

## VOCATIONS TO THE PRIESTHOOD

**Vigil of Pentecost**  
**Church of María Auxiliadora**  
**28th of May 1977**

Brother priests, dear sisters and brothers.

This gathering is a scene that marvelously reflects the Biblical readings. Like the Apostles who gathered together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, we prepare for our Pentecost. The gentle breath of the Spirit is felt in this sanctuary of Mary where she receives so many devout honors. This morning she ought to feel very special. I feel, as I believe each of you who are present here feels, that we are living but a small image of the much larger universal Church. We believe that Mary hovers over us, as the Mother of the Church, and with us, and with her warmth and protection, she implores the Holy Spirit, who is intensely renewing our own Church, to come upon us once again.

When the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council began to study the theme of seminaries, they began with these famous words: *Optatam Totius ---the Church is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends in great part upon a priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ and it solemnly affirms the critical importance of priestly formation* (a). The Holy Spirit who renews the inner life of the Church and priests who are instruments of the Spirit of God become the two great agents of the Church's renewal, and consequently, the renewal of the world. Everyone else, men and women religious, laity, the People of God who are led, sanctified and instructed by the priestly ministry, are called to be *salt of the earth and light of the world* (b).

For this reason our former bishops wanted to unite the celebration of the seminary, now called Seminary Day, with the feast of Pentecost. As a result of the wonderful initiative of the formators at the seminary, this morning we are living our Pentecost with these seminarians who are preparing for the priesthood. Let us take a count here: there are about four hundred seminarians in San José de la Montaña or the different seminaries of the religious communities --- young men who have been called by God and are preparing for this renewal of the world which burden, we, as priestly ministers, now bear. Today, they are young seminarians, our seminarians, and they are the center of our close-knit family. We direct our thoughts and reflections toward them, knowing that as the People of God, we are all interested, not only in this holiness of the Spirit who comes to us on Pentecost, but we are also interested in these instruments of the Spirit of God, these young men. In light of the declining number of clergy, we feel, more than ever before, the need for our own priests.

We want to honor and thank the priests who have come from other regions to lend us this necessary collaboration. We need them! For this reason we are grateful for the fact that they stir up within us the need for this collaboration. We follow them with love and gratitude. At the same time we are aware of the fact that there are some communities who feel they have been orphaned, because their leaders have been taken from them. We hope that one day they will be able to return<sup>1</sup>, justified from the false accusations and defended from so many slanders. Like the Apostles, they continue to preach the Lord's Word, but they

are aware of the fact they are supporting our needs. They are the first ones to understand that here, there are insufficient priests. Yet one day, their presence will no longer be so necessary, even though the universal Church will always have a need for them. They are like the circulation of blood in our body that originates and brings life to the whole body. The movement of these priests and pastors gives life to the whole Church. There are no foreign priests. There are Catholic priests, preachers of the Kingdom of God and sanctifiers of the People of God. They are to be esteemed because they come from other cultures and areas to learn about our idiosyncrasies and our way of life. Then through the vehicle of our own culture, they communicate this holiness that Christ wants to share with all people, and they communicate this Gospel that is life and they communicate this grace that is holiness of heart.

### **Mission of the priest**

This is the mission of the priest: as pastors they are to make holy, to teach and to lead the community toward unity, toward holiness and toward God. When we lose sight of this goal, then we call these priests, “foreigners”. When we confuse the sublime goal of preaching human dignity and defending the rights of the human person with other earthly political interest, then again we call these priests, “foreigners”. Let us hope that one-day we learn the sane, sacred and legitimate language of the Church that promotes the human person and orients humankind. Let us hope that we learn not only the spirit of this language, but also its profound meaning, all its complexity, all its community, social and family demands, and all the demands of this earthly life, for this in turn will sanctify all temporal interests. Let us also hope that one day we give priority to this spiritual transcendence that human beings carry within themselves and the freedom of the children of God. May these realities be communicated not only to men and women but to all institutions and to the whole world. The destiny of creation is to place all things at the feet of the universal kingdom, just as Christ will, one-day, place his kingdom at the Father’s feet. This makes priests messengers of Christ the King who hastens the hour when he will be truly respected and the hour when his laws become the norm for political, economic and social life. We do not meddle in politics but we bring the Kingdom of God to those kingdoms of humankind, for as the Pope says in one of his famous phrases: *a humanism closed off from other realities becomes inhuman* (c).

