

CHURCH OF TRUE INDEPENDENCE AND LIBERATION

**Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
September 11, 1977**

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14

Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-32

My dear sisters and brothers.

We want to thank you for the solemnity that you have provided for this Mass that is being offered by Teresa Sánchez Yanez for the intention of our nation and, at the same time, for the eternal rest of her beloved Antonia Yanez.

We also want to extend our condolences to our beloved Bishop Luis Chávez y González, who at this time is preparing the funeral services in Rosario, Cuscatlan, for his sister, Carmen Chávez, the widow of Hernández. We join together with all of you, our radio audience and those gathered here in the cathedral, and we pray for the eternal rest of these, our sisters and brothers.

We also recommend to your prayers the anguish and sorrow of the family of Lima de Chiurato.¹ As you know, she was kidnapped and we have received no further information about her. The Church accepts all this human suffering as her own.

The life of our Church

In this same line of thought, we want to remind you about several other sad realities. Today is the six-month anniversary of the assassination of Father Rutilio Grande and the four-month anniversary of the assassination of Father Alfonso Navarro. Although these crimes still remain a mystery, the reality is that there are blood-stained hands and these assassinations continue to bring great sorrow to the Church. It is not important if those responsible for these crimes do not taste human justice. In the heart of the Church and in the eyes of God, these assassinations are acts of martyrdom that will bring us great blessings from the Lord. These assassinations are, however, serious sins against the fifth commandment: *you shall not kill* (a) and cries out for repentance and conversion before that terrible sentence is fulfilled: *all who take the sword will perish by the sword* (b).

Tomorrow at 6:00pm, the members of the Cursillo Movement will gather in the Basilica of the Sagrado Corazón and celebrate the funeral services for our brother, Felipe de Jesús, a great Christian and catechist, who was assassinated a few days ago in El Salitre.

Tomorrow I will celebrate Mass at 11:00am in the chapel of the Rosales Hospital for the eternal rest of Agustín Cristales. His mother, who asked me to celebrate this Mass, said: *I do not know if we should offer the Mass for the dead because he disappeared. He was a student who was traveling to his classes and we have no further information about him. Perhaps he is dead.* I told her: *I trust in God. We will offer a Mass and pray for his reappearance and if he is dead, for his eternal rest.* This is a new type of death that is appearing in the society of El Salvador: persons who have disappeared.

Today in Aguilares, there will be a demonstration at the same time that a military operation is being prepared. We pray to the Lord that no more violence or bloodshed occur. In face of these realities, the Church has only one word that she continues to speak: repent and be converted. I spoke these same words last Monday during the outdoor celebration of the Eucharist in Salitre --- this celebration was a truly beautiful event for our Church. The anguish and sorrow of the family for whom we offered this Mass became a true Easter joy, because we were gathered together as a people who know that when one dies with faith in Jesus, one does not die but overcomes death. Our Christian faith is the victory that conquers the world.

As I speak to you about all these events that are part of our life as the Church of this Archdiocese, I want to mention the beautiful liturgy that was celebrated Friday night in the Church of Ilopango. The pastor, Father Fabian Amaya, has been designated to go to Chalatenango as Episcopal-Vicar. This is a situation where the bishop delegates Episcopal power to another so that the pastoral ministry of that Department can be organized and developed. I highlight this event because in other parishes, when there is a change in pastor, the reaction of the people is one of repugnance against the bishop who makes this change --- at times this reaction becomes offensive and insulting. Yet the people in Ilopango gave thanks to God and promised their pastor they would remain spiritually united with him in Chalatenango. As occurred during the time of Saint Paul, they experienced themselves as a missionary community. They read the beautiful passage from Saint Paul's letter, where he says farewell to one community because he had to travel to another place (c) --- everyone loved him and experienced the pain of separation, but because of their solidarity with the Church, they continued to be united with him. Those parishes that react so strongly when their pastor is changed have not understood the meaning of the Church. They give the appearance that they are working for an individual person --- if it is not Father so and so, then we will not work. This is not the Church. The true Church is the one I saw Friday night in Ilopango, where the people are united with their bishop and with their missionary, who must leave them and travel to another community. They felt that they were traveling with their pastor to this new place and that their own community had not been abandoned nor were they alone. Father Amaya knew how to work with and develop the laity in the parish. These men and women felt that even though their pastor was no longer with them, yet they promised to continue to work for the Church. Blessed be God! for not everything is grief and sorrow in our pastoral life, in fact, there are moments of great consolation. At this time, I invite everyone to participate in the installation of Father Amaya in Chalatenango on Saturday, September 24, at 10:00am.

