

THE VIOLENCE THAT GRIEVES THE COUNTRY

Ascension Sunday
May 22, 1977

Acts 1:1-11
Ephesians 1:17-23
Luke 24:46-53

Message of the Salvadorian Bishops

...for this reason the bishops¹, in their *Message to the people of El Salvador, in the face of the wave of violence that clouds the country*², began by speaking about their unity and solidarity: *We, the bishops of El Salvador, begin by proclaiming this message that expresses our profound concern for the actual situation of the country and the Church. We want to speak to you so that all the people of El Salvador are aware of the following: We unite ourselves to the Archbishop of San Salvador and with him, we condemn the wave of violence, hatred, slander and revenge that clouds the country. We share the pain that overwhelms his heart as pastor as he has confronted the cruel assassination of two of his priests and the innocent victims who fell with them. We identify with the suffering of the parents, wife and children of Mauricio Borgonovo Pohl; with the suffering of the parents of the young man, Luis Alfredo Torres; with the suffering of those who mourn the cruel death of Roberto Poma³ and the two humble employees who shared the same fate; with the suffering of so many fathers, mothers, spouses and children who in this hour of horror --- this hour that fills us with shame before the civilized world --- mourn uncontrollably the death and the "disappearance" of their loved ones. Once again we state that neither violence nor hatred nor slander will ever solve the problems that weigh upon us.*

I want to publicly thank my beloved bishops, the bishops of El Salvador, for this expression of solidarity. In light of the Word of God, Saint Paul (a) tells us that Christ ascended into heaven but left his Church here on earth. This Church was entrusted to a hierarchy and given a message of conversion and forgiveness of sin. Therefore, the Church is authorized to denounce sin and announce the forgiveness of sin. The Episcopal Conference is composed of men, for even though we are part of the Church's hierarchy, we are nevertheless men. We began writing this statement the Friday before last and we concluded this work last Tuesday. We began this work with an internal examination of ourselves --- a conversion, because the bishops, the Pope and all Christians live with this tension that Christ left to the world: conversion. Woe to the pastor who does not live this tension but who accommodates himself to a comfortable life style!

We have to share with the people this conversion, for if we are to raise our voices against the hatred, disunity, slander, and all the forces of hell that divide the world, we have to begin with ourselves. I have the great satisfaction of telling you, my dear sisters and brothers, that the bishops have reflected on this need for spiritual conversion in order to avoid giving scandal to the world by their lack of unity. We live together as one. I am pleased that my brother bishops place themselves beside all those who suffer, rich and poor, and at the

same time express their solidarity with the voice of the Archdiocese and reject violence, regardless of which side causes it.

This week we have denounced the violence in Aguilares. We have also denounced the violence against Father Victor Guevara who was taken to the barracks of the National Guard and treated with contempt. Father Vides, chaplain of the National Guard, was sent by the Archbishop to remove the Blessed Sacrament from the church in Aguilares, but he was not allowed to do so --- nor was the Archbishop allowed to fulfill this obligation of removing the Blessed Sacrament in order to prevent its profanation. Finally, Father Vides was permitted to accomplish this task and I hoped that last night he might have come with the Blessed Sacrament⁴. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, because of all those who are tortured and mistreated, the Church is unable to remain silent. The Church is the voice of Christ, and from the perspective of his Ascension, he reveals the dignity of the human person in his glorious heaven. Christ tells us that he loves humankind and he reproaches us because in this world there are still these situations in which the dignity of the human person is violated. I am pleased to reflect this morning on the Episcopacy of Latin America. The Voice of America announced this morning --- and I am sure many of you have heard the news --- that three bishops are going to be honored by the University of Notre Dame in the United States and President Carter will pronounce a discourse in defense of human rights. This is a most appropriate theme to address since these three bishops are being honored for their defense of human rights. I am very pleased that the bishops of El Salvador have placed themselves in this same line of thought.

Rejection of Communism and Capitalism

The message, then, presents a doctrinal orientation that I beg you, my sisters and brothers, to study. It has appeared in *Orientación*, and we are going to print more copies of this message. I ask also the various Catholic organizations to duplicate this message because the second part of the message contains a most useful orientation that will help us distinguish between the message of the Church and of communism. Just as the Church rejects communism, it also rejects capitalism. Listen to this beautiful doctrinal message: *The Church believes in God, the Creator, in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, and in the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. The Church believes that the world is called to submit itself to Jesus Christ through a gradual establishment of the Kingdom of God. The Church believes that the human person is called to be a child of God. The Church believes in the Kingdom of God as a progressive movement from the world of sin to the world of love and justice. The Church believes that the Kingdom of God begins, now, in this world and is fully realized in eternity.* What a beautiful profession of faith. Let us not forget it; and today, in place of the usual Creed, we will proclaim the Church's faith in God and in eternity as stated by the bishops of El Salvador⁵. We proclaim our faith in light of this Christ who ascended into heaven, who being man is at the same time God and who is now seated at the right hand of God and from there judges the realities of the earth. For this reason, the Church cannot be either communist or capitalist, because both are materialistic.

