

## WHAT IS THE CHURCH ?

**Pentecost Sunday**  
**May 29, 1977**

*Acts 2:1-11*

*1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13*

*John 20:19-23*

My dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience.

Today we celebrate the great feast of Pentecost. This name comes from Jewish history and signifies the fullness of the Passover which was celebrated fifty days after the Passover meal had been eaten. In the Bible, fifty represents fullness. Today then, is the day when we celebrate the fullness of Easter --- the resurrection of Christ --- fifty days after the Church rejoiced in the new life of Christ, mindful of the fact that this joy flows from the cross and martyrdom. Today, the Spirit of God is revealed to us, the Spirit that Christ, through his resurrection and eternal life, breathed forth into the Church. For this reason the Church is persecuted but can never be overcome. The eternal Risen One has said: *the gates of the nether world shall not prevail against it* (a). Luke<sup>1</sup> tells us that the one who overcame death and sin *filled them [the Apostles] with the Holy Spirit*. This is a precious gesture. The Bible speaks of a similar action when *God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life and so man became a living being* (b). God breathed life into the clay and all of us who are here were given intelligence and freedom --- innate abilities that we bear within ourselves because of the breath of God. Creation is renewed and we are redeemed from sin through Christ's redemption. The risen Christ, like the new Creator, breathed upon the fishermen: *Receive the Holy Spirit* (c).

Fifty days later this gentle breath of the Risen One becomes a strong wind --- a strong wind that attracts humanity and makes them listen to this breath that comes from God. This is new life, the life of redemption. The fullness of Easter is also revealed. Many of you participated in the Easter Vigil. The paschal candle illuminated the midnight sky of Holy Saturday and became light through the candles that you carried. This light now becomes tongues of fire that fall from heaven (d) and tell us that these paschal torches are symbols of God who dwells with humankind, symbols of the Holy Spirit that no one can extinguish. This is the fullness of Easter.

Through a happy initiative of our former bishops, today, when we celebrate the fullness of Easter, we also celebrate Seminary Day. It is the day on which the new cenacle, the seminary, is filled with new apostles. These apostles, together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, prepare for the fullness of their being. Then, enlightened by the Spirit of God, they, like the Apostles, will go out to proclaim this new life, this light that Christ has brought forth through his redemption.

This is the day then when the Church was inaugurated. My sisters and brothers, this is important. If people want to know about an institution, then they have to examine its constitutions, its rules, and the reason that brought about its establishment. Today then is an opportunity to know what the Church is. Why are there so many priests and bishops who preach about the Church? Why are there seminarians who are being prepared in the Church's seminaries? Why are there so many men and women religious who work and reveal the face of the Church in the world? And all of you, my dear sisters and brothers, what is the meaning of your life and what is your role in the Church? Let us learn how to understand our own identity. This has been my desire for the Church from the time that I assumed my position as archbishop. I have had to confront some very difficult situations but at no time have I wanted to confront force with force. This is slander. I have tried to define the Church, for as the Church defines herself and comes to an awareness of who she is, if she lives what she proclaims, then the Church will be strong. The Church has no enemies, only those who have voluntarily declared themselves enemies.

Today is a magnificent day to come to an understanding of the origins of our Church and to know who we are. My sisters and brothers, we do not confront anyone. We are not a political, sociological or economical power. In one of our recent statements we declared: We are the little David who goes out to meet Goliath (e), who trusts in his arms, his power and his wealth. We trust in the name of the Lord. Our smallness will become great and powerful if we are humble, loving and trusting in the name of the Lord. This is Pentecost.