Thus, my dear sisters and brothers, we are greatly concerned that these young men, candidates for the diocesan and religious priesthood, be formed in these holy ideas of the contemporary Church. We want them to be priests for our time, priests who defend the right of God in the midst of men and women who are created in the image of God, priests who are heralds of the Gospel that Jesus spoke of: *the truth will set you free* (d). These priests are heralds of a Gospel that is unfettered and an authentic instrument of renewal. May they be holy priests, priests whose very presence draws people to Christ and priests who, in their communities, are a true ferment of a Christian life that is so necessary today. Thanks be to God, my sisters and brothers, for we have very good priests and we want our seminarians to study and reflect on these sublime ideals.

### **Priestly People**

One day the Council spoke about this priestly people and referred to women religious, married people, university students, professionals, *campesinos*, workers, people who work in the marketplace, all those who are part of this People of God and stated that they have to divinize the work of their hands, for all of these people are part of this priestly people (e). In all of the different kinds of work that people perform in order to earn a living, they have the

opportunity to give this work a sense of the divine, offering it like a host to God. You are priests, but this priesthood remains like a trunk that has no purpose unless there is an individual, chosen from this same people, anointed with the powers of Christ and who, in the name of Christ, brings to the altar under the symbols of bread and wine, the work of the laborer and the professional. This is the work of the People of God and enables us to say to God on the paten and in the chalice: *Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread and wine to offer. Fruit of the vine and work of human hands.*

At that moment, the priestly people feel the culmination of their priesthood because there is a consecrated minister who changes their work into bread and wine and then changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, into the Glory of God, and into the salvation of the world. Priests are prepared for this ministry of giving a divine meaning to the priestly work of the world. For this reason a community is incomplete until there are enough priests so that in every town and village and neighborhood, the men and women who work there can experience the reality that there is a representative of God present in that place, a representative who gives a divine orientation to their life and work, offering them to God and mediating between God and themselves. These realities give rise to the need for priests and this, indeed, interests the whole People of God.

### **Cultivating priestly vocations**

My sisters and brothers, I would like today to be a day of reflection and that we reflect according to our proper vocation. We have groups of seminarians, aspirants to the religious life, novices of men's and women's religious communities; we have major seminarians, religious women, priests together with their bishop; we have lay persons, married people, students, young men and women. I invite all of you to reflect, according to your role and vocation, on the need we have for priests, priests who will give to our religious life and lay life its true meaning, the meaning that God and the Church desire. The Council teaches us that *the duty of fostering vocations falls on the whole Christian community* (f). The Christian community must provide vocations by living exemplary Christian lives. The Council continued and outlined specific roles.

I want to begin by talking to you about my own obligation as pastor. *It is the duty of bishops to encourage their people to foster vocations and to see that all their energies and efforts are closely coordinated, sparing themselves no sacrifice in the efforts to help, as fathers, those who in their judgment have been called to God's service* (g). I am the first one who has this obligation because of my position in the diocese. Even though our enemies mock this phrase, yet it is certain, when I am missing a priest, I am missing an arm. I affirm this reality with the same intensity that I affirm the following: when a priest is attacked, I am attacked, because without them, without the priests and the pastors, the bishop is mutilated. The persecution of the Church mutilates the bishop and therefore, we need to cultivate vocations. I want to say to you, my beloved seminarians, you are the hope of the hierarchy.

The sacred Council then calls upon all priests to participate in this work: *All priests should show their apostolic zeal by fostering vocations as much as possible, and should draw the hearts of young men to the priesthood by the example of their humble, hardworking and happy lives, as well as by their mutual charity and cooperation* (h). What a beautiful work for our priests! Beside every priestly vocation, there is another priest. If we were to speak about the experience of all the priests who are gathered here, if I were to recount my own

experience, I would have to speak about the missionary priests who came to my town and the warmth of the priests toward children. Each one of us could speak about a priest who influenced us in our vocational decision. Now when the priests are persecuted and slandered and even assassinated, we feel that the priestly vocation is stirred up and that there are many young men who have received the call to this vocation.