My sisters and brothers, we are preparing to celebrate our national holiday on September 15th, and the King of Spain will be visiting our country. He comes here at a time when our own situation, though in some ways very distinct, is, nonetheless, substantially the same as the colonial era. In *Orientación*², you are able to read a letter that the people of Spain sent to King, inviting him to reflect on his trip to El Salvador where he will find

Spanish citizens abused and disrespected --- some of the Jesuits who were expelled, were Spanish citizens. The King is coming here to extend a helping hand to a government that has exiled Jesuits who are Spanish citizens. Just as the visit of our President to Washington and his contact with other Latin American presidents had some positive results, so, too, we believe that this visit of the King of Spain can produce some positive results. Yet, in dealing with these high government officials one must ask: Do these officials understand that they represent all the people of the nation --- people who are suffering and in anguish? Do they speak clearly about the reality and life that is lived here?

As we prepare for this national holiday, I want to focus my thoughts concerning today's readings on the events that I have just mentioned, and also on the six months of Calvary that the Church of the Archdiocese has experienced --- gathering up the corpses of our sisters and brothers, consoling so many families, shouting NO to the escalating violence and yet appearing to be a voice that is lost in the desert. My sisters and brothers, we have not understood that we are able to call the Church, as we do in our homily, the Church of true independence and the Church of authentic freedom. This is the message that the three Scripture readings proclaim to us today.

My first thought is that we are a people with a great social sin. Social sin exists. When the bishops of Latin America denounced the sin of social injustice as an institutional sin, they were echoing the pages of the Book of Exodus (d). God told Moses: *Your people have sinned. There is sin in the people. The people have strayed from the paths where I led them. I will destroy this people* (e). But Moses, the true liberator in the eyes of God, intervenes: *No, Lord, have mercy on this people. You brought them out of Egypt. Please, forgive them* (f). The account concludes with the beautiful words: *So the Lord relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people* (g). The Book of Exodus expresses this idea in anthropomorphic language. God appears as a human person who relents and changes his decision. In reality, God does not relent or change his mind, but in order to express the idea of divine pardon, the author uses the image of one who threatens punishment and then relents, and changes his mind --- thus God has forgiven his people.

The second reading is an example of a sinner who confesses his sin. He is not embarrassed by his sin, but the sin remains as a glorious scar when he repents and is converted. My sisters and brothers, Saint Paul's example is one that all of us can identify with (h). I can say that I am the first one to admit that I am a sinner, for like Saint Paul, I am preaching to you not as one who is an example of holiness, but one who is a sinner whom God has forgiven, and who has been entrusted with this ministry to proclaim the word of salvation. Saint Paul states that the more sinful a person, the more eloquent is this person in speaking about the goodness of God, because the sins of the past are no longer a concern. The only thing that is important is the love with which one now serves.

Therefore, whatever your sin might be and whatever your actual situation might be, I want to invite all of you, all the people to El Salvador, to repent and be converted. At this time when we celebrate the birth of our nation, look at how many children of this nation are submerged in vice, crawling on the ground, unaware of their dignity as human persons and as a people of El Salvador. Look how many marriages are in actual conflict, how many adulterous spouses, how many degenerate children, how many young people, instead of being nourished for the future with great ideals, are consumed in vice. Look at how many families have been driven from their homes and disappeared, how many corpses are found in the dungeons of our jails where people are tortured and horribly whipped and treated unjustly,

how many have disappeared --- the living-dead of our own nation. This is the image of a people who, as we draw near to our celebration of September 15th, speak the same words as Moses: *My poor people of El Salvador, they have turned aside from the way I pointed out to them.* My sisters and brothers, it is imperative that we return to the ways that God has pointed out to us.

Thus, the theme of my homily is based on the events of the sad reality of our people and the great hope that we find in the Word of God that is given to this same people. Let us focus on the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son. It has been called the jewel of the gospel for it is a precious jewel of God's mercy. Rather than preach words, I want to place myself in silence before all of you, and invite you to self-reflection. Let each one of us discover those areas where the story of the Prodigal Son becomes present in our own lives, for this parable is a story of the universal history of humankind. We can all feel included in this beautiful parable. Let us analyze the three phases of this parable.

