

THE STRENGTH OF PRAYER

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
July 17, 1977

Genesis 18:1-10
Colossians 1:24-28
Luke 10:38-42

My dear radio audience, I want to begin today by expressing my profound gratitude to the bishops of Panama who have published a statement that refers directly to our situation here in El Salvador. On the one hand they denounce the war (Statement #6 of the White Warriors Union) and say: *its tone and content cause horror and certainly merits the strongest repudiation of all those who consider themselves human, and even more, those who consider themselves Christian.*¹ According to this statement, this group [The White Warriors Union] pretends to take the law into their hands and end by trampling upon the same law. This is more than an isolated act of terrorism since it disturbs and upsets the whole judicial order (government and constitutional representatives) and does not respect human rights. No accusation against the neighbor can justify this attitude, neither on an individual level and less so on a social and community level.

The Archbishop of Panama placed this document in the hands of the Panamanian ambassador to El Salvador and asked him to give it to our President. The following message accompanied the handing over of the document: *Our voices want to reach the highest authorities in the government of El Salvador and we ask them to apply the power of the law to the authors of said declaration which threatens the very law of the land. During the initial days of the new government in El Salvador, we have waited for [the new leaders] to take a definitive position with regard to this situation. We believe the situation demands action and we take this position not only as citizens of a sister nation but also as a people of the Isthmus, as Christians and as a people who join together in solidarity with the people of El Salvador.*

We want to thank our brother bishops for this expression of solidarity. They have also recently stated their position against these abuses in the Secretariat of the Conference of Latin American Bishops.² The statement of the Panamanian bishops demands urgent action because everyone knows that during these days our dear brothers, the members of the Jesuit community, are living under conditions where serious threats have been made against their lives.³ I beg you to pray for them. Let us also embrace the example of their serenity that can only be inspired by a great love for the truth and for Jesus Christ. In the newspaper *Orientación*,⁴ I praised this living message that the Jesuits offer us today. I also refer to the message of loyalty from the Salesian community, who in the person of Father Contreras expressed their solidarity with the bishop. It appears that his action had been misrepresented and manipulated by the media, a truly embarrassing system that gives no importance to a person's honor but is simply interested in preserving other interests. Hopefully our publications are more honest. Father Contreras has expressed his unwavering adherence to the bishop and stated that at no time did he pretend to be an anti-sign of the Archdiocesan pastoral lines. He again repeated that he expressed his solidarity in this spirit of Salesian

faith which he learned from Saint Don Bosco who is characterized by his adhesion and firm loyalty to the Church's teaching.

My sisters and brothers, all of this and many other beautiful things are communicated to me through diverse letters --- denunciations from mothers and wives, including a young woman who was about to be married when her intended husband fell victim to this injustice: he "disappeared." I would like to be able to announce not only the sad realities (yet the present situation demands this) but as a prophet should do, I would also like to be able to proclaim the wonderful things that God does, the goodness of people's hearts and the good that is so much a part of the people of El Salvador, present in them as an inborn condition. For example, I received a letter from Aguilares that spoke about the teachings that Father Grande shared with his community. The letter stated the following: *Father Grande knew how to discover the greatness of men and women and he took on himself the sufferings of others.* What a beautiful characteristic for all of those who call themselves Church! Yes, this is what I would like to do because among the many letters that I receive, I find a phrase often repeated: *we are praying... in our community we are praying... we pray often as a family.* I believe we have never before prayed so much and never before offered so many prayers to God.

In my homily today I pray, and hope that everyone understands me, (including those who have dedicated themselves to hating and killing and threatening and slandering others) when I say that I hope a ray of this light, this light that the Word of God presents to us, will enter into the hearts of all. For those who feel that the light of faith and trust has been extinguished, I pray that your consciences may be illuminated with a great confidence in the power of prayer. For those who are distinguished in prayer --- pious communities, meetings of prayer groups where prayer spontaneously arises from your hearts --- may you be encouraged to continue to live this power of prayer.