I hope that this time of reflection has been useful to the many young people who have not yet thought about their destiny. Perhaps God is calling you; calling you at this time when there are so many parishes without a priest; calling you at this time when priests are assassinated; calling you at this time when you see something of value being persecuted. What is not valued is not persecuted. The mission of the priests has to be awesome because they are treated like Jesus and the Apostles --- they are persecuted. The ministry of the Church will always be persecuted and therefore we should not be surprised when we call the Church a persecuted Church. I love to hear today's seminarians say that they feel excited about being priests and that they are attracted to this ministry. This work is not meant for those who are lazy or seeking comfort, but is meant for those who are courageous and heroic followers of Christ, followers of Christ even to the cross. Therefore, my dear priests, let us take advantage of this time and reflect on what we are able to do in our parishes and schools to awaken vocations in our young people.

The Council also speaks to teachers and all lay people: *The greatest contribution is made by families which are animated by a spirit of faith, charity and piety and which provide, as it were, a first seminary, and by parishes in whose abundant life the young people themselves take an active part. Teachers and all who are in any way involved in the education of boys and young men --- and this applies especially to Catholic societies --- should endeavor to train the young entrusted to them to recognize a divine vocation and to follow it willingly (i).* We are also mindful here of the women religious who work as catechists and who are involved in parish ministry, visiting homes. As the Council says they make Christ present by their prayer and their charity toward the sick (j). Religious life is a face of the Church that also attracts young people and leads them to commit their lives to Christ. The schools, teachers, and the family, indeed, all of us my sisters and brothers, have something to say and contribute to this vocational ministry. This is a most necessary work, for without priests, the People of God would not have guides, would not have representatives of Christ and would not have divine guidance.

As we reflect during this time, let these humble words move the hearts of all who participate in this concelebration. Let us ask ourselves: what do we do to foster vocations? Let us hope that our response today might mirror the words of the Council: a more lively organization of this vocational ministry at all its different levels, not only on the economical level, which is certainly necessary to help the work of the seminary which involves many expenses, but let us also remember that this ministry presumes that there are Christian homes. Thus this work must undertake the sanctification of the family and provide a new orientation to our preaching of the Gospel. For without falling into extremes, on one side or the other, we must present the Gospel of Christ in a way that is attractive to young people so that they might become active agents in this evangelizing work of Christ in the world.

I ask you, my sisters and brothers, in this environment of Pentecost, to join together with Mary who is awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit whom we carry within our hearts. Pentecost is an extraordinary manifestation of the Spirit who is revealed in the wind and the tongues of fire (k). These signs make us aware of the power of the Spirit who dwells within

the Church. In the Archdiocese, we are living in a time of intense ecclesial renewal. Let us not doubt that fact. But if the Council says that this renewal depends in great part on the priests and those preparing for priesthood, then this miracle that the Holy Spirit has performed among us, must unite us and draw us closer together. This miracle must make us feel that we are truly Church, for this is a privileged day for the Church --- a day when we reflect on the blessing of priestly vocation, a day when we all feel that we are indeed a priestly people and a day when God, through his Divine Spirit, is asking more of us. Let us not deny this offering to God for if we respond generously, we will feel that this renewal that has been initiated will be brought to its culmination. Then, through this renewal we will make our diocese and our Church a worthy and beautiful part of the universal Church.

Let us love our local Church with the love that one has toward one's family. Let us work to make this Church more beautiful, more attractive and more highly esteemed. Let us create an honorable diocese, a diocese where everyone is respected, and an example for the continent and the world. If we commit ourselves to these demands of the Spirit, then we will all be collaborators, agents and ministers of this one Church that is being renewed and being made more beautiful. This Church will then become a great torch that will enlighten our people who are in such great need.

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<sup>1</sup> Archbishop Romero is referring to the foreign priests expelled from the country by the government during the first five months of 1977. From 22 February to 19 May eight priests were expelled and a further seven forbidden to re-enter the country. See "Por qué se desfigura la imagen de El Salvador en el extranjero", *Orientación*, 19 June 1977.

*Margin References* (a) OT Introduction: (b) Mt 5,13-14: (c) PP 42: (d) Jn 8,32: (e) LG 10: (f) OT 2: (g) OT 2: (h) T 2: (i) OT 2: (j) LG 46: (k) Ac 2,14.