

THE CHURCH, A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 2, 1977

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4

2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14

Luke 17:5-10

My dear sisters and brother, the Divine Word ought to be for us, who believe in it, a light that illuminates our path. It ought to comfort us in our affliction and give us great reason to hope. For this reason I would like to speak with you about the events that occurred during the week. I want to illuminate these events, as well as public events and intimate family events, with the Word of God. For the Church, everything that is human is of interest to her. As the Pope once said, *she is the life of humanity*

Events during the week

For example, this week, we were saddened by the catastrophe that involved a military plane accident in which several of our brothers died. We pray for their eternal rest. Also in fulfilling their work which provides them with a living, some workers remain buried under a ravine. A young boy was carried away by a strong current and his mother was greatly distressed because his body could not be found.

I also want to thank the media even though we have been unsuccessful in intervening and finding Elena Lima de Chiurato.¹ We have experienced firsthand the desperation of her family. In tears her husband told me: *I fear the worst... twenty-five years of marriage has to end like this... if only they would give me her body*. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, and his Church that I have the honor to represent, in the name of all that is noble in the hearts of those who have gathered here this morning to reflect on God's Word, including perhaps those who have committed this crime of abduction, have compassion on the human suffering of Elena's family and give them some news. If you want, communicate with me, for I have offered to mediate this case, or you can communicate directly with her family. I earnestly beg you to do this.

Dear sisters and brothers, the grief of this family and of others who have disappeared has struck my heart because, in spite of our requests, they continue to suffer so much, not only they themselves, but their families searching for their loved ones. The respect we feel for the Chiurato family, we also feel for all those families grieving for this new kind of Salvadorans: the disappeared.

Life of the Church

Meanwhile the Church continues to organize herself and is reviewing her mission so that she can be more effective on behalf of humankind. Yesterday in Rome, the Synod of Bishops began their deliberations. They have been called together by the Pope who presides over this consultative body that is discussing the theme of catechetics. Last year all the bishops of the world were informed about this theme so that they could consult with their

priests, religious and laity. This has enabled us to support the Pope, who is responsible for the universal magisterium, as he seeks to evangelize, catechize and bring the Good News to all young people, children and adults. The bishops will continue their meeting in Rome until the end of this month and we hope that this consultation will provide some new guidelines in this most necessary area of catechesis. Bishop Marco René Revelo, the auxiliary bishop of Santa Ana, Director of the National Office of Catechesis, is representing the bishops of El Salvador.

With regard to other Church events, I want to highlight the appointment of Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas as the ordinary of the Diocese of Santiago de María. In our newspaper *Orientación*² I expressed my feelings with regard to this appointment. On the one hand, we lose a valuable collaborator in our Archdiocesan Curia. On the other hand, it is a great joy to witness the appointment of our auxiliary bishop to become the Ordinary bishop of another diocese. This implies that the Pope trusts him and this gesture belies the slanders and defamation of character that our beloved Bishop Rivera has had to bear. His person rises above this entanglement of calumnies and misunderstandings. The Pope has chosen him to become the leader of this young diocese that is alive with hope and where, without any doubt, his pastoral lines of action which are in accord with the new mentality of the Church will have marvelous consequences. I am happy that his pastoral vision coincides with the vision of the Archdiocese, for this will enable the both of us to carry out this work of evangelization in a united way. We rejoice and we pray that the Lord will enable Bishop Rivera to give this witness of a Church that is concerned for the actual problems of the world.

During these days, the schools are celebrating the graduation ceremonies for the young men and women who have completed their studies. We have been able to participate in some of these ceremonies. We have been unable to attend others, but I want to thank you for the invitations that you sent me to attend these celebrations. I also want to congratulate and give my vote of confidence to the Catholic Schools. This year during this time of baptism of fire that the Archdiocese has experienced, these schools have joined together with us and aligned themselves with the pastoral lines of action for education. There have been reactions against their position and this is an attempt to divide the Church. Unfortunately, these reactions have been given a forum and yet in reality there is no justification for this reaction because the Church has called all of her institutions, involved in the work of evangelization, (and the Catholic Schools are certainly one of these institutions), to renew the way in which this work is carried out.

At this time the schools are registering students for the next academic year. I hope that it is not true that certain groups of Catholics are attempting to undermine the work of the school by encouraging parents to register their children in other schools. If this is occurring among Catholics, I denounce this disloyalty. No group of Catholics, even though they might want to organize a school, has the right to take students from another school under the pretext they will be given a more Catholic education in some other school. The Catholic Schools are authorized by the hierarchy of our Archdiocese and those who are part of this Archdiocese ought to respect this authority. Let us not give the impression that we are two Churches. Let us live as one Church that is joined together by the magisterium of the Church, especially at this time, when the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellin Conference provide us with new orientations.

