

THE PROPHET'S MISSION

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 14, 1977

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 6-10

Hebrews 12:1-4

Luke 12:49-53

...[we] share the concerns, joys and hopes of the people of this diocese, as well as all their problems¹. The Word of God, the true path that we must follow, enlightens the reality of our history.

Life of the Church

Tomorrow is the feast of the Assumption and we commemorate the fact that Mary, in body and soul, was taken up to heaven. This triumphal ascent of Mary, after a life of commitment to God, is in itself a message. Let us try, if there is time, to assist at the Eucharist, or at least, let us take time in our homes to reflect on this mystery of our Mother who through her assumption is constituted Queen of the Universe. Yet even now, from her place in heaven, her eyes are focused on this earth. She is concerned about our life and this should instill in us great trust and hope: as a reward for her virtue, Mary is crowned in heaven.

At 11:00am we will celebrate a Mass here in the cathedral. At that time, a young man who has completed his theological studies, Jorge Benavides, will be ordained a deacon. At this time, we also want to congratulate the faithful of the parish in Mejicanos who celebrate their patronal feast tomorrow. We extend our congratulation also to the Assumption Sisters who celebrate their principal feast on August 15th.

I also want to communicate to you and ask you to pray for the priests and religious who are directly involved in the pastoral work in the various towns and villages of the Archdiocese. They will gather together on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday to study a document that I would like everyone to become familiar with --- a document written by Pope Paul VI. This document, like all ecclesiastical documents, receives its name from the first two Latin words of the document --- Latin is the official language of the Church. These documents are written in Latin and then translated into various languages, but continues to be known by its Latin title. This document that we will study is called *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and deals with evangelization in the today's world. It is a compilation of the suggestions and ideas that were given to Pope Paul VI during his consultation with all the bishops of the world (1974) who were concerned about bringing the Church's eternal message to humankind today --- humankind that can be so complicated and difficult. We will examine and deepen our knowledge of these guidelines that are offered to us by the world's bishops and the supreme teacher of the Church, the Pope, so that our evangelization here in the

Archdiocese corresponds to this series of initiatives outlined in the Pope's letter. We hope that all the priests and women religious will unify their criteria and explain their difficulties so that no one feels that there are two churches here in the Archdiocese. At times, certain people criticize the attitudes and the criteria of the Archbishop and the priests who are with him and give the impression that we are members of some other Church that criticizes the hierarchy of the Church. This is not the time for division. This is a time for dialogue, and here we have three days to dialogue in depth. In those matters where we disagree, we will have the opportunity to see if we are mistaken. We are not trying to impose some unexpected or sudden changes on people but rather we desire to undertake our great evangelizing task with criteria that, even if they are not pleasing to the world, are pleasing to God and those people who want to be faithful to the plan of God.

I also want to announce that next week, God willing, the Pastoral Letter that I spoke about on August 6th will be published. This letter deals with the Church as the body of Christ in history. In other words, the Church, in every age, attempts to do what Jesus himself would do at this time. If Jesus were a citizen of El Salvador, what would he do? This is the Church's primary question and summarizes the Church's actions.

I also want to share with you a concern of several Christian communities who are manifesting their solidarity with the catechist Filomena Portillo Puerta, a young woman of 21 years whose capture on July 30th in Ciudad Delgado they denounce --- she was found dead in Tejulta, Chalatenango. What is happening here? Is our situation getting better or does it continue to be the same? Also a catechist of Father Salvador Colorado from Ciudad Delgado was captured, tortured and threatened with death. This same death threat was made to Father Colorado who has suffered an emotional crisis and is being treated. This is also persecution.

We want to be given news about those who have been imprisoned and "disappeared." The Church must express her solidarity with the suffering of those families who suddenly discover that their loved ones have "disappeared." The Church also demands that human rights be respected and has no confidence in a government that speaks all the right words but does nothing to create an environment of greater trust.