First phase of the parable of the prodigal son: Distancing oneself from God.

There are three phases to this parable: first, the distancing of oneself from everything and everyone. God is all and God is happiness. The son who tells his father: *give me the share of your estate that should come to me* (i) is the man, woman, or young person who feels weighed down by the law of God. He wants to leave and so he goes. No one respects human freedom more than God. Only God, who had created me in freedom, respects my freedom: *If you want to go; if you are not happy with my law; if you do not feel happy in my house; if you are bored by the advice that your mother, in my name, shared with you; if you are upset with the honesty of your wife who throws in your face your adulterous actions; if you are embarrassed that your brothers denounce your vices; then go, go and live your life as you will.* The poor prodigal son goes, rejoicing because he now has his money, but he has distanced himself from the One who is everything, from the One who fulfills the most profound aspirations of humankind.

Saint Augustine says: *God has made man and his heart is restless until it finds its rest in God.*³ We are restless, until we rest in God. Blessed are those innocent ones who have never betrayed the Law of God. They are few, but thanks to God, there are some. God has made me for himself and my reason for being, the cultivation of my qualities and the development of my faculties must be centered in God --- in fact, I will have a happy life only if I center my life on the glory of God. Saint Ignatius Loyola gave the Jesuits this motto: *Ad majorem Dei gloriam* (For the greater glory of God). Therefore, the Jesuits work and move out to the most dangerous frontiers of the Church. They work even when they are threatened with death and they do not leave --- they remain and face all of these situations. They do this because they are working for the greater glory of God. And if death should surprise them and overtake them, their death does diminish the glory of God, but now they will rejoice forever. They will rejoice in eternity to the degree that they cultivated the greater glory of God on earth. Blessed are those who know how to work for the glory of God and who feel that, under the law of God, they will find the fullness of their joy.

As the psalmist says: *Better one day in your courts, than a thousand elsewhere* (j). But today, there are many who think exactly the opposite and so there are many in this first phase. Those who are tired of being faithful to the Lord, those who have begun to experience conflicts in their homes and those who are feeling uncertain about their faith – be careful my

sisters and brothers! Do not leave! You have not yet broken your relationship with God and the Church! Remain! Analyze your situation and bear with this burden for a little longer! The passion of this moment will pass and the eternity of God remains. The Church, giving life to all, will remain until the end of time. These slanders and persecutions cannot harm you, but you can harm yourself when, as Jesus said to Saint Paul: *it is hard for you to kick against the goad* (k). The foolish beast who kicks a rock does no harm to the rock but only harms himself. This is sin. For those who persecute the Church, kill and exile the priests, and torture the catechists are kicking against the goad. The Church, however, will not move. Even though these events will not be published in the newspapers and though we might be criticized, the Church will remain. The Church is a rock and will remain forever. Therefore, it is better to remain faithful to the Church than to accept money to spy on the Church. It is better to be a humble child of the Church than to be well positioned politically and economically and abusing the Church. Let us reflect on those situations when we have left the father's house. This first phase of the parable calls all of us to a profound reflection.

Second phase of the parable of the prodigal son

Many, perhaps the majority, have left [the Father's house] and thus entered the second phase of the parable of the Prodigal Son. This phase can be divided into two parts: first, when he has money; second, when he is disgraced and hungry. Our actual world is a world of social inequality, where wealth makes many people feel the euphoria of the prodigal son. They do not miss their father or their father's house. Now there are friends and banquets and celebrations --- money opens all doors. It was for this reason that Jesus pronounced very severe admonitions against the wealthy. He did this, not because wealth is evil, but because people, like the prodigal son, seek all their pleasure and power and happiness in money. Look at how God spoke to Moses. In the first reading God clearly defines the situation where money has become an idol: *I see how stiff-necked this people is... they have turned away from the way I pointed out to them, making for themselves a molten calf and worshiping it* (l).

When one no longer thinks of God, can money be anything but an idol? Yes, it is an idol of gold, a golden calf. The people adored this idol and prostrated themselves before it and offered sacrifices to it. What incredible sacrifices are made to this idol of money, and not only sacrifices but even iniquities. People are paid to kill; sin is bought and sold; everything is commercialized; with money, everything is licit. They proclaim: *This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt* (m) *you owe nothing to this false religion. These words disturb our tranquility. This is communism; the Church has strayed from her mission; she ought to preach a spirituality that calms us and allows us to fall sleep in splendid happiness.* Yet this idolatry of money is denounced by the very word of God, who is angered, because he is also jealous: *you shall have no other gods besides me* (n).