During this week I have visited the communities of Huizúcar and Nejapa on the occasion of their community feast day celebrations. Bishop Rivera visited Guazapa on the

feast of Saint Michael, the patron of this community. I want to congratulate the people for their devotion and for knowing how to integrate the tradition of these feast day celebrations -- a tradition that has been carried forward for many years --- with the new pastoral lines of the Church. That is to say, the Church is like an ancient tree, yet despite the age of its trunk, she gives birth to new offspring and thus provides new hope. This is the life of the Church. If we simply respect tradition and do not want to change things, then, we will become like a dead tree, like a museum of ancient artifacts. This, however, would not be the life of a Church that, with centuries of tradition, is bound together by a golden thread: the life of Christ. This would not be a Church that acquires new energy in face of new needs and new commitments that must be nourished by this old trunk of our Christian faith that is renewed with a vision of the real world.

I want to remind you of the fact that yesterday, the 1st of October, we began the month of the Rosary. A way to show our devotion to the Virgin is to return to this old custom of praying the rosary as a family in our homes. If you do not know how to pray the rosary, take some time to learn this prayer. Those who have put aside this custom, I invite you to return to this devotion and those of you who practice this tradition, I want to assure you that this is very much in line with our pastoral practices that respects popular traditions --- these traditions of love and devotion to the Virgin. I simply ask you not to pray the rosary in a mechanical way, repeating the *Our Father* and the *Hail Mary* in a routine fashion. I invite you to return to the roots of this prayer that is founded on the Biblical message. The mysteries of the rosary are a beautiful summary of the gospel. Little children understand that in their weak hands the mysteries of the Rosary begin to unfold before them as they meditate on the child Jesus, on Jesus who died for us, on Jesus who rose from the dead and on the Virgin who accompanied Jesus in his infancy, in his suffering and in his resurrection. Those who pray the Rosary and remember these gospel mysteries become Christian in the best school --- the school of the Virgin who is the best Christian.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I recommend that you return to this custom that many believe has become outdated and has no relevance for our present situation. Only things that we do not love become outdated. If we have problems with the Rosary then we also have problem with the Virgin. If we have problems with the Virgin, then, we also have problems with Jesus. If we have problems with Jesus, then we must examine ourselves to see if the real problem is not something within ourselves. Change your life and be converted and you will find joy in the company of the Virgin and Jesus, as well as in the company of this family of Christian people who pray this immortal prayer.

This morning, the twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary time, the Word of God speaks to us precisely about this reality. The liturgical year is moving forward and we will soon begin another year, but the Church is concerned for all Christians, like a university is concerned for their students. The Church wants us to learn the mystique of her kingdom, doctrine and above all, the mystique of living together as one. Today we could entitle this homily *The Church, a community of faith*. Faith is the theme of the three readings: faith enlightens Habakkuk's insoluble problem; Paul tells his disciple, Timothy who is perhaps in the midst of a vocational crisis, that faith is the secret to the solution of his problem; Jesus speaks about faith when his disciples place this request before him: *increase our faith* (a). Let this also be our request this morning.

The just lives by faith

The prophet's response today is beautiful. Habakkuk probably lived at the time of the Chaldean and Assyrian invasion of the Holy Land. He, like the prophets who look toward the future, seemed to confuse two different realities: the reality of internal injustice of the people and the reality of God's just punishment through an invading army that would punish the people of Israel for their sins. He understood that God punished people for their sins but did not understand how a people, more sinful than Israel, could be chosen by God to come and commit even greater injustices than the people who were being punished. He confronts God with a problem that is similar to that which is spoken about in the book of Job: the problem of evil. This problem could be applied to our situation and the problems that we face as a nation. Like Habakkuk, we can ask: *How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen. I cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery. Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and clamorous discord* (b). This is a wonderful book. It contains only three chapters and you could read it this week. Note the second chapter where the prophet explains his concerns. He writes his complaints against God in the form of five curses.

He writes first of all against economic exploitation: *Woe to him who stores up what is not his; how long can it last! He loads himself down with debts* (c). Here he denounces the exploitation of the poor --- the poor woman who is unable to provide food for her children and therefore must pawn her possessions or borrow money. This money is lent but at a high interest rate: *they store up what is not theirs*.