Listen to this clarification: first, *the Church condemns communist Marxism because as an ideology and as a concrete revolutionary movement, it denies God and denies any spiritual value. It classifies these realities as alienations* and thus communism does not permit the coming together of people in the way that we gather here this morning. This is called the opium of the people --- the people are asleep and do not protest. But we will see that this is not true because *it is based on a materialistic foundation.* Communism is

eminently materialistic while the Church is eminently spiritual. Communism *exploits the class differences in society in order to provoke a struggle and uses people as a means to obtain a political power that conforms to their ideology.* This is a synthesis of communism.

But the Church also condemns the liberal system of capitalism with the same intensity. Even though this ideology professes a belief in God, nevertheless, in practice, it denies God and places faith in profit as the essential goal of human progress. It views the human person as an instrument to accumulate wealth and leaves humankind in poverty. In this way capitalism foments class distinctions in society. It tramples upon the rights, the dignity and even the very life of humankind in order to preserve the political, social and economic power that some have acquired. Why does the Church attack the capitalists today? Why does the Church attack political power? Precisely for this reason: the Church cannot support the idolatry of money or the idolatry of the state. Today Saint Paul told us in his letter (b): Only Christ is Lord and the mission of the Church is to preach to humankind, primarily to those who kneel before the idols of the world, and to tell them that it is not licit to create idols out of the goods of the earth. Only Christ is Lord and Jesus speaks to Christians and says: blessed are you, Christians who are poor in spirit, poor in your selflessness, poor in your effort to create a better world, for you follow the true liberator, Christ the Lord, the one who gives humankind their true dignity. Neither communism nor capitalism adores Christ; they adore their idols. The Church adores Christ, and today proclaims Christ as the goal toward which the ideals of all Christians are directed. Christ, ascending into heaven, is the ideal, the one who truly promotes the human person, and the human person culminates his life by identifying him/herself with God.

The Church's contribution to the liberation of the world

The message then says: what is the Church's contribution to this struggle for liberation in the world? It can be neither communist nor capitalist. Using the words of the Pope, which resulted from the gathering of the world's bishops in 1974 and one year later in the publication of *Evangelii Nuntiandii: We have listened to the voice of our brother bishops, especially those of the third world* (c), this is to say, the Church has listened to the cries of malnutrition, illiteracy, marginalization and the Pope says that the Church cannot be indifferent before the voices of millions of people who need the help of the message of redemption. Then the Pope speaks about the collaborators that the Church prepares for this work of liberating the world: they are neither Marxists nor capitalists but Christians. He says: *the specific contribution of the Church and of Christian "liberators" should not be confused with tactical attitudes or with the service of a political system. Rather the Church is providing these Christian "liberators" with the inspiration of faith, the motivation of fraternal love, [and] a social teaching* (d). Christians should be aware of the Church's contribution and use this contribution as the basis for their knowledge and experience in order to translate this liberation into categories of action, participation, and commitment.

My sisters and brothers, there are priests and there should be laypersons who are fully involved in this struggle to free themselves from this marginalization, but our people should not place their trust in capitalism or communism --- they are both materialistic. They ought to receive from the Church this inspiration of faith and motivation of fraternal love and a clear social doctrine. I take advantage of this opportunity to tell all of you, my dear sisters and brothers, if your hearts grow in faith in Christ, if your hearts grow in true love of God and your neighbor, and if you study the social doctrine of the Church, then you will be constituted visible instruments of this true progress, of this true liberation of the Church.

This is the time for priests and laypeople to come together around this motivation of love. Our word is never inspired by resentment, hatred, or class struggle. Listen well, the Church cannot preach with resentment but rather this inspiration of faith and love allows the Church to feel that she is sister and brother to all humankind, especially those who suffer poverty, and those who are tortured or living on the margins of society. They are my brothers and sisters. How could I not love them? Then from this basis of love and faith let us study the social doctrine of the Church. This is not the time to confuse, for example, the Medellin Documents with Marxism.