Prays, a personal meeting with God

With prayer, nothing is impossible. If everyone in the Archdiocese took the attitude of Mary as she spoke with Jesus, then Jesus would say to us as he said to Martha: *You are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing* (a). What is that one thing? It is that which was envisioned centuries before Christ, and is recounted for us today at the conclusion of the first reading that describes Abraham being visited by God, transfigured as men. Abraham is the blessed object of this theophany. He comes face to face with God and has the opportunity to welcome God and serve him with the fruits of his labor. He gives God all that a generous person would give to a friend who visits. In Hebron, Palestine, Abraham has been honored with the name *el Kalil* which means *friend*. One could not give another person a more honored name than that which was given to Abraham: the friend of God, the one who dealt with God as a friend, a man of prayer. Let all of us who are reflecting together here resolve to obtain something of that title for ourselves: friends of God. This interesting encounter of Abraham with God, friends who have eaten and shared together, is concluded with the phrase: *I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son* (b). This is the essence of the message of the first reading. For this son of the elderly Abraham and his sterile wife, Sarah, is the promised child. Here we have the birth of a people that will have the honor, in history, to be the bloodline that will give birth to the Redeemer. Jesus is a descendent of Abraham. What an honor that the Son of God should be a descendent of this elderly man and this sterile woman!

This was the great and wonderful plan of God. *Nothing is impossible for God* (c). The angel speaks these same words to Mary when she refers to another sterile woman who will bear a son: Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. In today's second reading, Saint Paul describes the only thing that is necessary: *the mystery hidden in God has been revealed to humankind* (d). Blessed are those who understand that God became man to save humankind. All people who incorporate themselves into Christ and are converted in Christ, share in the Divine Life. God became man in Christ in order to make those who believe in him, God. This is all that is necessary. In today's Gospel, we see Mary almost in ecstasy as she listens to Jesus' words, while Martha is busy about the house preparing the meal. Martha calls out to Jesus: *Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me* (e). Jesus defends Mary: *Martha, Martha, You are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.* All those who come to understand the only thing that is necessary are people in prayer, contemplative people. Martha is the image of the active person. This is how this beautiful Biblical passage has been interpreted for centuries. In light of Martha who is busy about many things we see an image of the Church that is involved in a multitude of activities. How beautiful is the Church! For even though Jesus praises Mary's attitude, he is not reproofing Martha's attitude. Jesus is saying: hopefully all your activity proceeds from the one thing that is necessary. It is not enough to pray and to contemplate, one must also work. But when one works, one carries in the heart that which unites all that one does, namely, a faith perspective that illuminates all action. My sisters and brothers, it is here that I want to remind you of the need to find that one thing that is necessary, the necessity of prayer.

During these days I am visiting the beautiful Christian communities and I assure you that through reflection on the Bible there arises many wonderful prayers that reveal the work that the Church is doing in El Salvador, especially in the small communities. It is clear that there is nothing subversive about this work and this work is also not political. In fact if there is anything political about this work, then it is the politics of the Kingdom of God that is awakening the conscience of people and making them aware of God --- and then making people aware of the situation of their sisters and brothers. What beautiful prayers! What contemplation! It is necessary to pray and to work. But our work must proceed from our prayer --- our work can never be separated from prayer.

The media has made everyone aware of the fact that last Wednesday there was a power failure in New York City. When the mayor asked the Electric Company to explain what happened they said: *It is the work of a higher power. God did it.* The mayor, however, said that the power failure resulted from negligence. Both are right. It is very similar to the situation that occurs when a moon flight is being prepared. At a specific time in the preparations it is said that *technically everything is ready; now we just have to pray. We have to pray and use all our human energy.* It is not enough to work without God nor is it enough to pray without working. *To pray is to work* is the great motto of Saint Benedict, the founder of the Benedictines who never rest at any time in their life. They are either praying or working. In their monasteries the monks appear to work like busy bees and never seem to rest. Yet their hearts are always at prayer. Like Mary, they contemplate only that which is necessary and like Martha, they are busy at work. How beautiful would be our cities and fields and towns and villages, if professionals, merchants, students, mothers --- if everyone had in their hearts this great sense of prayer and at the same time were honest and diligent in their work!