The origin of our Church is recounted by those twelve fishermen, rustic men who, together with the humble virgin of Nazareth, received a baptism of fire and wind. These cowards, behind the locked doors of the cenacle, came to believe that they were Church and went into the world to preach the Gospel. The Apostles are told: do not go around saying false things about a risen Jesus (f). They responded: We have seen him! We are witnesses. We cannot be silent. We must obey God rather than man. (f). Even though they died as martyrs, they have left behind a long succession of followers that continues even in our own time. We see this in the bishops and priests and the Christian people who continue to be the same Church that was begun twenty centuries ago, the Church of Pentecost. What is the Church? What is Pentecost? They are one and the same thing. My sisters and brothers, as I reflect on the doctrinal wealth of this feast, I simply want to highlight three thoughts. Yes, I have three messages and I invite you to guard these messages in your heart and try to live them.

### **1. The Church, a phenomena of human openness before a divine power**

The first message is this: the Church is a phenomenon of human openness before a divine power. I am here responding to many people who believe that prayer has no place in today's world. There are many people who do not pray. There are many people who believe that all the problems of the world can be solved without lifting their minds and hearts to God. The Council says: *the Church has a primary mission: to open itself to God and to unite itself to God (g)*. As we will see, all human aspirations are derived from this mission. But, my sisters and brothers, first I want to highlight this idea. There is much materialism in the world. In our last message, the bishops denounced <sup>2</sup> two forms of materialism: the atheistic materialism of Marxism and the selfish materialism of liberal capitalism. Both are materialistic and for this reason the Church cannot identify herself with either of these. The Church is spiritual and elevates humankind toward God. The Church is transcendent and says to people: *You have a great ability. The most beautiful dimension of your human*

*vocation is the ability to speak with God, to enter into dialogue with your Creator.* My sisters and brothers, this is beautiful. Pentecost reveals the following reality: God creates a space in which he is able to share his life, truth and essence with humankind.

Saint Paul has just told us: *no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit* (h). Reflect on this. With our lips we can say, *Jesus is Lord*. But we can feel these words and understand the depth of their meaning only if God provides us with the opportunity to speak with him, only if we feel we have the ability to pray. Those who do not pray have not developed their full human potential. Those who do not pray because they do not believe in God are mutilated. Those who do not pray because they kneel down before the god of materialism --- be it money or politics or anything else --- have not understood the true meaning of being a human person.

To pray is to understand the mystery that I am, man/woman, and I have limitations. These limitations bring forth the divine essence with whom I am able to dialogue. If I had in my power the ability to make a friend to my liking --- a friend to whom I could transmit all my thoughts, my freedom, all that I am in order to be able to establish a dialogue with this friend, then from my hands would spring forth a creature who at the same time I would make my partner in conversation. But this is impossible; among human persons this is simply impossible. But God, who created heaven and earth, has the ability to create a partner in conversation, to create a being whom he has constituted the ruler of creation, one who interprets the beauty of the sun and the stars, who interprets the joy of life, who feels the anxiety of his/her smallness and speaks with the One who is able to give comfort, with the Author of all things. This is prayer. This is the ability of the human person to understand that he/she has been made by someone powerful, but he/she has been elevated to be this One's partner in conversation, elevated to speak with him.

To bring this message to humankind --- this is Pentecost; this is the Church. Thus the Church proclaims, above all else, her religious mission. She is grieved when her children do not pray: prayer that we have tried so much to inculcate in humankind. My sisters and brothers, prayer is the heart of our Church. The Holy Spirit is nothing more than God who enters into communication with us and invites us to use our freedom and our intelligence to open ourselves to the Absolute and enter into dialogue with the One who created us, who made us capable of becoming his child, who awaits us in heaven, who consoles us on earth and who carries us along paths that are worthy of the children of God.

My sisters and brothers, from this religious mission, the Church derives a great obligation, an obligation that is terrible to experience, namely, the Church has to defend the signs of transcendence. How could the Church not be pained when the most beautiful sign of the presence of God on earth, the Eucharist, has been trampled upon in Aguilares? How could the Church not be pained when they have used a hatchet to break open the tabernacle? <sup>3</sup> The same has occurred in Ciudad Arce where the Blessed Sacrament has been profaned by vile thieves. There was no need to smash the sacred reliquary of our faith, the Eucharist! The priests are signs of the Church's divine presence in the world. How could the Church not be pained to see that people mistrust her priests? That people want to divide them into categories of good priests and bad priests? If priests are in communion with their bishop, then they are also preaching and they are being a living sign of a Gospel that is being proclaimed to the world. If they do not fulfill their obligation then the bishop should hold them accountable. You, the faithful and civil authorities, instead of placing your hands over them and judging them, you should direct yourselves to those who have responsibility in this

area, the bishops. You should tell the bishops: *Father so and so is lacking in faith*. No one apart from the hierarchy has the right to say whether this priest preaches or does not preach the Gospel.