The second complaint is against wanton pillage: *Woe to him who possesses evil gain for his household, setting his nest on high to escape the reach of misfortune* (d). Here the prophet says that the palaces that are built as a result of usury will cry out for justice. Their bricks and adornments give witness to the blood sucking practice of usury. What does it profit one to have a beautiful palace that is the fruit of pillage and robbery?

His third complaint is against genocide, for this invading army will come and kill his people. *Woe to the one who builds a city by bloodshed* (e). The prophet's words seem to be written for our time. *Woe to him who establishes a town by wickedness*. A city or a civilization cannot be established upon a foundation of injustice and bloodshed, or a foundation of abuse and torture.

In the fourth place, the prophet complains about the corruption of the oppressed people. *Woe to you who give your neighbors a flood of your wrath to drink, and make them drunk, till their nakedness is seen* (f). Here the prophet writes with almost vulgar words and describes the vices of this wealth that seem to be so prevalent among our people. Woe to those corrupt people! In this passage, my sisters and brothers, not only is injustice denounced but also immorality. We see motels doing great business as they become houses of prostitution where the human body is bought and sold. This is corruption and there is corruption within matrimony which in many cases has been turned into prostitution because the spouses do not want children and are simply interested in sexual pleasure. This is immoral and God does not tolerate this. The government gives the privileges of human rights but this is conditioned by our agreement to use contraceptives. Thus the source of life is mutilated. Men and women are sterilized and the flesh reigns supreme. All of this offends God and the prophet feels in his own life the multiple abuses of his people. Abortion has been legalized in our country despite the fact that the bishops asked the President and the Assembly to respect the life that lives within the mother's womb. But the law was passed.

This is truly a persecution of the Church for this law is clearly against the morality that the Church preaches. Despite having promised the Episcopal Conference that the right to life would be respected, the right to be born, yet not even the right to be born was upheld. Here in El Salvador, it is said that human rights are respected and yet thousands of abortions take place in our hospitals and medical clinics. People are paid to go abroad and get an abortion. These trips are very clearly evil. My sisters and brothers, this is a terrible situation. We truly live under the curse of the prophet: *Woe to the people who drink until their nakedness is seen.*

Finally the prophet speaks about idolatry: *Woe to him who says to wood "awake!" to dumb stone, "arise!" See, it is overlaid with gold and silver, but there is no life breath in it (g).* Naturally we do not have the same idols as the Chaldeans and Assyrians, but gold continues to be an idol that many adore. In order to adore these idols people are willing to abuse every right of the people. They command others to kill and destroy and slander. They speak every kind of epithet against the Church that in turn makes her cry out with the prophet: *Woe to you idolaters! You who make gold your god, but have no life within you. As you lay prostrate before this metal your heart has become hardened.*

In light of these realities and problems that are realities in history, in light of the sins of the world, God's response is heard in the first reading: *Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late. The rich man has no integrity; but the just man, because of his faith, shall live (h).* My sisters and brothers, this is the message that I would like to have engraved in every heart. The just person lives by faith. Faith is the only reality that gives us an adequate response in face of so many injustices. Where injustice, abuse and brute force seem to hold sway, the just persons can appear to be unarmed. There might be little that we as Church and as weak individuals can do to combat the abuses of human dignity. Nevertheless we have the living power of God, faith. The just ones live by faith. This is the life that I desire for everyone's heart.

What is faith ?

In today's gospel, our Lord invites us to have faith. He says: *If you have faith the size of a mustard seed (i).* This is a rhetorical figure of speech used in the gospel to express a reality: *you would do marvelous deeds like this... you would say to this mulberry tree "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you.*

We do not have to uproot a tree and plant it in the sea, but there are other things that appear to be more difficult; for example, how can we change the situation in El Salvador? Another example, families weep over their missing children, how then can we make it possible so that these children, these spouses, these sisters, and these brothers reappear? Before the power of arms and force, the unarmed person appears to be very small. Nevertheless it is this smallness of these people who have faith in God that makes them more powerful than all the armies of the world.

What is faith? My sisters and brothers, my greatest fear at this time is that people are losing faith. The greatest offense that these criminals commit with so many violent abuses is that they endanger the faith of the people and lead them to trust in the brutalities of violence. Be careful, my sisters and brothers, for there are many people, especially young people, who no longer believe in spiritual powers and become part of the guerrilla. They become involved

in kidnapping and violence as though this were the solution. How I long to unveil these false idolatries so that they can clearly be seen as weaknesses of the flesh that lead to nothing good. How I long to place in the hearts of the guerrilla and those who use violence and those who abuse and torture and those who place their trust in money and politics, the power that comes only from God. How I long to tell them that only faith can move mountains and bring happiness to our people and change our history.

