

THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 8, 1977

Acts 14:21b-26

Revelation 21:1-5a

John 13:31-33a, 34-35

My dear sisters and brothers and radio audience.

For the Archdiocese, this is a time of family. Because of this marvel, the radio, we feel that we are one family, and not only with those who at this moment are sheltered here beneath the roof of this cathedral, symbol of the Church's unity and the truth in the world. The cathedral is a special place: it is the seat of the pastor who is responsible for the unity of the whole diocese and also responsible for the truth that is preached in the Diocese. Through the radio, however, we feel that the cathedral has expanded to every corner of the diocese and we are happy that this message is multiplied through the use of the radio.

When we speak of the radio as a "miracle," it is because we echo the voice of the Second Vatican Council that dedicated one of its documents to the means of communication -- the radio, the press, and television. In this document, the Church wants to awaken her children, all Catholics, to their responsibility to support the means of communication¹. Each year one day is set aside to awaken the conscience of the Catholic community about the importance of the media. This year we will celebrate that day on Sunday, May 22. I therefore am anticipating this celebration which will occur in two weeks. At that time I will speak at greater length on this subject. But as all of you know, the Church's means of communication, our radio station and our newspaper *Orientación*, are the object of a special persecution.

This week a bomb exploded and destroyed some of the machinery in our printing office, *Imprenta Criterio*. This week we also received threats that there is a possibility that our radio station will be closed. Who knows if this is the last time that you will hear me on radio? Hopefully this is not so.

God wants it to be understood that the mission of the Church does not involve backing defamation campaigns against the Church. It should also be understood that the Church's voice is necessary in order to speak out against those slanderous campaigns that have increased in strength and rage like a storm against the Church. It is not just that the Church should be silenced when she must speak in order to defend herself and offer guidance to the faithful at this time of confusion. I am most happy to have received some correspondence on this matter. The community of Ciudad Arce has sent a beautiful letter that states: *We are strengthened when we listen to your message that is filled with great optimism and that speaks the truth. In our communities we pray that God will continue to strengthen you in this mission.* Thank you very much, my beloved Christians. I know that this voice that speaks is not an isolated voice. It is like the individual who speaks, and expresses the thinking of an entire organization. The mystical body of Christ is an organization and all Christians are part of this body, including the persecuted, silenced and tortured Christians.

The Church's mission

There is a voice that speaks in the name of this organization and that suffers, cries out, speaks the truth, nourishes and strengthens. My sisters and brothers, I feel that I am that voice and --- as we have said in a message that all of you should have read in the newspapers this week² --- we fulfill a mission. On the one hand, we are in solidarity with the anguish and the hope of the people of our time, especially those who are poor and suffer. On the other hand, we are not being political when we speak in this way. The Council has stated (and I put these words in quotation marks): *The Church has the right to pass moral judgments, even on matters touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary* (a). When I was a student in Rome, I was moved by the following words of Pope Pius XI: *The Church is not involved in politics, but when politics touches the altar, the Church defends the altar*. The rights of the human person are of great interest to the Church. Indeed, when life is endangered, Mother Church is interested. At this moment, the Church is very mindful of mothers who are suffering. The church is interested in those who are unable to speak, who suffer, or are tortured or silenced. This is not being political. Rather politics has touched the altar, has touched morality and the Church has the right to speak its word of moral orientation.

