

THE CHURCH OF THE COVENANT AND OF TRUE POVERTY

**Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 28, 1977**

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Life of the Church

...on the other hand¹, in the same village of El Salitre, nothing is known about the events that that were written in yesterday's edition of *Diario de Hoy*² concerning the assault that left a policeman wounded. Once again unjust acts are distorted or the reporter is mistaken about the place where such an event occurred. In Salitre, the only thing that is known is the fact that on Friday morning three Christians were captured and later found dead, their wounds inflicted by machetes.³ We want to unite ourselves with these families who are now in pain. We want to be the voice of the voiceless and shout out against so many abuses of human rights. Let justice be done! So many crimes taint our country. Let the army find out who these criminals are and at the same time give a just indemnity to these families who are now so helpless. We have made many comments about this event on our radio programs. Here I simply want to make this an intention of our celebration and, like always, ask the Lord for eternal rest for the victims and the conversion of those hardened sinners who don't want to hear the call to justice and repentance.

I have visited Aguilares and will continue visiting its cantons. There is an atmosphere of bravery. The heart of true Christians who live in hope. But, since we are human, there is also an atmosphere of fear. Our communities are watched as suspicious, it is not believed that the Church is not preaching subversion, it is always under suspicion. Catechists and proclaimers of the Word are considered dangerous people. Once again the Church protests that her message is one of justice and love; that the aim of her preaching continues to be the message given by Christ to proclaim to the world. And it will not betray this mission to promote justice and love, a brotherhood that becomes more and more necessary in a situation where only terror, the brute force of arms, spying and psychological warfare try to run everything.

As always, the Church speaks out in the daylight and her message continues to be the same message as Jesus'. Her message is not some theory about love for one another, but a message incarnated into the reality where people do not love one another and where there is hatred, where some individuals have become wolves that devour others, and where extortion continues to be part of our sad reality. The situation of exploitation can never be a Christian environment. In fact, the Church wants to remove from the world the sins that blemish its history. Therefore, I repeat that God wants to utilize the history of every people, and specifically, the history of El Salvador, and make it the history of salvation. The Church is

sent by God to purify history and make it the source of salvation. Therefore, the Church must continue to denounce the sins of history. Wherever sin is found, it is an obstacle to the Kingdom of God, which cannot be established in the world because sin impedes its presence. For this reason, Christian communities must continue to be faithful to their mission and to Jesus Christ and remove all sin from the world.

Last Sunday, I visited Aguilares where the Blessed Sacrament had been profaned. What wonderful people! Despite their poverty and difficulties, they were able to obtain a new tabernacle ---the old one had been destroyed by the Guardia and is no longer secure enough to house the Blessed Sacrament. Even though the government promised us that they would repair the damage that was caused by the unjust occupation of this building, yet we have had to repair the house and replace the tabernacle and other articles that were destroyed. Also certain things have not been returned, for example, typewriters and materials that are used in the evangelization of the people. But, thanks to God, we have a new tabernacle. It was incredible to see the emotion of the people, their tears, as we placed the ciborium with the consecrated hosts in the tabernacle. The people were singing: *Let us praise the most Blessed Sacrament of the altar*. No one can silence this voice of our people. They believe in Christ present in the host and a bullet-riddled tabernacle does not instill fear in these people. In fact just the opposite. When will they understand that the faith that is rooted in our hearts only grows stronger when we are abused?

In our presentation last Wednesday (which unfortunately was not taped correctly and therefore many were unable to listen to our message) we spoke about the situation in Aguilares. We are asking the people to help those living in Aguilares. We call upon your generosity which has been awakened as a result of so many difficult situations. Your donations of clothing, shoes, food, and money are arriving at the chancery and a committee of religious and lay people will distribute these to the people most in need.

In that same presentation, we also spoke about our program of vocational recruitment. At this time, Father Ledislao Segura, a Jesuit, is involved in the ministry of vocational recruitment --- as you can see the Jesuits are not subversive, but help the Church in her time of need. Father Segura is a tireless pilgrim. He travels from parish to parish and speaks with the pastors and with those young men in the schools who are discerning their vocation. Many of the young men who are presently studying for the priesthood owe their vocations to these visits of Father Segura. We naturally understand that as the Church matures, she seeks to discover new ways to recruit vocations. It would be good if each community (or family, for the family is a cell of the community) were so devout and created such a Christian environment that vocations naturally arose in these communities, just like the flowers and fruits grow in our gardens. The communities need priests, and God raises up vocations in these communities. They need, however, to be cultivated. Thanks to the Base Communities of Faith and the intimate dialogue that takes place when the members come together, men and women are able to grow in their faith. Unfortunately these meetings are seen by some as subversive and meddling in politics, yet it is precisely in this environment that people become more aware of their human dignity and the dignity of the family. People are able to develop themselves as Christians and create their own destiny and the destiny of the community.