What is faith? I wanted to write down the ideas of the Second Vatican Council contained in the document *Dei Verbum*. We are told how God is revealed in nature in such a way that even non-Christians, indeed any rational human being, can discover the existence of God in the flowers, the fruit, the stars. This is natural revelation. But the Council also tell us, besides this natural revelation, God desired to reveal himself and his plan of mercy and love. This was accomplished through his Word, the Son of God, who became man and entrusted this revelation to the Church (j). So the Council asks: *What should people do when they know that God has spoken*. The response: when God reveals, people must submit with faith. Through faith --- and here we are given a beautiful description of faith --- *man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him*. My sisters and brothers, look at the beauty of these words. Perhaps from our childhood we have had a very intellectual concept of faith. This has occurred because before the Second Vatican Council, we lived with the doctrine of the Council of Trent that had to combat many abuses of faith that was preached by the Lutheran Reformers. These individuals taught that we should trust that God will save us even if we have sinned greatly. We attribute to Luther this phrase --- I am not sure if it is historically accurate --- *sin greatly, but do so in such a way that you strongly believe you will be saved*.³ Against this ghastly error that can lead many sinners to a deceptive trust, the Council of Trent condemned this rash trust and taught that faith means accepting the truths of God and the things that God taught. Thus we were given a very intellectual concept of faith. A king when asked, *how is your Christianity?* stated: *in the area of faith, very well because it is nothing more than believing, but in the area of morals, very bad*. Faith and morality had become separated.

When this Protestant error was overcome, the Second Vatican Council was then able to speak about faith in a different way --- look at the cohesion of the Church's teaching --- for the Council speaks about a Biblical faith, the same faith that Luther wanted to interpret and did erroneously and abusively. The Church interprets the faith with the phrase that I have just read: *man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him* (k). Faith is not only the acceptance of truths, but also the acceptance of the will of God. It involves handing over the will and the heart to that which God desires.

Is an act of faith pleasing to the eyes of God? Listen to Mary when God seeks her consent to collaborate in our redemption: *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word* (l). This is an act of faith, an acceptance of the mystery of God without understanding it. It is an acceptance of the One who is all-powerful and knows everything. I do not understand but I accept. In your hands I am an insignificant instrument. For this reason I do not understand the mystery of history. I do not understand the unforeseen nature of injustice and why God would chose other greater injustices to punish lesser injustices. I do not understand these things but I do understand that I must give myself to God and that God is the Lord of history. I understand that those whom God uses to punish

others will also be thrown into the fire when they become useless for the accomplishment of God's loving plan.

Then the Vatican Council goes on to say that faith is not something that springs from us alone. Pay close attention to this, my sisters and brothers, because faith does not depend on you. To give this faith response, the Council states *the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind, and giving joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it* (m). Thus faith is supernatural, it is a gift of God. Blessed are those who believe! This explains the request of the disciples: *Increase our faith* (n). My dear sisters and brothers, a lack of faith is not a grace from God and I know there are many listening to me who do not have faith or at least they brag about their lack of faith. How unfortunate! You are blind; you are a beggar. While people of faith contemplate the beauty of God's will, you have myopic vision and are blind and do not see and have no faith. Ask God to restore your faith! Ask God to lead you from the darkness and the shadows in which you live. Faith is a gift of God and this gift will not be denied to those who ask for it. The Council says that by asking for this gift, one moves this process forward. For even before you ask for this gift, it is there in your heart, waiting for you to ask for it. My sisters and brothers, let us ask for this gift. May this be our prayer during this week: *Increase our faith* (o).

Lastly the Council states that this gift will never pass away. So that we can more fully understand the revelation of God, the Holy Spirit continually perfects this faith with his gifts (p). This is the great work of the Holy Spirit that is realized in the heart of every person and community. I rejoice now, my sisters and brothers, and greet the priests and Christians and religious woman and catechists who are forming these communities of faith, these base communities, these small groups that are guided by the Scriptures, and that reflect on the Scriptures together and thus grow in their faith. These groups are called subversive by those who persecute the Church. Yet they are maturing in their faith. A group with a sound Biblical foundation, legitimately called together by the Church, should be mistrustful. It is the faith of God that grows through the illumination of grace and the Holy Spirit who dwells in the hearts of all people.