The Pope is a sign of the divine presence of Christ. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, at this time, I, as pastor, invite all of you to celebrate the day of the Pope on June 30. I ask you to organize devotional services in all the parish churches so that we can become more deeply aware of the fact that the Pope, who personifies the priesthood, is a divine sign. For this man, with all his human limitations, has been chosen by God to be the instrument of God's grace and truth. In this same light, today Pentecost, which is also Seminary Day, reminds us, the People of God, of these young men, chosen from our families and privileged to prepare themselves for the priesthood. We ought to cherish them, help them and love them. We ought to do this especially at this time when they find no other stimulus to move forward than that of a persecuted, slandered and assassinated priesthood. It is good that these young men should be happy in their vocation, because they understand its meaning. The priesthood is not for loafers or lazy people nor for *guerrilleros*; rather the priesthood is for heroes who proclaim a difficult message that the world so often does not understand. Therefore, on June 30<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the Pope's coronation, it is important that we honor him and, at the same time, honor our priests and bishops. In this way we can make amends for the sacrileges that have been committed by the assassinations, tortures and expulsions of the ministers of Christ. Out of love for the Pope and out of respect for his person, let us love the priesthood; let us understand and help our priests. During these past days, we spoke about the Eucharist and said that homage to the Body of Christ, to the consecrated host, is an opportunity to make amends for the vile profanation that has occurred during this time of persecution. In our parishes let us render our homage to the Blessed Sacrament, a sacred sign of the Church in the world. Let us make our homage to the Blessed Sacrament an act of expiation. As the angel taught the children of Fatima: I want to make amends for all those who have offended you. I want to love all those who do not love you. I want to have faith in you for all those who have lost their faith. I want to make the Blessed Sacrament the visible soul of our Church and of our faith.

### **The Church is surety in the truth**

My sisters and brothers, the second thought that I want to share with you on this day of Pentecost is our surety in the truth. I would be arrogant if I told you I was secure in the truth, but Jesus has told me this when he said to the Apostles: *I will send you the Spirit of truth and he will teach you everything* (John 16:13). The Spirit of truth encourages the Church to preach, write and speak on the radio. This same Spirit also strengthens the Church to speak the truth in face of lies and to clarify ambiguities. How could the Church, inspired by the Spirit of truth, remain silent when she is the victim of slander and misunderstanding, when the media speaks half-truths? These half-truths are worse than lies. The dark pages of the Church are written by sinful human beings and these events must be viewed in the historical context in which they occurred. The Church is not so criminal! The persecution of the Jesuit community is part of our history. Their founder, Saint Ignatius Loyola, asked that his community be given the mark of persecution and this should not surprise us<sup>4</sup>.

Persecution is a reality that is necessary for the Church. You know why? Because the truth is persecuted. Jesus told his disciples: *if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you* (John 15:20). For this reason, when Pope Leo XIII was asked about the marks of the Catholic Church, he responded: *You know the four marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic,*

*and apostolic. I would add another: persecuted.*<sup>5</sup> It should be remembered that Leo XIII was a very intelligent man who set forth many principles of the Church's social doctrine. The Church cannot live and fulfill its obligations without being persecuted. The Church preaches the truth in the same way that God commanded the prophets: to proclaim the truth in the face of the lies, injustices and abuses of the time. The prophets had to pay a costly price for this mission! They wanted to flee from God because they knew that speaking the truth was a death sentence.