When government officials come to understand what is occurring here, they will see that they have nothing to fear from this work but rather much reason to hope. Indeed, the country has much reason for hope since as these people become aware of their dignity, they will also be more critical of the injustices that occur in the life of our nation. This will disturb

and upset certain individuals, yet for this reason the Church must continue her mission. We do not want people to continue to live their lives in ignorance or to be slandered and called communists, slandered and told they are distributing opium to the people. In these situations, the Church makes people more aware of the fact than all the different ideologies, that everything must be oriented toward eternity, and from this perspective, men and women must work to design their own destiny and the destiny of their community.

In this way, true priestly vocations will arise from our communities, vocations that our communities need. At the same time, however, Father Segura continues to travel from parish to parish. I ask the pastors to take care of him during his travels, and I hope that those young men who are discerning a vocation will take some time and talk with him. Do not use, as an excuse, your poverty or lack of money. Almost all the priests come from families who are poor. This is our greatest joy: to remember our poor mothers who worked so hard, and our fathers who worked to sustain their families and from this household arose a vocation that became a voice for the people who live in poverty, a voice that helps people to orient the world on the paths of God.

I also told you in this presentation, and I am going to repeat it here since it was announced for this Sunday, that according to the tradition of my venerable predecessor, Bishop Luis Chávez y González, this last Sunday in August is dedicated to the catechism, Catechism Day. Many times this celebration consisted of asking for donations to help the religious education programs of the parishes and the Diocese. I am not so interested in donations, I know that funds will be provided when people better understand the meaning of this day. Therefore, I am saying here, without asking for money, but asking you to be very aware of the fact that we are here in this cathedral because of the catechism. Our parents were our catechists. A good parish priest reminds us of our happy infancy when someone taught us the *Our Father* and how to make the *Sign of the Cross*. The Church evolves. Catechetics is going to be the theme of the next Synod of Bishops that will meet in Rome. Representatives of all the Episcopal Conferences will come together to respond to the Pope's request for consultation in this area: how should we carry on the catechetical process today? The times have changed greatly. At one time we were drawn to these programs by holy cards and candy. We certainly need to preserve an attitude of ingenuity. But television, the movies, and the means of communication have changed children's attitudes. Holy cards and candy are no longer attractive to young people. We must look for new ways to bring our young people to a true love of the content of their faith and the Divine revelation that God brought to the world to make humankind divine. Thanks to this faith that comes to maturity in the catechetical process, there is great hope. Parents, you are given the primary responsibility to guide your children in those initial steps of faith tradition. *Tradition* means to hand on, to hand on from grandparents to grandchildren, from generation to generation, the doctrine that God revealed and that the Apostles taught (catechetics). What are the four gospels but catechetics: they tell people about Jesus and what he taught. They are directed to children and young people and adults and speak about God becoming man to save humankind, thus making people sisters and brothers to one another, and everyone a child of God. In this way people are saved. This is very simple --- it is the content and the meaning of love, the content and the meaning of Revelation. This message of Revelation is transmitted with love and becomes alive in every human person and in every society. This is our catechism, the transmission of God's Revelation that is ultimately directed to the faith of humankind.

Thus there is a distinction between catechetics and theology or apologetics or sacred history or so many other auxiliary scientific systems. The object of catechetics is faith and life, not science and knowledge. Therefore it is not enough to teach formulas, such as: Who is God? Why did God make you? To memorize answers is good, but it is not catechetics. Catechetics implies living these realities. If God has created me, then my faith tells me that I must live as a child of God. If Christ has saved us, then this should not be some memorized response to a question, but we must live this reality, that is, we must hand over our lives to Christ who handed over his life for us. The Church will be blessed when these modern ideas mature and enable her to transmit the content of her teaching in a way that allows people to mature in their faith.