Since the Church desires to remain faithful to her only God and speaks, like Moses, against the idols of humankind, the Church has to suffer. Her prophetic mission is painful, but necessary. She prays, like Moses prayed to God: *Lord, have compassion on our people. Make them aware of the vanity of these idols. Do not condemn them, O Lord* (o). My sisters and brothers, we have never preached with resentment and hatred. We preach with sadness and love and sorrow. We see that many of our sisters and brothers are being lost and consumed by this idol of money and their hearts are becoming obsessed with money. Our President has stated that *our capital resources must be humanized*. It is necessary to humanize these resources, otherwise, as we have read in the book of Exodus, they will become a golden calf and enslave us.

The prodigal son, when he had money, was deceived in his happiness. We see this reality in the second part of this phase. When he no longer had money, he became hungry and looked for work. The only work he found was tending swine. He was so hungry that he was jealous of the swine's food --- *he longed to eat his fill of the husks on which the swine fed* (p) --- but even these the master took away from him. It seems impossible to describe a more bitter situation of the sinner than that of caring for swine and longing to eat the food of the swine.

My sisters and brothers, the gospel is harsh. Hopefully we have not had the sad, bitter and painful experience of savoring of the husks of swine that can never fill us with happiness. My dear young men and women who are listening to me, your happiness will not be found in drugs or alcohol or prostitution or robbery or crime or violence. These are only the husks of swine and you will never feel satisfied with these. Look at the sinful poverty of the prodigal son; it is simply the fruit of his evil mind. When the Church calls herself the Church of the poor, it is not because she tolerates this sinful poverty. The Church draws near to sinners to tell them: *Repent! Do not continue to sleep but develop yourselves! Recognize your dignity!* As the Church carries on this mission of promoting human dignity, she upsets many people. There are many people who prefer to see the masses of people asleep, conformists, and satisfied with the husks of the swine.

The Church is not in agreement with sinful poverty. Yes, she desires poverty, but a poverty that is dignified and the fruit of a struggle to overcome the poverty of injustice. This is the poverty of the home of Nazareth. Joseph and Mary were poor, but their poverty was wholesome and dignified. Thanks to God, we have poor persons who are like Mary and Joseph, people who live a holy and dignified poverty. Jesus says to them: *Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; blessed are those who mourn* (q). Following the example of Jesus, the Church also cries out that this is the poverty that is going to save the world. Rich and poor have to become poor, but poor in light of the gospel understanding of this word and not poor as a result of disorder and vice. Poverty means detachment and trusting in God who, with his sword, smashes the golden calf in order that people might adore the one God. This worship of God means that those who "have" share in the happiness of those who "have not" --- this is the happiness of love. The poor sinner, in the depths of his misery, feels the lure of love.

Third phase of the parable of the prodigal son: conversion and return

My sisters and brothers, we have said many times that the Church cries out for repentance and conversion. When the Church speaks out against sin, and the abuse of human rights and so many other forms of sin in our midst, she does not speak with an air of triumphalism or superiority. The Church speaks and is aware of her own sinfulness, but is also aware of the call of love and conversion, and the call to return to the Father's house.

Listen to the son's anguish that, at the same time, fills him with confidence: *How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall go up to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son"* (r). This is the hour of conversion. My sisters and brothers, I would prefer that you hear the voice of your own conscience rather than my words. There, in the den of your sin --- adoring the golden calf or

the victim of your own evil mind --- lamenting your sinful situation, you hear the call of God who awaits you with love --- with a love that triumphs. There, on the other extreme, is the elderly father in his ancestral house. Every day he scans the roadside to see if his disgraced son has returned. One day, he sees an emaciated, ragged, and wan figure on the far-distant road. *It is my son!* and he runs to meet him.

Blessed is that moment. The gospel describes this event with these incredible words: *While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him* (s). This is the vengeance of God. When his son tries to excuse himself: *Father, I have sinned* (t), he does not allow him to speak. He calls his servants and clothes his son in the best garments, for his son, who had died, had come to life again. Yes, there is great joy, because as Jesus said in the parables contained in this chapter of the gospel: *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance* (u). The Church exists for sinners. As Saint Paul said: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost* (v).