When Pope Paul VI closed the Second Vatican Council he made a wonderful analysis in his discourse that is one of the most beautiful speeches of the present Pontiff and I recommend that everyone study this document because it is a discourse on the new humanism. The Pope stated that the Council reaffirmed the religious mission of the Church, namely, its union with God. As a result of this union with God, the Church teaches men and women that prayer is their most noble activity. Humankind encounters God in prayer. Prayer also gives unity to the pluralism that exists in the world and enables people to discover the secret of truth and the steadfastness of the Church. They discover other human beings. Paul VI stated *We call upon those who term themselves modern humanists, and who have renounced the transcendent value of the highest realities, to give the council credit at least for one quality and to recognize our own new type of humanism: we, too, in fact, we more than any others, honor mankind.*⁵ Yes, the first reality that gives meaning to our prayer is the fact that in prayer we discover God. The Pope goes on to say: *To appreciate it [the Council] properly it is necessary to remember the time in which it was realized: a time which everyone admits is orientated toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than of that of heaven; a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual, and seems, quite wrongly, to be prompted by the progress of science; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person, more conscious now of himself and of his liberty, tends to pronounce in favor of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law; a time in which secularism seems the legitimate consequence of modern thought and the highest wisdom in the temporal ordering of society; a time, moreover, in which the soul of man has plumbed the depths of irrationality and desolation; a time, finally, which is characterized by upheavals and a hitherto unknown decline even in the great world religions... The theocentric and theological concept of man and the universe, almost in defiance of the charge of anachronism and irrelevance, has been given a new prominence by the council, through claims which the world will at first judge to be foolish, but which, we hope, it will later come to recognize as being truly human, wise and salutary: namely, God is—and more, He is real, He lives, a personal, provident God, infinitely good; and not only good in Himself, but also immeasurably good to us... and we can enter into dialogue with him.*⁶ My dear sisters and brothers, prayer discovers this because prayer is a personal encounter with God.

The example of Abraham speaking with God as a man would speak with anyone else and the example of Mary attentive to the words of Jesus, present us with examples that today's world needs. Many people have closed themselves off from any communication with God. Many also do not believe in God. Atheism is a phenomenon that is spreading among us, at least a practical atheism --- for in fact, God does not exist for those people who do not pray. But how can people live unless they believe in God? Is it not in prayer that we receive this power that comes from an encounter with the Almighty? In fact, is not our origin and destiny, our reason for existence, the light of our intelligence, the love of our heart, the power of our life and the perseverance in our resolutions discovered in this same encounter with the Almighty? Only God can give us all of these things. Every form of humanism and liberation that is not based on this contemplation and prayer with God is false. If it is not false, it is at least hypocritical.

My dear sisters and brothers, I hope that my poor words awaken in those who do not pray at least an attempt to place themselves in contact with God. God has only to see his creatures take those first steps of drawing near to him and then God willingly enters into dialogue with these individuals. God is more anxious to speak with us than we are to speak with God and the slightest impulse to pray is enough for God to respond. To withdraw to the shade of the terebinth tree... to sit in the shade of an oak or a fig tree... to recline on the

river bank... to stand before the beautiful views of our countryside... why not take a moment and pause and raise up this beauty to the Creator? Do not let this week pass by without making a profound attempt to look for God. If you do this I assure you that next Sunday we will come together to celebrate this Eucharist filled with this vision of having found God and our hearts more devoted to discover in the Mass this God that we look for everywhere and that can be found everywhere.

Prayer and a commitment to history

Besides this encounter with God, prayer gives unity to our life and explains our reason for existence. It explains our life as Church. Indeed, we are living in a time when Church takes on a great significance. The lips of everyone in El Salvador has pronounced thousands of times the word *Church*, but many do not know what Church is all about. For some it appears as a great plague that must be eliminated. Others persecute and slander and defame the Church. Many call themselves children of the Church and are members of Catholic associations and/or movements. What does the Church mean for those who persecute it? Most sad, however, are those who live within the Church and yet have still not understood her meaning.