Hopefully there is a Bible in every home. At mealtime and before sleeping, parents and children should read some Scripture passage together just as they pray the Rosary together. In this way they nourish the faith of the children and young adults and older members of the family. We never cease to grow in our faith. Those who say, *I learned my catechism lessons at the time of my First Communion*, and are no longer concerned about their faith, have remained with the faith of an infant. My sisters and brothers, grow in your faith. Grow, because within you is the Spirit of baptism and confirmation, demanding that you grow in faith. In this way you will better understand the mysteries of your country, its unjust order and all those things that we do not understand and that we want to resolve with violence and power and repression and torture. Things are not resolved in this way, but rather through faith and coming to understand God's plan as it unfolds in history. Indeed, in this way men and women become aware of their responsibility to collaborate with this plan and not become an obstacle to its accomplishment.

The faith entrusted to the Church

It is a shame that the time has passed so quickly. Therefore, I will briefly comment on the second reading and tell you that faith, which God has given us as a gift and that grows

within us, this faith has been entrusted to the Church. I would hope that you read the second letter of Paul to Timothy and hear in Paul's voice the voice of the Church. Ultimately, this voice is the voice of a bishop. Paul was a bishop, like the one who is speaking to you, naturally with the great difference of his holiness and my mediocrity. But Paul as bishop, and I as bishop, we, together are the voice of the Church. When Paul writes, it is the Church that is speaking these words: *stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands* (q). These are the gestures of the Church: when a priest is ordained the bishop imposes his hands on the candidate and thus transmits to him the power of the priesthood. When a person is confirmed, hands are also imposed on the candidates to call upon the Holy Spirit. Within a few minutes, I will take bread into my hands and say *this is my Body* and as you come forward to receive communion, I will say to you *Body of Christ*. These are human gestures of the Church, but these are also Christ's actions. It is Christ who continues to speak to us. Through faith, the Church continues to transmit the message of Christ and to share the life of Christ to humankind. The Sacraments, then, are our contact with Christ. They are ways through which we are able to encounter Christ himself acting through his minister.

My sisters and brothers, the Church then communicates this word to the people of El Salvador. *For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony to the Lord, nor the testimony of the Church nor my testimony, a prisoner for his sake* (r). Paul was chained as a prisoner and felt that it was the Church that was being persecuted. But even though he was chained, he was able to say to all his children, *I, as the persecuted Church, am the face of Christ; do not be ashamed to be my child*. Woe to those who are ashamed of the Church! Woe to those who continue this slanderous campaign against the Church! They are ridiculing and laughing at their own mother.

Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God (s). Look once again at the word that God speaks to Habakkuk: *write down the vision... for the vision still has its time and presses on to fulfillment... and the just man, because of his faith, shall live* (t). And so Paul, as the church, speaks to us as Catholics: *take as your norm the sound words that you heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Jesus Christ* (u). Love. A true love that is inspired in faith and a serene love that does not fear violence nor has recourse to violence, for there is no need for that. It is enough to believe and give ourselves to God. We do not have to understand God's time nor the reason for the trials that test us. That time will come. It might be delayed, but it will come.

This is the hope that the Church wishes to preserve and therefore, when Paul speaks to the Church, he says: *guard this rich treasure with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within you* (v). My sisters and brothers, guard this treasure. It is not my poor word that sows hope and faith. I am no more than God's humble echo in this people, speaking to those chosen by God's scourges, speaking to those who practice violence in so many different ways. Beware! For when God no longer needs them, he will cast them into the fire. So then repent and be converted in time. To those who suffer the scourges of this abuse and do not understand the why of these injustices: have faith. Give yourselves completely to God --- will and mind and heart. God has his time. Our missing ones are not missing to God's eyes. For all of them and for a world that suffers uncertainty, let us pray for the assurance of faith. Guard this treasure that we now proclaim in our profession of faith.

¹ Reference to Elena Margarita Lima de Chiurato

² See “La palabra del arzobispo. Un nuevo obispo en Santiago de María”, *Orientación*, 2 October 1977.

³ This phrase, which Luther spoke in a moment of despair to his companion Melancton, should be understood as follows: “even though you sin badly, if you believe you will be saved”. See J. Loretz, *Historia de la Reforma*, Madrid, 1963, Vol I, p. 317.

Margin References (a) Lk 17,5: (b) Hab 1,2-3: (c) Hab 2,6c: (d) Hab 2,9: (e) Hab 2,12: (f) Hab 2,15: (g) Hab 2,19: (h) Hab 2,2-4: (i) Lk 17,6: (j) DV 5: (k) DV 5: (l) Lk 1,38: (m) DV 5: (n) Lk 17,5: (o) Lk 17,5: (p) DV 5: (q) 2 Tm 1,6: (r) 2 Tm 1,7-8: (s) 2Tm 1,8-13: (t) Hab 2,2-4: (u) 2 Tm 1,13: (v) 2 Tm 2,14.