule trying to cover as many cities and towns as possible before voters go to the polls. Once the 18th arrived, birthday

cakes became a part of all political events I attended throughout the island. Sometimes, I went to three or four rallies the same day and, after my speech, out came the birthday cakes with candles for me to blow out. These celebrations were closer to my heart. No fundraising was involved. The cakes came from the hearts of good *populares*, desirous to wish me well.

There were 36 candles my first time around. In my last campaign—1988—there were 52. This year, there would have been 69. I consider it something special to have lived these years in Puerto Rico because, during my life span, we have witnessed the transformation of a deeply fatalistic people of a then-impooverished island, with profound social injustice, governed under a misguided colonial system, with their identity in question, into a people with a postmodern economy, with a healthy distribution of wealth, governed mostly under our own Constitution, proud of our culture, identity, and capabilities.

During the years I have lived, we discovered the value of democracy and of what we are capable of doing under good leadership. This conviction, which is a part of our historical legacy, is a source of good hope when we undergo difficult periods such as the one we are in right now. When I was born, our people hadn't yet achieved great heights through the democratic process. Now, we are aware that if our forefathers were able to do it with the meager resources at their command and the uneducated masses of the first half of the 20th century, we can go much further with the capabilities we have in our people and with the instruments of government we have at our command within the relationship we have chosen to have with the U.S. Therefore, I look forward with confidence that, if in the short term there are serious problems, which seem insurmountable and intractable, in the long run, we are going to get back on track again and Puerto Rico will rise to a new level of civilization.

With these thoughts on my mind and feelings in my heart, I celebrated with my children and friends my 69th birthday. The celebrations spanned through the 18th when I had lunch with Rafa in Washington, the 19th with Juan and Vivian in San Juan, the 21st with José and Dora and their kids in a restaurant in Condado, the 22nd with a dear group of friends, which Jorge Colberg brought together for me in Naguabo, and the night of the 23rd into the early hours of the 24th with other good friends in a surprise party, which Nelsa, my wife, ignoring all my protestations against celebrations, organized with much love for me in our Ponce home.

I almost missed this party, or at least a good number of the people she invited would have left by the time we got there on the 23rd. We woke up in Palmas del Mar where we had stayed after the *bohemia* organized by Jorge Colberg in Naguabo. We were supposed to get back to Ponce by helicopter to arrive at 4:00 p.m. in a ballpark near our home. The helicopter couldn't fly because of bad weather and, coming back from Palmas to Ponce, I chose to take the scenic route through Yabucoa, Naguabo, Patillas, Arroyo, and Guayama. This route takes two hours, but Nelsa was unable to come up with a good excuse to dissuade me from taking it without arousing my suspicion.

Nelsa had invited the people for 3:30 p.m., but she couldn't mention this to me because she thought it important the news they were celebrating my birthday be broken to me by my friends once I got home.

Since it was Sunday, in Guayama, I decided to go to church, which would have left people waiting for another hour. At the last moment, however, I changed my mind only to find out when we got to Ponce that there were a lot of wonderful people awaiting me to celebrate the date my father decreed as the day of my birth: The day of San Rafael Arcángel.