The Council speaks about the Church and this reflection is the result of several years of coming together during which time the Church became conscious of herself. She appears as that young man or woman who arrives at adolescence and discovers in his or her body and spirit the most profound mysteries of being and life. It is like that situation that occurs when people reflect on themselves and discover the marvel of their conscience, their freedom, and their intelligence. This is exactly what occurred at the Council. In the light of God, the Church reflected on her life and what it means to be founded by Christ. The Church discovered that it was precisely in prayer that she connects with God, connects with the One who gives strength to her life, who enables her to be always youthful, who gives truth to her word, serenity in time of suffering and enables her to be unflinching in time of persecution like individuals who bear within themselves this God that enables them to face all kinds of trials and tribulations.

The Church is not a human organism. There is something divine in this human organism that fills her and yet transcends her and makes her aware of the fact that she is a sacrament of God in the world. As a sacrament, the Church offers salvation to humankind, to men and women today. She offers this salvation with the power of the Risen One and gives life to those who die or are elderly or sick, thus enabling them to find hope. When this situation began, this situation that we now find ourselves in as Church, I had the privilege to direct my first words to this Archdiocese and I said --- and you understood my words --- that which men and women are seeking, the Church possess and offers to humankind. What has filled me with great satisfaction during my time here as bishop --- a most interesting time for everyone --- is the fact that many people have come to me and told me that they had found in the Church what they had not found anywhere else. They have felt the Church present in their lives as the power of God. Yes, I am filled with great joy whenever someone comes to me and says: *I was separated from the Church but now you can count on me. I want to be a true Catholic.* People have discovered in the Church that which she bears within her inmost being: the power of God. In as much as the children of the Church pray, they will then become instruments of God.

Pope Paul VI, in his exhortation on evangelization in the world, asked the question: *What is evangelization?* He then answered this question and said that evangelization occurs when a group of people find themselves with Jesus' message, reflect on this message, assimilate it and are convinced that this message is joy, life-giving and satisfying (f). Humankind is evangelized in order to go out and evangelize others. People receive life in order to give life to others. All Catholics who know how to pray will become like a fountain that is filled with water and overflows and then makes the fields fruitful for planting. All Christians who pray, all children of the Church who place themselves in contact with this power of prayer, all Catholics who want to be like Mary, eager to receive the words of Jesus and form themselves spiritually, whose "waters overflow and make the fields fruitful for planting," such persons make their family life holy, convert sinners, enable others to draw near to God and wherever they go, they bear this witness that only God can give.

The saints are marvelous examples of these people who lived this fullness of God. History recounts no greater examples. The true protagonists of history are those who are most united with God. From the perspective of God, they come to understand the signs of the time, the ways of Divine Providence and the construction of history. Ah! If we only had people of prayer among those who plan the destiny of our country and our economic future. If we only had people who instead of adhering to human technology, listened to God and his technology. Indeed, we would have a world that the Church dreams about. We would have a world where injustice no longer existed, where human rights were respected, where all people generously participated, and a world where there was no more repression or torture. Excuse me if I always speak about torture, but there is a heaviness in my heart when I think about those people who experience the scourges, kicks and blows of another human person. If these people had a little bit of God in their hearts they would see that the person they are striking is a brother/sister and would see in this person the image of God. I speak about torture because this situation continues --- the arrests and the "disappearances" continue. How I hope that a little contact with God will change these dungeons of hell, that a little light will shine on these individuals and enable them to understand what God desires of them. God does not want torture. God repudiates evil. God wants that which is good. God desires love.

Only through prayer can we discover man's greatness

Only through prayer can we discover what God desires. This is the third consideration that I want to speak about and is my final reflection. Only through prayer and contemplation of God can we discover the true greatness of the human person. When I spoke about this letter from Aguilares that stated: *Father Grande knew how to discover the greatness of men and women and he took on himself the sufferings of others*, I think about the Council Fathers who understood humankind today and were criticized by others who felt that *humankind and society had turned their backs and had almost become unfaithful to the Gospel*. The Pope, however, felt that this was not so. In fact taking his lead from the Gospel command of Jesus to love one another, the Pope made this Council a Council of charity⁷, a Council that drew near to humankind with all their problems that are at times difficult to understand. On the one hand, humankind is great and rises above human inventions and their ingenuity. Yet on the other hand, humankind is depressed by their disgracefulness, bitter with life and filled with many false hopes. What happened when the Council found humankind in this situation? They did not make a diagnostic of death nor did they chastise humankind with *anathemas*.⁸ It was most characteristic of this Council that wanted to reveal the spirit of today's Church, that they should be most sympathetic of humankind's situation.