I also want to announce the publication of the Medellin Documents. They are already in circulation thanks to the efforts of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas and are available for everyone in the Archdiocese. These documents should be studied and known by all Catholics. Unfortunately, many people are learning about these documents from uninformed sources, from persons who distort these documents in biased publications. These individuals want us to believe that the Church has become Marxist and sadly enough the only knowledge that many people have about these documents has been obtained from these poisonous newspaper columns. I believe that we can count on mature Catholics to have their own criteria, and to not believe things to be dogma just because they read about them in the newspapers or see them on television. Go to the sources and use your critical sense in judging matters. When you read a newspaper, even when you read the editorials, you have to use your judgment and say: this is a lie. You see that the papers can also be biased. This is precisely how you reveal your maturity in judgment --- when you read or go to the movies. No picture is bad if you apply your criteria when at the movies. You yourself know how to condemn immorality and all those things that should be censured. You do not need someone to tell you: this movie is permitted for people of such and such an age --- your own criteria tells you this. Therefore, when dealing with the Medellin Documents, it is necessary to know the sources. Now these sources are available to you. I asked that copies be brought to the

cathedral today and I suppose they will be available after the Mass. If not, look for them in the Catholic bookstores or in the chancery office.

My sisters and brothers, other acts of violence have occurred during these days and the Church cannot accept violence in any form. These crimes and apprehensions and tortures are just as violent as the bomb that exploded in San Salvador and the kidnapping of Dr. Carlos Emilio Alvarez². The Church cannot approve any of these actions. Violence is inhuman and builds nothing. Violence destroys and it especially destroys the hope for a better society. I beg you, with all the authority that the Church has given me, please let us think of God, the God of peace, the God who loves us, the God who forgives sinners if they repent.

One of the most beautiful letters that was received in my office this week stated: *What I most admire about the Church during these days is the fact that, despite having suffered so many abuses, and even assassinations, I have never heard the Church speak a word of hatred or vengeance. The Church always speaks words of love and conversion.* The humble souls understand the Church's intentions! I am happy that people feel this way, even though I know that there are others who are obstinate in accusing the Church of violence and of being the cause of everything that is wrong in our country. Those who listen to our words and are not prejudiced or selfish, but hear the Church's true language: we say NO to violence and we call sinners to repentance. As was said on the day of Father Grande's funeral services: *Who knows if the assassins of this victim [Father Grande] are listening to me on the radio? Know that we do not hate you and that we pray to God for your repentance.* Come with us one day and receive the bread that God gives even to sinners and assassins --- and he gives this bread with a kiss of love. What joy for the Church when those who have written or paid others to write these slanderous lies about the Church or used arms to humiliate people or tortured people in such brutal ways, what joy when these individuals repent. They will see that these things simply cannot exist and they will return repentant and ask pardon of God who still awaits them. From the beginning, God gives life to sinners; he does so because he is waiting. I hope, my dear friends, that you are listening to me (perhaps humiliated because of what you have done --- violence is never something to be proud of and those who beat others always feel ashamed of what they have done; they are more humiliated than the one who is beaten). I hope that you feel ashamed, especially since you are in a country that calls itself civilized. If we truly want to put a beautiful face on our country, then let us wash its intimate conscience. I say this especially to those who are culpable and who are causes of this situation that cannot continue. I also speak to those who have supported, tolerated and covered up this situation.

What constitutes peace ?

My brothers and sisters, here we are before the Word of God. I find in the message of the prophet Jeremiah and Paul's letter to the Hebrews, and especially, the divine words of Jesus in the gospel, the secret of happiness. Perhaps some of you are surprised as Jesus presents himself today and says: *Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division* (a). Now don't say that Jesus is preaching violence. He is preaching true violence that needs true peace. *Do you think that I have come to bring a superficial peace?* This is the first point of today's message. What constitutes peace? Peace consists of harmony with the plan of God. When an individual, a family or a people are in harmony with the will of God, then there, in that place, true peace exists. In my Pastoral Letter I highlight this concept and state that true peace occurs when the history of humankind

reflects salvation history. There are not two histories. The history of humankind, of each person and of all people who form part of this nation --- this history is not distinct from the history of salvation or the history of the plan of God. It is a plan that God presents to humankind, just like an architect presents his plan to those who will construct a building. As long as the workers build according to the architectural plans, the building will have a solid foundation. But if a foreman and some workers decide to lay the foundation in another form, and to nail support beams in a different part of the building, and work as they want to work, then the plan of the architect is a failure. The same can be said of God's plan for humankind and his history of salvation --- if people decide to construct the world according to their desires and selfishness and not according to the plan of God, then God's plan is lost.

