

A TORCH RAISED ON HIGH

Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time

June 19, 1977

Aguilares

Zechariah 12:10-11

Galatians 3:26-29

Luke 9:18-24

My dear religious women who represent this portion of God that has been consecrated in a special way to the service of the Church, my beloved lay people, especially the people of Aguilares.

I have the sad task of gathering up the bodies of those who have been abused, the victims of this persecution of the Church.

Today I have come to gather up this church and convent that has been profaned, this tabernacle that has been destroyed and above all else to gather up this people that has been humiliated and unnecessarily sacrificed. Therefore as I finally come here --- I have wanted to be with you from the beginning but I was not permitted to enter --- I bring you the word that Jesus commands me to share with you: a word of solidarity, a word of encouragement, a word of orientation and finally, a word of conversion.

1. A word of solidarity

In the first place, I want to express to you a warm word of solidarity. We are with you now and we have been with you at every moment. In fact, if there is any time that the Church can say *we have been with you*, then in a very special way, it is in this situation in which you find yourselves here in Aguilares. Therefore, we repeat: *we have been with you*. Among the victims of this persecution, three beloved priests have been shackled and exiled¹.

Yet Father Carranza has said it well: *the harsh sound of rifles will be silenced and the voice of the prophet will remain vibrant.*² The Word of God is once again present among us to tell us, my dear sisters and brothers, that God always rejects violence. Those who kill and persecute and beat others, have no part with God. The Word of God, *all who take the sword will perish by the sword* (a), holds out a severe sentence on those who commit violence and do not sincerely offer repentance for their sins. We suffer with those who have suffered so greatly. Yes, I repeat we are with you and we want you to know, my dear sisters and brothers, that your pain is the Church's pain.

In today's first reading the prophet is very expressive when he proclaims the desolation of Jerusalem. At the same time, however, he also announces a time when the Lord's mercy and goodness will be poured forth upon this suffering people. You are an image of the wronged Divinity that is spoken about in the first reading in prophetic and mysterious language --- language that represents Christ nailed to the cross and pierced by a lance. You are the image of all people, who like yourselves, have been pierced and abused. But if you suffer this pain with faith, then you will give your suffering a redemptive meaning

and the people of Aguilares will sing a joyful hymn of liberation. Those who have trespassed against you will look at you and repent. They will see the heroism and the joy that the Lord has given to you in your time of suffering.

My dear sisters and brothers, as I begin with this word of solidarity we are mindful of your many loved ones who have been assassinated. In this Eucharist we pray for their eternal rest and we are sure that the Lord will grant them this blessing and that from heaven they will continue to work for this holy liberation that has been undertaken here in Aguilares.

We also suffer with those who are lost³, with those who do not know the whereabouts of other family members, and with those who are fleeing. We are witnesses of this pain and separation. We have lived this pain and separation with you because as pastor I have experienced the trust of those who, with the help of the Church, continue to look for those who have “disappeared.” My dear sisters and brothers, be assured that in the eyes of God they have not “disappeared.” Rather they are very close to the heart of the Lord even though you, their families, are in pain as you continue to search for your loved ones. No one is lost to God. For God there is only the mystery of suffering, which if it is given a redemptive and sacrificial meaning, then like Christ our Lord, this suffering becomes a redemptive suffering.

We are also with those who have been tortured. We know that many families have suffered this pain and humiliation. May the Lord give you courage and show you how to forgive. Remember that violence done by anyone, but especially by members of the Armed Forces who instead of defending the people commit outrageous acts against the towns and villages, this violence is reprehensible in the eyes of God. God can never bless this kind of violence. Know, then, that all your pain and suffering is understood. Know that the Church, in accord with today’s first reading, interprets this pain as a redemptive pain, a pain that will allow the people of Aguilares to experience even greater blessings.

2. A word of encouragement

My sisters and brothers, I want to add a word of encouragement: Take courage and do not let your spirits become weakened! In the Archdiocese, Aguilares has a very special place, for it is here that Father Grande and his two beloved *campesinos* feel victim to the assassins’ bullets. The direct persecution of the priest and the catechists is without any doubt a sign of the Lord’s favor. Jesus Christ speaks to us in today’s Gospel: *if anyone wishes to follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me* (b). Those who want to save their lives, who want security and often achieve this security by evil intrigue, such as turning in another brother or sister to the authorities in order to gain their favor --- yes there have been many betrayals --- but those who want to save their lives, must lose it. They must sincerely hand their lives over to the Lord. Here priests and lay people have literally handed their lives over to the Lord without thinking about martyrdom and suffering. They have given us a wonderful testimony of life and we embrace this testimony in order to present it to the other parishes in the Diocese.