It will be said that this is Marxist. At this time I am not going to read the message that was published this week, it is too long. At the end of the Mass that message will be read here on the radio. But in that message it is stated (and I want you to be aware of these words): *We want to remind you that we are human and therefore have limitations and can be mistaken*. My sisters and brothers, I recognize that I am a man and make mistakes. For this reason I am open to dialogue. Anyone who is not in agreement with me, come and let us talk with one another, convince me of my errors. But don't criticize me or silence me without first listening to me. We are aware of our limitations and of the fact that we can be mistaken. As human persons we all make mistakes. Therefore, all the priests, speaking with their Archbishop, stated in this same message: *We want to be faithful to our prophetic mission of orienting the people in the midst of so many confusions*. This is our intention; do not distort it. We want to guide and give witness to the People of God who listen to us and read our bulletins: this people who seeks orientation. Do not silence this voice that offers guidance. We will correct our possible errors. We are willing to dialogue --- so tell us how we have been abusive; tell us where we are mistaken. These are accidental matters that can certainly be corrected. But let us speak and let us offer guidance. Therefore we restate our oath of fidelity to the Word of God and the magisterium of the Church. This is the guidance that the priest offers: the Word of God and the Church's magisterium.

In light of God's Word and the Church's magisterium, we must speak in the same way that Peter addressed the authorities in Jerusalem: *We must obey God rather than men* (b). Therefore we are conscious of the fact --- note the balance that we propose here --- that we would not be in communion with our Church if we proclaimed and worked for a liberation that were merely political or social-economic. In other words, if the liberation and redemption that the Church preached through her priests only sought redemption that was political or economical in nature, if it were in the style of Marxism that has no faith in God or hope in the Kingdom, then we would not be in communion with the Church. Let it be very clear then that the Church preaches social justice, equality and the dignity of the human person; the Church defends those who suffer or are abused and this is not subversive nor is it Marxism. This is the authentic teaching of the Church. My dear sisters and brothers,

hopefully everyone is interested in knowing what the Church said during the Second Vatican Council.

This does not mean that the Church has broken with twenty centuries of tradition but rather she has evolved with these modern times. Therefore it is easy to confuse our words with Marxism if one is not aware of the fact that the Church lives with hope, with God, with the spiritual, with prayer. This gives even greater impulse to the communists to work for liberation here on earth because they know that on this earth there is no Paradise (the communists would have us believe the opposite). Paradise is consummated in eternity, but is also present here on earth, in the Kingdom of God, as the book of Revelation tells us (c), for Christ with his resurrection established a new situation for the human person: one of holiness and justice and love. It is not necessary to wait or die to possess heaven for here on earth love is proclaimed. If there is not love then we will only have the sad reality of unsociable human beings living for other unsociable human beings.

This is what happens when Christ's love is extinguished in our hearts. Yet it is precisely love that the Church preaches, love for those who persecute and calumniate. As Jesus said: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (d), *offer no resistance to one who is evil* (e). This is what we preach: No to vengeance! No to the class struggle! No to violence! Only a blind person would believe that in times of violence and persecution, the Church has been lacking in solidarity with those who suffer, whether that person be rich or poor. We have defended the life of the Chancellor, Borgonovo Pohl³, and we were happy to do so. We did not want him to become a victim of violence. Therefore, together with the mother of Borgonovo who is suffering, the Church is in solidarity with all those mothers whose children have been taken prisoner, with all those who suffer. We are not on the side of one particular class of people.

My sisters and brothers, I also want to be very clear here because some have said that the new Archbishop does not want to be the bishop of the rich, but only the poor. This is a lie. It is a phrase that has been used in this slanderous campaign against the Church. From the beginning everyone has heard me say: I am with everyone. I am open to dialogue with everyone. I am willing to correct my mistakes and anyone can come and speak with me. I love everyone and my vision is that in loving people, people are saved. In my heart there is no room for exclusion and I say this to you, my sisters and brothers, with total candidness. Therefore the mission of the Church should not be confused with Marxism or subversion or hatred, for this would be a betrayal of the Church's mission. If any priest is convinced of subversion or Marxism then we must separate that individual from the Church --- but that individual must be convicted of such a reality in judgment and in truth.