Finally, my sisters and brothers, I want to tell you that we are now distributing the Pastoral Letter that I have spoken to you about. The Interdiocesan Social Secretariat has published this letter in a very beautiful edition. I say it is beautiful not because it is one of my documents but because the theme that it deals with is beautiful: the body of Christ in history. This is a response to so many calumnies and defamations and distortions that have been published. All of this has perhaps poisoned the souls of those who are without faith, yet at the same time, these realities have awakened the faith of many other people. Here they will find the best answer.

With the calmness of a theological reflection, I want to make you aware of the fact that it is certain that changes have occurred in the Church. Those who do not understand these changes are Catholics who have not been renewed. In the second part of the letter I respond to the question: why have there been changes in the Church? My response: because the Church is the Body of Christ in history, that is, the Church has to be Christ in this hour, in this country. The Church has to speak as Christ would speak today, here, in this pulpit in this cathedral. If the Church acts in this way, then she is the authentic Church of Christ and will wound those who offend God's Law and attempt to impede the plan of the Kingdom of God in this world. The abuses of power, the selfish inversion of capital, the idolatry of money, poor people who do not want to develop themselves to become architects of their own destiny --- all of these are sins of our society. The voice of Christ that denounced sin in his own time --- the sins of Herod, Pilate and the Pharisees --- will, now, today, denounce the abuses of authority and power that, in so many different ways, are displeasing to the Lord of history: Christ, God, the King of our hearts.

I also want to tell you that with great joy we have published a pamphlet that will be very useful for understanding the social teaching of the Church. It is called; *Orientaciones Sociales de la Iglesia a la Luz del Evangelio* (Social Orientation of the Church in Light of the Gospel).⁴ It is a compilation of Biblical texts and the encyclical letters of the Pontiffs that we hope will instruct men and women today about God's desires for society. You are able to obtain this pamphlet and study it. In this way, you will become actualized Catholics in this present situation.

My sisters and brothers, I forgot to tell you the names of the three deceased persons in Tejutla whom we remember in our prayers. They are, Felipe de Jesús Chacón Vásquez, a devout Cursillista --- how could he possibly be a guerrilla? Serafín Vásquez Escobar and Pablo, whose last name I do not remember. Let us also pray for their families who are in desperate situations.

Let us place ourselves in this concrete situation of our Church and our country, so that we might enlighten these situations with the light of the divine word that has just been read. I want to present two aspects that I believe are the two great messages of today's readings: in the first place, I want to speak about the Church of the covenant between God and humankind; and then, in the second place, I will speak about the Church of true poverty.

The Church of the covenant between God and humankind

Today's readings guide us and it is important to note that these are not the words of men, but God's words. Saint Paul compares the two covenants as he presents us with an image of the Church. The covenant that God made with Moses in Sinai and on Mount Horeb was a covenant of terror, fear, lightening and thunder. The majesty of God was so powerfully felt that the pilgrims in the desert said to Moses: *You speak to us, and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die* (a). Saint Paul, reminding the Christians about this covenant says: *You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast* (b). We are reminded here of the beautiful pages of the book of Exodus. God presented himself to the people who were prone to idolatry and made them fearful. He wanted to make the people aware of the fact that there is only one true, living God. God desired to make a covenant with a people that would adore only him, with a people who, in the midst of so many other idolatrous nations, would preserve a single cult to the true God. Therefore, filled with majesty, God sealed this covenant on the mountain and gave the people the tablets on which his law was written. The Ten Commandments of the Law of God (c), that continue as law in the Christian era, were promulgated by this God who was feared. You have not heard that voice that the people listened to when they asked God not to speak because they were afraid of dying.

When people saw these revelations of God, faith in the one God was preserved and the covenant of the Old Law was respected by the people. But when the temptation of idolatry presented itself, the people fell into idolatry. When this people were attracted by gold and money and political power, they made a covenant with the kings of this world and sold themselves for money. Then God punished them.