Look at how quickly the response has come: yesterday two lay people from each parish, 200 lay people who are committed to the Church, began a course that will conclude this afternoon in the seminary. Without a doubt they are following the heroic example of those who gave their lives for Christ. They want to make a deeper commitment to the Church. Indeed, this is the condition that is needed to be part of this lay movement and it is demanded of all who have received Baptism. For by the reception of this sacrament we vow

ourselves to follow Jesus, to follow the path of the cross and suffering. What a wonderful example you have given us here in Aguilares! The Church has indeed moved forward. Men and women have committed themselves to proclaim the Church's "most dangerous" doctrine and this is absolutely necessary.

My sisters and brothers, I believe that many people have mutilated the Gospel. We have tried to live a Gospel that is very comfortable, a Gospel that no longer demands the handing over of one's life, a pious Gospel and a Gospel in which one feels comfortable. But here in Aguilares, you have initiated a very bold movement that demands a Gospel commitment. In the recent publications of the Jesuits⁴ you have been able to read and understand that you are dealing with a very serious commitment to the crucified Christ. This demands the renunciation of many pleasurable things that cannot be tolerated as one embraces the cross of our Lord.

Thus, we must come to an understanding of Jesus' invitation: *if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself* (c). Let us deny ourselves --- deny ourselves of our comforts, our personal opinions and follow only the teaching of Jesus that yes, can lead us to death, but that will certainly lead us to the resurrection. All these heroes: priests and catechists of Aguilares who have died in the name of the Lord are without a doubt participating in the unfading glory of the resurrection.

A word of orientation

I also want to share with you a word of orientation. Do not confuse the liberation of Jesus with other false liberations that are merely temporal. As Christians who have been formed by the Gospel, you have a right to organize yourselves, to make concrete decisions that are inspired by the Gospel. Be careful not to betray these evangelical, Christian and supernatural convictions and replace them with a liberation that is merely economical, political or temporal. Even though Christians collaborate with people who hold other ideological positions, they must always preserve the originality of Christian liberation that Saint Paul announces today: *through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus* (d). Baptism incorporates us into Christ. Through Baptism, we become one with Christ and we must be careful so as not to betray all that is derived from this oneness with Christ, namely, we become a new people. We become a new people whose hearts have been purified from sin. As a new people, we resist the temptations of violence and hatred and resentment. Also as a new people, we love with the heart of Jesus and we defend our rights with love. Love is the power of the Church. We never promote hatred or class struggle, for these are the power of other false liberations that ultimately never lead to liberation.

The Council has spoke about a form of modern atheism that awaits the class struggle to establish a future kingdom in which all people will find great happiness (e). My sisters and brothers, if we do not take Christ and his Church into consideration, then this future kingdom will never be achieved. We will only have more tears and more abuses. We will continue to hear the sound of machine-guns and the violent outcries of those who are massacred. None of this leads to the establishment of the Kingdom of God, Yet if we die with faith in Christ and work in the light of Christ, then yes, we are moving in the direction of authentic liberation.

Those who have been enlightened with the light of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church have become aware of the fact that the dignity of the human person, created in the

image and likeness of God, is so often disrespected here on earth. Yet people have discovered their rights and in the light of Christ defend these rights and must continue this struggle and also continue to be faithful to this illumination of faith and the teaching of the Church. Do not be deceived for you will come to know true redemption.

I admire and want to also thank in a very special way the Jesuit community for they have illuminated the paths here in Aguilares. It is true that they have been misunderstood by many and persecuted as subversive priests. But those who have done this do not understand the Gospel. The Gospel that the Jesuits preach is the same Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church. There is no reason to confuse their teaching with anything else. I want to thank the Jesuits for having enlightened so many *campesinos* and for having organized so many communities. They have done all of this with a Christian spirit and out of the goodness of their hearts. We are once again reminded of Father Grande and his collaborators who knew how to instill the light of the Gospel into the hearts of many people. May this light never be extinguished!