On the other hand --- and notice the balance of the Church when she says that she is not subversive or Marxist --- we are aware that we would not be in communion with our Church if we announced a liberation that was merely political or socio-economic. Also the Church's teaching about liberation would not be accurately reflected if a priest or a catholic, in the name of a tradition that had not evolved, or from the perspective of some merely transcendent theology that was completely separated from the historical, temporal problems, rejected the teaching of Vatican II, Medellin, and the teaching of the Pope and diocesan bishop who is in communion with the Pope. For the bishop, in communion with the Pope, is the only teacher who is authorized to teach and authorize the authentic teaching of the Church in his diocese.

Yes, my sisters and brothers, for while one side accuses the Church of being Marxist and subversive, another group of people want to reduce the Church to a spirituality that is separated from the realities of the world, a type of preaching that remains in the clouds, that sings the psalms and prays, without any concern for earthly affairs. These people are not Catholic because the modern documents of the Church are inspired in the words of today's gospel: *This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (f). The modern preaching of the Church emphasizes this fraternal love. Perhaps we have placed too much emphasis on the love of God and believed that we loved God while at the same time we treated our sister or brother unjustly. Today the Church demands: If you truly love God then treat your neighbor well, treat your workers, your subordinates, and prisoners well. In this way we will have love even in our prisons and in all parts we will no longer have the hatred and violence that is so prevalent in our time.

The Church then ministers within this balance and yet knows those Catholics who do not understand this modern teaching of the Church --- recently a priest who is not in communion with the Church has written against this teaching⁴. The Church, however, does not preach a love that leads one astray from God, but rather preaches a love of God that is revealed in the love of neighbor. I therefore recommend that everyone reflect on this message, because it contains nothing that is subversive, but is a message of orientation.

Finally, my dear sisters and brother, we want to say that the Church must speak. If by chance we are unable to broadcast our message, look for the Word of God from your priests and in your parish. Go to Mass on Sunday. The Diocesan Curia will be careful to continue to publish its informational bulletin. Look for it in your parishes. Do not become isolated from that communion with the Word. The persecuting forces, those who slander the Church, have at their disposition the newspapers, radio and television, thus creating an unequal struggle. The Church is not looking for a struggle but simply wants to state what she is all about. Come to know us. Even if you want to condemn us, you must first know us in order to do so. Do not condemn the Church or her children without first listening to and hearing and allowing us to clarify the news that is so often distorted in the public forum. My dear sisters and brothers, please maintain yourselves in communion with the Word. The Church has undertaken a campaign to help the means of communication. In the letter from Ciudad Arce, we received the first contribution of thirty-nine cents for this campaign, a contribution gathered together from some poor people. They are a sign of hope and tell us that we, as Church, are not alone. I have also received a contribution from a priest and another *campesino*. You can make your own contribution through your pastor or by bringing it to the chancery. In this way we will maintain the means of communication for the Church.

Prayer is primary

In the second place, I beg you, my beloved sisters and brothers, to pray often. I say this not because prayer is secondary. No, prayer is primary. But in the order in which I am expressing my ideas, I say to you: this is the month of May, the month of the Virgin, the month of much prayer. The Catholic schools met this past week and recognize that a terrible campaign is being waged against them. We know that this campaign is aimed at the destruction of the Catholic schools. We also know that a national commission for the defense of the Catholic doctrine is planning to establish a school. I have just stated that the bishop is the only one who is authorized to point out the Catholic teaching of the Diocese. No one else is allowed to take upon themselves the vigilance of the Christian doctrine in the schools. In light of this situation, it was suggested that we need to pray. I have, therefore, declared that

May 13th, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, will be set aside as a day of prayer. I speak about this initiative of the Catholic schools because I want this to be a day of prayer not only for the schools but for the whole Diocese.