When John the Baptist went to the palace of King Herod and told him: *it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife* (k), naturally the adulterer, like a serpent, forced the king to decapitate the prophet. When the truth is preached, when injustice and abuses and outrages are confronted by the truth, the truth will always hurt. I told you once before this comparison that a *campesino* related to me: *Bishop, when one places his hand in a bowl of salt water, if the hand is well, nothing happens. But if the hand is cut or wounded... ah! the pain!* The Church is the salt of the world (l) and naturally where there are wounds, the salt stings. For this reason persecution is an essential mark of the Church. There are times when this persecution becomes more intense. This persecution comes not only from the government but also from other powerful sources. Persecution is waged by sinners, by those who do not live the commandments (m). Those who promote abortion feel the sting of the Church who is against abortion. Those who promote the use of contraceptives felt the sting of the Church in the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* which stated that it is not lawful to mutilate the sources of life (n). Those who kill are pained when they remember the fifth commandment: *you shall not kill* (o). Those who steal and lie are disturbed by the commandment that reproaches them.

The Church is persecuted and has to be persecuted, for she defends the rights of God and the dignity of the human person. The prophetic mission of the Church is difficult, but necessary. The Council said that the Spirit of God gave the Church the truth so that the Church might give witness to the truth: *the Holy Spirit guides the Church in the way of all truth* (p). How could we be indifferent to the situation in Aguilares, Paisnal and Guazapa? How could the Church not speak a word of comfort to those who suffer and yet reject the use of violence against those who commit these outrageous crimes? These realities must be judged! Justice must be made a reality! But who should do this? In the midst of humankind is a God who demands respect for the life and dignity and liberty of the human person. The Church has to proclaim the word of the Lord. As this word is proclaimed, the evil of sin is rejected, but the Church does not act with hatred. The Spirit of truth enlightens the Church to tell the sinner, whoever that person might be: *Do not continue living as a sinner. Don't be cruel or torment or torture or treat others disrespectfully.* The Church does this with love. She looks for the good of the sinner; she seeks the conversion of the sinner.

Today the Bible tells that when Peter preached, more than three thousand people were converted (q). They listened to the Spirit of God in the words of these men. I know, my sisters and brothers, that all of those who are attempting to live the changes put forth by the Second Vatican Council, if they are truly people of good will, will be converted. So many people are being converted as the Church remains firm in fulfillment of her mission. Many think that people are losing their faith because they are leaving the Church. People will leave the Church because they feel they must leave, but those who remain in the Church are those who understand that the Church can speak in no other way and they are converted. In the Church, these converted ones become prophets of the truth and participate in the mission of the Church.

The Church, filled with the Spirit of Pentecost, cries out: do not be deceived. Dear readers of the newspapers, you are mature people. You do not need someone to tell you: *This is a lie. This is the truth.* Discern for yourselves. Everyone understands the reasons why certain things are written and how the teaching of the Church is distorted in certain columns. The readers of the papers of our country are not children, but mature men and women! Even the humble *campesino* is able to discern the lies from the truth, the ambiguities from clarity. The Church cries out: cease the publication of foolishness, half-truths, lies and slander. Hopefully they would exert greater effort to unify and understand. We call upon all the readers of the press, those who do not have money to respond to these paid campaigns of slander, those who are like the Church who is also poor, let us know how to say *This is a lie!* If we have doubts, let us go to someone who can enlighten us, an expert in ecclesiastical history or theology. The truth of the Church is not some hidden treasure, for as Christ said before his accusers: *Ask those who heard what I said to them. They know what I said* (τ).

## 2. The Church, guarantee of unity

Lastly, my sisters and brothers, and forgive me for going on at length, but Pentecost is a beautiful opportunity to realize that we are in the Church, that in fact, we are the Church. Therefore, in the third place, the Church guarantees our unity.