Thus we now have the prodigal son in the third phase of his journey, a phase that I sincerely pray each of us will experience: the return home, where love awaits him with outstretched arms. Despite my great sinfulness, I will not be rejected. And so I repeat these words because during these days some sinners have come to me and confided in me and asked: *Will God forgive me for the many great sins that I have committed?* My sisters and brothers, I have spoken to them these words that I now say publicly and that are the words that were often spoken by the missionaries: *God will surely forgive you. For if your sins are great, God's goodness is even greater.* No sin can be submerged in the fire of God's love, rather this love of God, like a fire, will burn away the root of every sin that exists in the world.

My dear sisters and brothers, on the eve of our nation's birth, I want to remind you of the Church's teaching, namely, that the social structures, the situation of institutional sin in which we live, have to be changed. All of this has to change. The abuses that I mentioned before, at the beginning of this celebration, cannot continue. The names of the victims change, but the cause remains the same. We live in a situation of inequality and injustice and sin. To repress through the force of arms and pay others to assassinate the voice that cries out is not the solution. This remedies nothing. It only makes matters worse and strengthens the Church's prophetic voice. The solution lies in everyone --- government officials, businessmen, workers, landowners --- working together to change these structures so that there is greater justice and love.

But as the bishops in Medellin reminded us: *We will not have a new continent without new and reformed structures, but, above all, there will be no new continent without new men* (w). Only when we have a new people of El Salvador, will we have a free and better and truly independent nation. True slavery is rooted in the hearts of the people of El Salvador. Therefore, we have to imitate the prodigal son and realize that the unjust situation of our nation cannot continue to nourish itself with the pods of the swine. We cannot just patch things up and mend the situation, lashing out and repressing and torturing --- these are the pods of swine. It is necessary that we return to God with sincerity of heart. As Moses led Israel, the people repented and asked for God's pardon. Each person, each individual, is responsible for his/her own destiny and together we are responsible for the reality of our nation. Let each one of us enter into the intimacy of our hearts and ask: *Am I an agent of*

liberation for my country? Have I, in the first place, freed myself from my own sins? As long as I remain a slave of Satan and sin, then everything that surrounds me and is associated with me cries out for liberation and I am not an agent of liberation.

Therefore, at this time when our people are in need of liberation, the Church contributes a unique mystique when talking about liberation, for the Church speaks of liberation from sin. From the depths of her heart she invites the prodigal son to return, and how many prodigal sons are there here in El Salvador! It does not matter what we have done, for in the loving embrace of the father, the prodigal son disappears and he begins to be, once again, the good son. Saint Paul reminds us that he was once violent, a blasphemer, a persecutor, and now, he is an Apostle, because Christ has loved him and he allowed himself to be filled with this love. (x) My sisters and brothers, we believe in love: in a love that awaits us and a love that wants to make our nation more happy and every citizen more worthy. We believe in this love that awaits the prodigal son who is still nourishing himself with the pods of swine, this love that desires to give the prodigal son the true bread that will restore his dignity. I pray that September 15th might be a day of encounter for the prodigal son and for our sinful nation --- a day of encounter with God who is love, who forgives and who wants us to be happy.

¹ Elena Margarita Lima, wife of Luis Chiurato, manager of SALTEX, was kidnapped on 7 September 1977. See *El Diario de Hoy*, 7 September 1977.

² See *Orientación*, 11 September 1977.

³ St Augustine, *Confessions*, 1, Ch. 1.

Margin References (a) Ex 20,13: (b) Mt 26,52: (c) Ac 20,17-38: (d) Mt 2,1: (e) Ex 32,7-8: (f) Ex 32,11: (g) Ex 32,14: (h) 1Tm 1,15-17: (i) Lk 15,12: (j) Ps 84,11: (k) Ac 26,14: (l) Ex 32,8^a: (m) Ex 32,8^b: (n) Ex 20,3: (o) Ex 32,11: (p) Lk 15,15-16: (q) Mt 5,1-12: (r) Lk 15,17-19: (s) Lk 15,20: (t) Lk 15,21: (u) Lk 15,7: (v) 1Tm 1,15: (w) M 1,3: (x) 1Tm 1,13.