A newspaper is being published in the city with a very poisonous column --- they are attempting to interpret the Medellin Documents with Marxist categories⁶. This is truly slanderous. Medellin was a meeting of the Latin American bishops, authorized by the Pope, to make the documents of the Second Vatican Council relevant to this continent. How marvelous! In this context, I remember the words of Bishop Pironio, a holy bishop, who said: *The Holy Spirit has breathed upon our continent*. Yet if this reality is unknown, and if one wants to present these documents in a way that is slanderous to the Church, then yes, the Medellin Documents will be called subversive. The Documents of the Second Vatican Council, however, are profound theological writings for our modern times and the social encyclicals of the Popes contain solutions that are far superior to all political and economical systems. The Church does not offer one system but offers a social doctrine that Christians are able to organize according to their conscience.

Then, the bishop's message condemns this false understanding of tradition that wants to present the Church as simply spiritual --- a Church of sacraments and prayers but with no social commitment or commitment to history. *We would betray our mission as pastors, if we were to reduce evangelization to mere practices of individual piety and the participation in non-incarnated sacraments*. The Pope says: *Evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social* (e). My brothers and sisters, let us not place our faith in some corner and reduce it to some private place and then live in public as though we had no faith. The Council said that this divorce between faith and our private life is one of the great errors of our time (f). So great is this error that in the name of this error, the Church is called subversive because she wants to lead Christians to a faith commitment in their concrete life. My dear Catholics, let us study this right doctrine and wisdom of the Church. Then we will understand that priests and Christians who live their Christian commitment in the world are far from being communists or Marxists or subversives.

A call to make social justice effective

The message concludes with a call to repentance, mainly an invitation to those who exercise political and economic power *to unite themselves with the other vibrant forces of the country and together search for a way that will make social justice a reality*. *This is our only salvation and this alone can prevent the country from falling into violence or some kind of totalitarianism*. *To become more attached to one's own interests and to forget the cries of the dispossessed is to create an environment for totalitarian violence*. The bishops of Chile stated: *The true struggle against Marxism consists in eliminating the causes that engender it; changing the means of production in which it develops and offering an alternative as a substitute*. *Many times those who are against Marxism are the very ones who create the evil they pretend to combat*. *They help Marxists when they consider Marxist or suspect people of being Marxists who struggle for respect for human dignity or for justice or for equality or*

those who ask for participation in the affairs of the country or who are opposed to the current powers.

This call concludes by trusting in the solidarity of the priests (the Society of Jesus --- the Jesuits are specifically mentioned) because at this time they are so often slandered. *A campaign has been waged against the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador, and from the shadows of anonymity, this campaign attempts to choke and silence the voice of the Church and justify the most horrendous abuses against Human Rights.*

My sisters and brothers, I take this opportunity to tell you that among the collaborators of this true progress of the world, the Church prepares its priests in the seminary and next Sunday, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, we will also celebrate Seminary Day. On Saturday, the seminarians will come together for a period of reflection and I invite all to participate in this activity that will be held in the Church of María Auxiliadora....⁷

¹ The greeting and initial words are not recorded on the tape of this homily

² In this homily Archbishop Romero reads and comments on "The Message of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador to the Salvadoran people on the wave of violence covering the country", *Orientación*, 22 May 1977. The text in italics comes from this message, except where indicated otherwise.

³ Roberto Poma, member of a prominent business family in El Salvador and President of the Salvadoran Institute of Tourism (ISTU), was kidnapped by the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) on the 26 January 1977.

⁴ On 19 May 1977 members of the Armed Forces and the National Guard carried out a military operation in Aguilares; they repressed the peasant population causing several deaths. They went to the church where they captured and expelled from the country the three Jesuit priests responsible for the parish, they profaned and destroyed the tabernacle and used the church as a barracks. See Information Bulletin of the Archdiocese n° 16, ECA 342-343 (1977) pp. 339-340.

⁵ Several days afterwards the Frente de Agricultores de la Región Oriental (FARO) accused Archbishop Romero of having changed the credo. See "A new creed?", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 May 1977.

⁶ See Rev. Ricardo Fuentes Castellanos, "De Medellín a Riobamba y San Salvador", *El Mundo*, 23,24,& 25 March 1977.

⁷ The final words were not registered on the tape of the homily.

Margin References (a) Ep 1,22: (b) Ep 1,20-21: (c) EN 30: (d) EN 38: (e) EN 29: (f) GS 43.