How beautiful is today's second reading! Saint Paul tells us that the Spirit gives the Church a diversity of gifts, ministries and charisms (s). Here in this cathedral, so full this morning, and through the transmission of this message by radio, thousands and thousands of people are reflecting on these readings, and no two people have received the same gifts. God is so varied in his creation that no two leaves on a tree are equal. This is equally true when talking about the creation of the infinite in his Church. God has given the Church wonderful gifts so that with all these different gifts we might organize the Kingdom of God. A sane pluralism is necessary. We do not want everyone to be exactly alike. This would be uniformity and uniformity is quite distinct from unity. Unity embraces pluralism and respects the thoughts of others. Through all these individual ideas, unity is created, and this unity is much richer than any single individual's thoughts. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, uniting us in one single truth, with one single divine criterion and making us all children of the Church. Some are made bishops, others, priests, some are religious or catechists and others are parents or students or professionals or laborers. Saint Paul says that the same Spirit brings together all these gifts into one unity.

Because of our unity, my sisters and brothers, we are living in one of the most beautiful moments of our Church. In light of Pentecost, I am remembering concrete actions of our Church. Allow me to conclude by calling to mind some of these joyful actions. Everything is not bitter. This situation of persecution is rubbish when one reflects on the depth of those Catholics who love and attempt to build the true Church. For example, this week I have observed a great awakening of the laity. You are the laity. You who are not priests or religious, you are called laity and through your baptism, you have been incorporated into the body of Christ. You share with the Church the responsibility of being truth, unity, light and salt in the world and the responsibility of being concerned for the welfare of others. We have had the pleasure of seeing the laity come together and prepare a statement that is being distributed throughout the diocese. The statement proclaims: *We are aware of the fact that we have left the priests alone and heroically they have had to undertake responsibilities that pertain to the laity.* This is a beautiful confession. This is a call to all

those who live in the world, to understand that the priest, who does not live in the world with a family like yours, is inspired by the Church's doctrine, grace, word and ministry. But you who are in the world, you are the ones who have to bring the life of the Kingdom of God into the structures of society, into the every day life of your homes, your work and your politics. You, my Catholic sisters and brothers, though you have not received the gift of priestly ordination, nonetheless you are priests in your own homes and you have to sanctify your own role. We rejoice that this awakening of the laity is taking place at a time when we lack fifteen priests who have been taken from us and who are now unable to work with us<sup>6</sup>. You are invited to take their place and assume your role in the Church. For at this time everyone's effort is necessary in order to build the Kingdom of God.

With admiration, gratitude and great pleasure I want to call your attention to the gathering that took place yesterday in the parish church of María Auxiliadora. About four hundred seminarians from throughout the country gathered together and we were all filled with great joy. What a great hope for us! Rather than feeling afflicted as a result of the present situation of so many of our priests, these seminarians are encouraged because they see the priesthood as a value. Many priests, religious and lay people were also present at this celebration --- a true gathering of the People of God. What must we do so that we are not lacking priests in our communities? Today, when we celebrate Seminary Day, we are called to provide assistance to our seminaries by prayer and by our financial support.

Another event that should be mentioned is the meeting of the religious women. Aware of the present situation of our country, they raised the question: what is the role of consecrated women? All of the different religious communities have their own specific charism, a charism they received from their founder, a charism that is based on the Gospel. What would this founder do here and now in El Salvador? The religious women have to interpret their establishment in light of the present time so that they do not turn their backs to the Gospel or the Spirit. They must live in the present time and develop their vocation in perfect harmony with this Church that is in the world to be *salt of the earth* and *light to the world* (t).

Lastly, I want to speak to you, my dear sisters and brothers, and conclude this lengthy homily by recounting for you an event that filled me with joy and comfort as I witnessed another way in which God continues to bless us. I speak to you about the wonderful example of my dear predecessor, Bishop Luis Chavez y Gonzalez, who at the age of seventy-five told me that he was available and suggested that he go to Suchitoto.