On May 13th, at 10:00am, we will celebrate a Mass in the Cathedral with representatives from the schools and I invite the parishes to send representatives to participate in this celebration. On the same day, in the scenic mountains of Las Pavas in Cojuntepeque prayers will be offered to the Virgin of Fatima. In La Rábida, which is consecrated to the Virgin of Fatima and in Los Planes de Renderos, also consecrated to the Virgin of Fatima, these parish churches will be special centers of prayer. I ask all the pastors to organize a Holy Hour on this feast of Our Lady of Fatima, so that all the people can ask the Virgin to intercede on our behalf. Let us pray together for our country and for our Archdiocese. Let us celebrate then this Holy Hour in all the parishes on May 13th but let us not be satisfied to pray on just this one day. I ask you during the month of May to give new life to the beautiful traditions of our people: processions through the streets of the towns and villages, adorning our churches with flowers. Indeed, the flowers that fill the hermitage and the image of the Virgin, all of these are signs of the prayers of our people. In the schools and in the seminary they are celebrating this month of May with great devotion. At the same line, I want to remind you my sisters and brothers that every day in the cathedral we will have exposition of the most Blessed Sacrament. Therefore when you come from the towns and villages and pass near the cathedral, come in and pray before the Blessed Sacrament, pray for the needs of the Church and the country.

Solidarity with the Jesuits

My sisters and brothers, I want to speak about the communion among the members of our family, but especially about the solidarity of the Archdiocese with the Company of Jesus, the Jesuits. We can speak of them in the same way that we speak of other priests: they can make mistakes. Nevertheless, regarding the substance of their doctrine, I ask you to study the history of the Jesuits who were founded by Ignatius Loyola in the XVI century during a time of great conflict --- an era that is very similar to our situation today. The Jesuits came together to form a valiant army of men who would always be at the vanguard of the Church. It was for this reason that the Jesuits are called “the company” which is a military term that refers to those who are at greatest risk during a battle. From this perspective we can see then that it is natural that the Jesuits are always at the forefront when the Church is attacked.

But take note, the Company of Jesus, the Jesuits, are not some sect separated from the Catholic Church: they are the Catholic Church. The one who attacks a Jesuit, attacks the Church. These realities sadden us. This week, if we are allowed to do so, an article will be published with the title *The Jesuits and the capture, detention and deportation of Father Jorge Sarsanedas*⁵. I myself went to the barracks of the National Guard to receive Father Sarsanedas and bring him to airport where he got a flight to Panama. He is originally from Panama and is ministering there now. I want to make it clear that I did not sign the release document that contained many false statements⁶. As pastor of the Church here in San Salvador, I want to express my complete solidarity with the Company of Jesus which has always been a strong, powerful and valiant bastion in our Church.

I want to thank them because our Archdiocese has already been bathed in the blood of one of the Jesuits: Father Rutilio Grande. Now another Jesuit has been deported and we do not know what will happen next. We pray to God and to the Virgin for understanding. We

pray that the Church's message be understood. We cannot continue to sweep the countryside and deport people but rather we must take advantage of the goodness that is in each person. My dear sisters and brothers, it is necessary that we take on an attitude of dialogue and understanding. Even our enemy has an aspect of goodness and good will.

A greeting to the mothers

I want to conclude by congratulating, from the depths of my heart, all the mothers. As we said at the beginning of this Mass: mothers, who suffer like Mary at the foot of the cross, know that you are not alone. The Church is with you, not in some subversive way or with distorted intentions. As we heard in the message that was communicated by the Word of God: we are with you in love. Love is the sign that Christ gave to us. I want to say to all of you, my sisters and brothers, dear radio audience, all those present in the cathedral, even if all the means of communication should silence us, there is always present in the world a very powerful microphone: the Christian mother, the Christian community. Yes it is true that in the time of Saint Paul and Barnabas, as we listened to earlier this morning, there were no radios or newspapers. But it is said that if Saint Paul were to live today, he would be a newspaper reporter. Yet Paul who had no radio or newspaper, traveled and established Christian communities --- and these communities spoke out. Mothers are like the sacrament of God's love. The Arabs say that God, who we are unable to see, created the mother who we are able to see --- and in all mothers we see God, we see love, we see tenderness.