I therefore speak a word of encouragement and pray that the light of the Lord might always illuminate these paths. New pastors will come, but the same Gospel will be preached. We pray that the pastors who come to continue this work might have this same light and courage. May they know how to guide people along the true paths of Christian liberation and do so in a way that the Church desires. The Medellin Documents, written specifically for Latin America, are an expression of the authentic doctrine of the Church. There is no reason to fear these documents, but rather they should be studied and understood and lived and put into practice because they provide light that will lead the people of Latin America to salvation.

In this sense, Aguilares is a torch raised on high. With all your pain we want to congratulate you because you have raised this torch on high. May this light never be confused with other *ignis fatuus* but rather may it represent the authentic light of Christ that shines in the midst of confusion and darkness.

3. A word of conversion

Finally, my dear sisters and brothers, I want to share with you a word about conversion. When Jesus Christ invites us to lose our lives in order to gain our lives (f), when he invites us to entrust our lives to his care, he is calling us to conversion. When the first reading states *they shall look on him whom they thrust through* (g), it is clear that this passage refers to repentance and to people waiting for God's mercy and thus we are being invited to adopt the same attitude. I know that it is very difficult to forgive another, especially after one has been so violently abused. Nevertheless, I want to invite you, my sisters and brothers, to take to heart these words of the Gospel: *Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust* (h).

Let there be no resentment in your heart. May this Eucharist, which is a call to be reconciled with God and with our sisters and brothers, satisfy our hearts with the knowledge that we are Christians. May it remove from our hearts every trace of hatred and rancor. Let us be firm in defending our rights, but let us do so with love in our hearts. For if we act with love, then we show that we are seeking the conversion of sinners. Love is the vengeance of Christians. Let us pray for the conversion of those who have beaten us and those who had the

audacity to sacrilegiously profane the tabernacle. Let us pray for the conversion and repentance of those who have made this place a prison and a torture chamber. May the Lord touch their hearts before they hear the Lord's sentence: *all who take the sword will perish by the sword* (i). May they truly repent and behold the ones they have violated. May a well-spring of mercy and goodness be poured forth upon all of us and enable us to realize that we are all sisters and brothers.

How blessed will be that moment when this terrible tragedy disappears from El Salvador. At this present time we live in fear of one another and there are places where our sisters and brothers are experiencing great suffering. May the Lord make these realities disappear from our midst with an outpouring of his mercy and goodness and grace. May Jesus lead many people to conversion. Indeed the Creator has gifted us with a beautiful nation and has given this people his own name, *El Salvador* (the Savior).. May we be converted into a nation where we are all conscious of the fact that we have been redeemed and that we are sisters and brothers, for as Saint Paul says: *you are all one in Christ Jesus* (j).

This is the final word that I am going to speak to you in this message. Let us carry in our hearts this Word made flesh, this host that *that is given up for us* (Sacramentary, Words of Institution). Let us celebrate this Eucharist with our priests who have this mysterious power that God has given to them. We are going to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. We are going to place the Blessed Sacrament anew in the tabernacle where it was profaned by sacrilegious hands. May this Eucharist touch the hearts of the people of Aguilares and all those who have come here to express their solidarity with this people. For the sake of this sacred Host, we want to love. We know that our hearts are small, but Jesus lends us his heart so that we might place on the altar one heart that represents the hearts of us all. Thus we unite together to give glory to God. We are thankful for the life we have been given and we ask forgiveness for our enemies and for our sins and sins of our people. In this spirit, let us now celebrate the Divine Eucharist.

¹ They are the Jesuit priests Salvador Carranza, Marcelino Pérez and José Luis Ortega.

² See "Carta desde el exilio del Padre Salvador Carranza", *Orientación*, 19 June 1977.

³ Though Monsignor Romero didn't yet use the term, he is referring to the "disappeared" because of the repression.

⁴ See "Los Jesuitas ante el pueblo salvadoreño" ECA 344 (1977), pp. 434-450.

Margin References (a) Mt 26,52: (b) Lk 9,23-24: (c) Lk 9,23: (d) Ga 3,26-27: (e) GS 20: (f) Lk 9,24: (g) Zc 12,10: (h) Mt 5,44-45: (i) Mt 26,52: (j) Gl 3,28-29.