---*Your gesture moves me, Bishop. You may do as you wish.*

---*Then I will make my profession of faith.*

---*But Bishop, who would ever doubt your faith?*

---*No, it is the law and it will be done.*

Then standing before the crucifix in my office, he prayed with the humility of the most humble Christian: *I believe in God, the Father Almighty...I believe in the Church...* After the Creed, he said: *I swear obedience and fidelity to my superior.* My sisters and brothers, who was the superior in this situation? I felt so small before this incredible example. Yet there he is. At this moment he is beginning his pastoral ministry with other young priests who are going to help him. This should be seen as a gesture of Pentecost. For Bishop Chavez, as a priest and as a man, with his infirmities and his age, is a sign of the divine presence on earth. Also this week, Father González died in San Miguel. He was elderly and had been paralyzed for three or more years --- five years I believe --- bedridden and unable to rise. Yet people went to him for confession because the hand that is raised in a gesture of absolution and

proclaims: *I absolve you from your sins*, is a sign of God in the world. As long as there is a breath of life in a priest, there is also the presence of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit who places value on the life of a priest, for I repeat, the priest is a sign of the divine among humankind.

My sisters and brothers, in face of this wave of slander against the Church, let us remember: the Church is beautiful. She is like the rocks of the ocean. When they are battered by the waves, they are beautified with adornments of pearl. How beautiful are the waves that polish these rocks and beautify them. This is the Church at the present time. Let us live as members of this Church. Now we have been clothed in the Spirit of Pentecost and we have seen the origins of our Church. We have discovered these three marks: openness to the Absolute and taught how to pray; surety in the truth and the prophetic mission to denounce the lies and ambiguities and to proclaim the truth of the Lord; a guarantee of unity for all peoples who are unified in one love. This is the Church. We are filled with joy, for having come face to face with its origins, we see that we are the same Church. We want to live with this attitude of spiritual openness to God, this surety in the truth of the Church's teaching, this unity in diversity. We want to live without hatred. We want to live in love. Yes, we are the Church. Those who do not want this, go! --- you have excommunicated yourselves. You are not Catholic even though you call yourself Catholic.

My brothers and sisters, let us live the beauty of this hour when we define ourselves. Let us define ourselves: we are Church if we live these three characteristics: openness to the Infinite and trust in God; surety in the truth that the Church proclaims; and the guarantee of unity which results from a more intimate integration with the hierarchy. Even though it is said that this action is not Catholic, it is certainly Catholic action. Let us then proclaim our faith and as we profess our Creed let us realize that our Church is beautiful.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be St John.

<sup>2</sup> See "Message of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador to the Salvadoran people on the wave of violence sweeping the country". *Orientación*, 22 May 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Archbishop Romero refers again to the military operation on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May in Aguilares when soldiers of the Armed Forces and the National Guard, after repressing the people, occupied the church and profaned the tabernacle. See "Information Bulletin of the Archdiocese n°16", ECA 342-343 (1977), pp. 339-340.

<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Romero is referring to a paid advert of FARO in which this organization justifies the expulsion of the Jesuits but denies this indicates a persecution of the Church. See "Is it certain the Catholic Church is persecuted?", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 25 May 1977.

<sup>5</sup> We can't find the reference for this quotation, but Pope Leo XIII, in his last encyclical letter *Annum ingressi* (19 March 1902), wrote that "persecution is the inheritance of the Church".

<sup>6</sup> Archbishop Romero is referring to the priests expelled from the country during the first five months of 1977. See "Why the image of El Salvador is disfigured abroad", *Orientación*, 19 June 1977.

*Margin References* (a) Mt 16,18: (b) Gn 2,7: (c) Jn 20,22: (d) Ac 2,3: (e) 1 S 17,45: (f) Ac 4,19 & 5,28-29: (g) GS 42: (h) 1 Cor 12,3: (i) Jn 14,26: (j) Jn 15,20: (k) Mk 6,18: (l) Mt 5,13: (m) Ex 20,1-17: (n) HV 14: (o) Ex 20,13-16: (p) GS 3: (q) Ac 2,41: (r) Jn 18,20: (s) 1 Cor 12,4-7: (t) Mt 5,13-14.