The Bible presents the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon and their punishment through disease and other calamities as signs of God reclaiming obedience to the covenant. God has spoken through Abraham and Moses and the Prophets: *I will be your God and you will be my people* (d). A priestly people, a people with specific laws for a cult that God desires, a people that was able to realize their ideals in the most beautiful temple of that era, the temple of Jerusalem. In that temple, the presence of God was made real; so much so that when the temple was consecrated, it was filled with smoke, that is, with the majesty of God. (e) This made people aware of God and the people felt the need to be united with God. Their idolatries and sins distanced them from God, and God punished them, not to distance himself from them forever, but to bring them back to him once again. How many times did God compare the covenant with the marriage contract! (f) How many times did this woman commit adultery, and sleep with other men! God is compared to a disillusioned husband who continues to love his adulterous spouse. He waits for her to return, repentant and then, once again, he takes her as his spouse. Comparisons which move us all.

The Council states: *He [God] therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant. Step by step He taught and prepared this people, making known in its history both Himself and the decree of His will and making it holy unto*

Himself. All these things, however, were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ, and of that fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God Himself made flesh (g). The second part of the letter to the Hebrews tells us --- listen to these words my dear Catholics who have come to the cathedral in such consoling numbers --- how happy I am to see the cathedral filled and to be able to speak with you as a sign that our Diocese, despite the persecution, remains faithful: You have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant (h).

My dear sisters and brothers, present here in the cathedral and those listening to me on radio in your chapels, at the bedside of someone who is infirm, or in your homes, I am able to speak with you, those of you who are reflecting on this message with good will, and I know that many listen to me with good will. Others, however, listen to me and look for ways to entrap me and denounce me. I forgive them and ask the Lord to touch their hearts. I pray that they may become part of this group that that will hear the words of Saint Paul when he says: *You are the companions of those angels who eternally adore God.* You form part of that noble group of people who have followed God. You are also joined together with the firstborn of heaven who have been born for eternity and you are united with the just souls who have achieved their destiny. It seems that I can see among those just souls, the martyrs of our Archdiocese, those who are dying today, the victims of injustice and slander. You, also, are arriving at your destiny, behind the procession of the angels and nobles and blessed. Such a long procession of the people from the Archdiocese, people we speak about in our parishes and chapels and villages, people who remained faithful to the teaching of Jesus. Your hope is secure because you find your support in the mediator of the New Covenant, Jesus. Jesus is the cause of our hope.

My sisters and brothers, do not follow the Church because of other human beings, or bishops, or priests. We are sinners. Pray for us so that we might be faithful like you. My faith as bishop finds its support in Jesus and I pray that Jesus will also support the faith of my beloved priests. I pray that the religious women, so united at this time and fulfilling so many different commitments, may you find in Jesus the support of your faith. I pray for so many lay people who have found in the Church a reason to believe and hope. Here is the reason for your faith and hope: the risen Jesus, alive, and at the head of this long procession of angels and blessed --- Jesus, who goes before all those who are on pilgrimage in this world.

This is the new covenant. In a few minutes you are going to hear these words from the altar: *This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all (i).* This is the definitive covenant. The covenant that God sealed with Abraham and Moses and that was foretold by the prophets.. This new and definitive covenant that we now live, was being prepared for us until the Great Mediator arrived. The Great Mediator is Jesus Christ.

Here I want to clarify something I said on August 5th. From these microphones we spoke about the process of the Divine Savior and I said that the people gathered here were following their true leader, the Divine Savior. Someone left here and told others that I said that I was the leader of this people. See how things get distorted! I have never believed that I am the leader of anyone, because there is only one leader: Jesus Christ. Jesus is the source of our hope. In Jesus, I find a support for my preaching, and in Jesus I find the truth for the words

that I speak. My dear sisters and brothers and radio audience, I would be crazy to think that I, weak and mortal (yes I am going to die like everyone else) am the support of all the people. I would be crazy to think that I am the hope of all the people. Thanks be to God that through my humble words some people come to discover the One in whom we must have faith and in whom we must place all our trust, Jesus Christ. I stated in my Pastoral Letter that the Church is nothing other than the Body of Jesus. Jesus is the strength of the Church, not because Jesus is man, but because Jesus is God who became man and lives and reigns forever.

The Church of true poverty

I conclude my reflection with this second consideration: today, in the first reading and the Gospel, the Word of God invites us to live true poverty. The wise man of the Bible says: *My son, conduct your affairs with humility* (j). In the Gospel, Jesus says: *When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not recline at table in the place of honor, do not be proud or self-righteous. Be humble and take the lowest place...When you hold a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives and your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have a repayment. When you hold a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind* (k). Humility and poverty are twins. Perhaps it is better to say that they are one reality. The truly poor person is humble. The truly poor person has nothing, and knows he has nothing but also knows that he has everything in God.