Peace then consists of knowing what God wants for society, for my life, and for the nation. This should be the focus of government officials and all those who want to build the world, and those who are able to change the destiny of the country with their money, technology, and political ability --- they should seek to make God's will a reality and not their own will and desires. As good builders they should continually reaffirm God's architectural plan for this nation and build accordingly. Then there will be peace. For as the Council says: *Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies* (b). Peace is not that peace that exists in the cemeteries ---where the bodies of those who have been killed during times of repression are buried and can no longer speak. True peace is based on justice and equality and the plan of God who has created us in his image and likeness. God has given to us the ability to work for the common good of the Republic. God has not chosen a small group of people to do this work but rather has chosen all the people of El Salvador. We all have a right to participate in designing our own destiny and formulating the common good. This is our right and no one should be excluded.

How beautiful when history is developed in this way, when our history coincides with the history of salvation. Yes, there is peace. This is a very profound reality and not everyone understands this. For this reason Jesus says that one of the results of this doctrine will be division. *A household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three* (c). In the intimate family life *a mother [will be] against her daughter and a daughter against her mother*. One person understands the meaning of true peace and another wants a superficial peace. So in society there will be divisions as long as there are stubborn people who, in their own way of thinking, want to establish peace on a foundation of injustice and selfishness and repression and abuses of human rights. But peace is never achieved in this way. This will be a fictitious peace and not the peace that Jesus gives us. Jesus says: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you* (d). The world is often a false irenic, for we often create the appearance of peace as we extend our hand to another and yet we know that we are not in agreement. In ancient times there was a social sanction so that when men arrived at their clubs they had such a deep understanding of their nobility that if an assassin or a thief arrived, and though he might be a great Lord, they would not shake hands, because to shake hands meant that one was in full accord with the other. It would be wonderful if this social sanction were restored in our own society. We could then make demands against those who are not in agreement with the plan of God. Yes, we must always be respectful of their way of thinking, but we must let them know that they are not establishing true peace and this is where conflict arose.

The prophets announce God's plan

The role of the prophets, the second consideration of this homily, is focused on the central figure of the first reading, Jeremiah, and the central figure of the second reading, Jesus Christ. Jeremiah is a wonderful character who in his mission foreshadowed Jesus who for preaching true peace that went against the desires and the selfishness of some, was crucified on the cross. Jeremiah was a man who suffered greatly. For almost fifty years his prophetic mission was one of pain and suffering. This suffering reaches its peak in the reading that we have just heard. His enemies obtained authorization from the king to throw Jeremiah into a cistern, a well. Another individual, however, who had influence with the weak king, Zedekiah, obtained authorization to rescind the previous order. *Take him out of the well* --- Jeremiah trusted in God and God saved his life (e). I recommend that those who like to read the Bible, read the book of Jeremiah this week. A very interesting book! But read it in its historical context. There was a certain degree of happiness because during the reign of Josiah, the king and the prophet were in agreement. They tried to restore the true image of God among the People of God. This was the obligation of the king. When the prophet saw the good-will and the attitudes of the king in defending the rights of God, he gave his approval to the king and supported him.

The Church is not fighting with the government. She is only telling the government, like king Josiah, to look to God and do what God wants. This is the role of the prophets in the Old and New Testaments: to announce the plan of God. When people accept this plan, there are no conflicts. There is joy and happiness. Jeremiah hoped that this is how it would always be. But when Josiah dies and Jehoiakim becomes king and then Zedekiah, who appears in today's reading, conflict arose. The kings were complacent about the idolatry of the people and allowed the people to prostitute their religion. They separated themselves from God and worshipped false idols. Even the temple priests were involved in this idolatry. It must be remembered that the prophets were distinct from the priestly class and therefore the prophets called attention to the priests because they had become partisans of the monarchy and sure in their religion: *Put not your trust in the deceitful words, "This is the temple of the Lord!" If you do not conduct yourselves according to the will of God, you are offending the Lord. Then this temple will be destroyed and the armies of Babylon will come and destroy Jerusalem and the leaders of the people will be led into exile for a second time* (f). These words disturbed the idolaters because here was a prophet who wanted to purify the history of God in the people. The prophet Jeremiah could not say anything differently and, in fact, the prophet has to disturb society when they are not acting in accord with God. The prophet cries out. Thus Jeremiah becomes estranged from the people. They did not like him. You heard, today, in the first reading the accusations: *This man ought to be put to death! He demoralizes the soldiers who are left in the city, and all the people, by speaking such things to them. He is not interested in the welfare of our people, but in their ruin* (g). See how the accusations against the prophets of all times are the same. When the prophet disturbs the consciences of the selfish, or of those who are not building according to God's plans, he is a nuisance and must be eliminated, murdered, thrown into a pit, and not allowed to speak the word that annoys. But the prophet could not tell them anything else. Read in the Bible how Jeremiah often prays to God: *Lord, take this cross away from me. I do not want to be a prophet. I feel my insides burning because I have to say things even I don't like* (h).