The Council saw in humankind overwhelmed by incredulousness, sin and crime, the image of God that can make men and women beautiful and enable them to recover their original greatness. My dear sisters and brothers, this is the Church of today, the Church of sympathy, dialogue, and the Church that wants to draw near to humankind in their situation of greatness and their situation of misery. The Council discovered this dignity and taught that all persons should respect this dignity in themselves and in others. The Council spoke of the need to make inhuman conditions more human, to create divine situations of faith, prayer and contact with God who created humankind to enter into this dialogue with the Divine and thus make them his family for all eternity. (g)

The Church can never forget this precious vocation of humankind. When certain traditionalists or people concerned about their own self-interest say that the Church has forgotten her religious mission and is involved in political and social matters, they forget that it is in the political, economical and social arena that men and women develop themselves. The Church is not interested in political and economical matters *per se*. But the Church is interested in these matters in as much as they enable men and women to become more human and not idolaters of money or power. For the idolatry of power makes people oppressors and the idolatry of money makes people situate others on the margins of society. The Church is concerned that the goods that have been placed in the hands of humankind --- politics, money, resources --- enable humankind to realize their vocation as children of God and as people created in the image of God. The Church learns all of this when she separates herself from the dangerous idols of the world and places herself, like Mary, before the Lord, the only thing that is necessary, the one from whom she derives her reasons for existence, her faith and hope and the greatness that humankind is able to possess.

My sisters and brothers, for this reason the message of the Word of God today is vital. I would like that all of us leave here and carry within ourselves the image of these two women who characterize the Church: Martha and Mary. Let us continue to work like Martha; in fact, let us intensify our work. But let us not forget that which is necessary and that which Mary understood. May our hearts struggle to unite all our activity and discover the reason for all our activity: God, Christ and human dignity. Let us never lose sight of God. Like the Council, let us draw near to humankind and the earth, but let us do this with hearts filled with hope, faith, love and united together with God. This is the balance of true modern holiness: like Martha, to be very committed and active in the affairs of the world. Let us commit ourselves to use well the temporal realities that God has placed in our hands. Let us work and go out of our way to serve others. But let us not do this in some philanthropic manner, that is, let us not work just for humankind and the earth. Rather let us work with a true charity that is inspired by God and like Mary who learned from her meditation on the Gospel, let us be people of prayer. Let us read the Bible and reflect on it together so that we can elevate our minds and hearts to God and then from this, let us work in the world. This is true Gospel balance and thanks to God, many people today are living this balance and I pray that this will become a standard of modern life for everyone.

¹ See "Comunicado de la Conferencia Episcopal de Panama ante la situación de la Iglesia en El Salvador", *Orientación*, 24 July 1977.

² See "Mensaje de SEDAC al pueblo de Dios y a los hombres de buena voluntad de Centro América y Panamá" (24 June 1977), *Orientación*, 10 July 1977.

³ The White Warriors Union (UGB) threatened the Jesuits with death unless they left the country before 20 July 1977.

⁴ See “La voz del arzobispo: lealtad salesiana y firmeza jesuita”, *Orientación*, 17 July 1977.

⁵ See Paul VI, *The religious value of the Council*, Allocution for the closing of Vatican II (7 December 1965), 8.

⁶ See *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ See *Ibid.* 7.

⁸ See *Ibid.* 9.

Margin References (a) Lk 10,41-42: (b) Gn 18,10: (c) Lk 1,37: (d) Col 1,26: (e) Lk 10,40-42: (f) EN 13: (g) PP 21.