When the Virgin proclaims in her *Magnificat*: *The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty* (l), what is she saying? The Virgin does not despise the rich but looks down upon those who are self-sufficient and proud, those who do not need God and create idols from the material things of this world. These people trust in their money more than God and more than they love their neighbor. They trust in their power because they have arms. They abuse others and are proud. These are the ones that God sends away empty. Those who are humble, even though they have power and money, do not place their hope in these material realities because they know they are as fleeting as the wind. People will never find stability in power --- it comes and goes. True humility consists of trusting in God for everything. If I have power on earth, I must recognize that God has given me this power and therefore use it as God wants it to be used. For God can say to me what he said to King Saul: *your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and has appointed him commander of his people* (m). My sisters and brothers, power in this world is passing, but humility is truth. People are truly rich when they trust in the richness of God. These are the ones who are true members of the eternal covenant with Christ.

For this reason I believe that this Church of the Covenant, this Church of the Archdiocese, heir of God's covenant with Abraham and Moses and Christ, this Church is the true and authentic Church because she no longer seeks security in power or money. Today the Church is poor. Today the Church knows that the powerful reject her, but she is loved by those who place their trust in God. Therefore, my beloved sons and daughters of the Church, never betray this covenant with our God, because this angers God. When the People of God in the Old Covenant lost confidence in the covenant that God had established with them, they sought support from Egypt and Babylon. God rejected them and they became the victim of their own mistrust. Whenever Israel trusted God, even though they were surrounded by enemies, they were victorious.

This is the Church that I desire, a Church that does not rely on privileges or the value of material goods, and a Church that is more and more detached from earthly and human goods. In this way the Church, from the perspective of the Gospel and her poverty, can more freely judge society. This is not a demagogic poverty, because that is not poverty. Those who pretend to be poor in order to create revolution and plant seeds of hatred are not poor. They trust in their revolution and this does not automatically make them poor. The Church is poor because she does not trust any earthly revolution nor does she plant seeds of hatred --- the Church will gain nothing from that. The Church plants seeds of love, love of neighbor and the Kingdom of God on earth and true poverty and humility. My sisters and brothers, this is the Church of our dreams and that Church that I believe we are building in our Archdiocese.

I thank all those who lead the celebration of the Word, priests, religious, and lay people, because you have understood this message. Those who have mistrusted the Church but each day are now discovering that she is authentic, be assured that this is the true Church. If one day I were to betray the Church, then pay no attention to me, but follow the Church that we have so clearly glimpsed at this time. I hope, however, with your help, to never betray this Church.

Therefore, I want to clarify something at this time. When the newspapers stated ⁵that the Church is not persecuted and that everything was well and that the government had come to an understanding with me, this is false. I continue to say that there will be dialogue only when an atmosphere of trust is created with concrete actions. These crimes must cease. This mistrust of the people must cease. The Church is committed to the noble interests of the people and my sisters and brothers, as long as this atmosphere of mistrust exists, I would betray you if behind your backs I were to enter into a dialogue with those who do not respect the rights of humankind.

Meanwhile, let us continue to follow the Church. Let us continue to hope for dialogue and for an atmosphere of friendship that has been taken away from us. Let us hope that the atmosphere of confidence that has been lost will be restored. As I stated in my Pastoral Letter, the Church is willing to cooperate in this effort. She does not seek advantages for herself but wants to serve and seek the common good that the people truly deserve.

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

² See *El Diario de Hoy*, 27 August 1977.

³ Archbishop Romero mentions their names later.

⁴ In fact the title of this publication is *Orientaciones sociales de la Iglesia a la luz de los documentos pontificios*. See *Orientación*, 28 August 1977.

⁵ See *El Mundo*, 25 August 1977.

Margin References (a) Ex 20,19: (b) Heb 12,18-19: (c) Ex 20,1-17: (d) Jr 31,33: (e) Ex 40,34: (f) Ho 2,21-22: (g) LG 9: (h) Heb 12,22-24: (i) Lk 22,30: (j) Si 3,19: (k) Lk 14,8-14: (l) Lk 1,53: (m) 1S 15,11 & 16,13.