The prophets call people to conversion

It is always the same. The prophet has to speak about society's sin and call people to conversion, just as the Church is doing today in San Salvador: pointing out whatever would enthrone sin in El Salvador's history and calling sinners to be converted, just as Jeremiah

did: *Reform your ways and your deeds! If you do not, this temple, in which you trust, will be destroyed. Reform your ways and your deeds! The armies from the north are coming and will carry you off into exile* (i). This was the political situation. Palestine wanted to seek support from Egypt. But God had another plan. How terrible are God's plans when people do not want to obey God of their own accord. Unfortunately, there are famous men in the history of the world who were chosen by God to be a scourge on society. Could this not be our situation --- overseers and people who are seen as a scourge on society? God needs these people because men and women do not want to repent and be converted on their own accord. So God waits and the prophet waits, for with conversion, a time of happiness will once again dawn. God waits even when he knows that a time of disgrace is near at hand. We saw that during Israel's time of disgrace, the Temple was destroyed. But even today, its walls remain as a testimony to these former times.

Now that the Israelites are in possession of Jerusalem, Jewish people from all over the world return to cry on those walls of Jerusalem. They remember the passage from Jeremiah that recounts the people's disobedience and therefore they perished and were led into exile in Babylon. There, because of their sins, their social sin, their idolatry, and the failure of their authorities to fulfill their obligations and call the people to order, they were humiliated and ruled by foreigners. Because of their social sin of injustice, a sin that was denounced by Jeremiah, because people felt secure in their traditional religious practices and did not renew these customs or seek the will of God, even the priests were led into exile. These religious leaders had become partisans of the monarchy and spoke flattering words to the king and the army and the people who wanted to continue in their idolatry.

God punishes the priests when they do not fulfill their obligations. We have said that this denunciation of sin also includes the priests. We are also sinners and have to ask for God's forgiveness. In my Pastoral Letter I speak of the fact that if the Church has come to a better understanding of the world, then she can question the world about their sins. But at the same time the Church must question herself about her own sins. We are human and capable of sin and we must also repent and be converted. We are not the ones who call people to conversion, rather it is God who calls and we, as Church, must also repent and be converted to God. God's plan can also make us, bishops and priests, feel uncomfortable. Yes, the Kingdom of God proclaims to the Church and the world the need for repentance and conversion.

The prophets also announce hope

But there is hope – and here I end my humble commentary on today's Word. The prophets announced that a time of disgrace would come but they all proclaimed a time of hope. In the midst of his lamentations, Jeremiah announced that the people, repentant and converted, would return to their land. In fact he says some beautiful things about those who were persecuted. Jeremiah placed his hope in those who were exiled, this remnant of Israel who had been an example to the people in Palestine because they were faithful to the Word of God (j). They are the hope this message does not fall on deaf ears.

I have great hope, my sisters and brothers, because I know that the word of this homily touches many hearts. I hope that people understand the intention of my words: a denunciation of sin that the Church can never tolerate, not even in her members, and a call to repentance and conversion. Priests, religious, Catholic schools, institutions of the Church, pious associations, all of us, beginning with the Archbishop, have to examine our lives in

depth and see we if we are living in accord with God's will. In this way, we, like Jeremiah, will we able to give the world a witness of holiness. We will show how life should be lived when we are attacked by abuses and slanders.

I congratulate all the catechists and preachers of the Word of God who, despite the persecution, remain faithful. There is hope and Jeremiah reveals this hope with a gesture, for like all the prophets, he spoke not only with words but also with gestures.

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

² Carlos Emilio Álvarez Geoffroy was kidnapped on 11 August 1977 by the Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN) and freed eight days later after their demands had been met. See *Prensa Gráfica*, 13 & 20 August 1977.

Margin References (a) Lk 12,51: (b) GS 78: (c) Lk 12,52-53: (d) Jn 14,27: (e) Jr 38,10: (f) Jr 7,1-15: (g) Jr 38,4: (h) Jr 20,9: (i) Jr 26,1-13: (Jr 31, 1-7.