If all the mothers embraced this love that the Church preaches, if they knew how to tell others: love is not subversive, political or hatred, --- for we are speaking about that love that a mother has for her children --- if these mothers and wives were able to influence politicians, government officials, capitalists, businessmen, if these mothers were able to influence the heart of those who have in their hands the reins of history, then all these different relationships would indeed become more human. Remember that Roman mother: when Rome was about to be destroyed through a traitor, the Senate sent the mother of that traitor to her son, to show him the evil that he was about to do. Thus Rome was defended and saved thanks to this mother. Mothers: this is the role that you now have. Therefore the Church understands you and loves you. You are also with the Church. If because of this world-wide defamation of the Church, you doubt the universal love of the Church, then I place before you a question: would you be happy if we doubted your love toward your children simply because some enemy defamed you and said: this woman does not love her children, she hates them and persecutes them? Yes it would be an horrendous defamation to distort a mother's love. The Church is also a mother and wants to be understood. The Church as mother understands the mother of a family and says to them: we are in solidarity with you, mothers/women, because I am Church, I am woman, I am mother and I love and defend the truth of my Divine Spouse who entrusted me with the transmission of this truth to my children. Help me.

When the Second Vatican Council was concluded, the Council Fathers presented the documents to a woman who represented all the mothers of the world. You can read this beautiful message of the Council to the women of the world. It says: *You women have always had...an understanding of cradles. You are present in the mystery of a life beginning... You [women] do know how to make truth sweet, tender and accessible, make it your task to bring the spirit of this council into institutions,... [and] pass on [these traditions] to your sons and your daughters*⁷. Christian mothers: at this time of violence and bloodshed and misunderstanding, at this time when so many people are suspect, how will the face of El

Salvador be transformed if not by you, our mothers, who have as your mission that of loving and uniting your children --- will you not unite all the people of El Salvador.

We are going to offer this Eucharist for these intentions, praying in a special way for all the mothers. My sisters and brothers, if I have been mistaken in all that I have said here, it is because I am human. If someone comes to dialogue with me and convinces me, I am willing to admit my error. But if I have spoken the truth, even though the truth might hurt, accept it, because as Jesus said: *the truth will set you free* (g).

¹ 2nd Vatican Council, Decree *Inter mirifica* on the means of social communication (4 December 1963)

² “Declaration of the Archbishop and Clergy of the Archdiocese of San Salvador on recent events”, *Orientación*, 8 May 1977. Passages in italics in this homily are quotations from this message, unless indicated otherwise.

³ On the 19 April 1977, the PLF (Popular Forces of Liberation) kidnapped Dr. Mauricio Alfredo Borgonovo, foreign minister in the government of Colonel Arturo Armando Molina, to obtain the freedom of 37 political prisoners. The minister’s family requested the intervention of Archbishop Romero who accepted and did all he could to save his life. See “Statement of the Archbishop of San Salvador on the Borgonovo Pohl case” (*Orientación*, 1 May 1977).

⁴ The reference is to Ricardo Fuentes Castellanos who frequently wrote against the Archbishop and the Archdiocese, accusing them of having abandoned the real Church to embark on a socialist adventure.

⁵ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 10 May 1977.

⁶ Fr Jorge Sarsanedas, a Panamanian Jesuit, was arrested by the National Guard on 1 May 1977 when he was returning from celebrating Mass in Tutultepeque (Nejapa). The 6 May he was expelled from the country after having been tortured. See Declaration of the Archbishop and Clergy of the Archdiocese of San Salvador on recent events”, *Orientación*, 8 May 1977.

⁷ See 2nd Vatican Council, Messages of the Council to the World (8 December 1965) .

Margin References: (a) GS 76: (b) Ac 5,29: (c) Rv 21,1: (d) Lk 6,27: (e) Mt 5,44: (f) Jn 13,35: (g) Jn 8,32.