

THE CHURCH AT PRAYER AND THE MISSIONARY CHURCH

Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time
October 16, 1977

Exodus 17:8-13
2 Timothy 3:14-4:2
Luke 18:1-8

Our coming together this morning is like a family gathering¹. I say this not only to those who are participating here and fill the cathedral (I am greatly pleased by your participation and this is very consoling to me as pastor) but I say the same to those women and men in the various parishes and villages who are united to us by radio. We come together to reflect on the reality of our pilgrimage as a local Church, for Jesus has commanded us to be *salt of the earth* and *light of the world* (a). This perspective guides our personal history and orients us as we confront different family and social problems. We ought to learn how to enlighten these situations with the Lord's word. For this reason at this time in the homily, I like to take some time and remind you about some of the events that occurred during the past week. Events seems to occur very rapidly and from one day to another we can easily forget what is truly important.

Events in the week

Let me highlight some of the events that occurred this past week. All of us have witnessed the labor conflicts between factory owners and workers. These conflicts have occurred in some factories and strikes have been declared which in turn have resulted in bloodshed. The dignity of the human person has been trampled upon and it is clear that the option of dialogue, the rational way to resolve conflicts, has not been sufficiently explored. The chancery has had the privilege of receiving news and being asked to intervene in certain situations. The Church realizes that she is not an expert in the area of sociology or labor matters. There is a Department of Labor and we know that people desire to live in harmony. This desire should be explored more thoroughly. As pastor, I can only affirm that justice and the respect of human dignity must be upheld, even when this involves the humblest of workers. Indeed, this is God's will.

In this sense, then, I am happy to be in dialogue with other churches. Some Protestant pastors have come to me and expressed their solidarity with the Church in her eagerness to preach justice. They want to work together with us in this area of common concern. The Church accepts this mission and wants to work in collaboration with others. Justice is not a concern of only the Catholic Church, but rather, it is a concern of all women and men. Therefore, you can be assured that the Church will always stand by the law, as well as the poor and those who suffer. The Church will always raise her voice when there are abuses. The Church enlightens these realities with the perspective of God and calls upon all people to use their common sense and understanding and not seek to resolve these situations by the

irrational use of the *power of the strongest*. Rather, we call upon everyone to use the power of reason, which is also the power of God.

Know also that the Church supports the just demands of the *campesinos*. The harvest time is drawing near and soon people will be gathering in the sugarcane, coffee, and cotton. We know that the people who will harvest these products are in debt and their salary is already committed to pay off these debts. These people, because they must eat, live on credit. Now that the price of these products of our land, so blessed by God, has risen in the world markets, it is only just that everyone who participates in this process should share in the wealth. This is simply Christian justice. Let us share this wealth! Let us show our gratitude to God for the gifts we have received for the higher prices in the world market. In this way we can all feel, not only emotionally, but in reality, that we are sisters and brothers. Once again I state: the Church is not an expert in establishing salaries --- she is not competent in this area. But we all know that there is a government agency that is called to act with justice and not imitate the judge in today's parable who *neither feared God nor respected any human being* (b), but only respected the powers of this world. Thus, this judge and many people among us do not pay heed to the needy widow who asks for justice. Let there be more dialogue, not only between factory owners and workers, but also between the interests of the people and the interests of the government which is charged with overseeing the diverse sectors of our society.

I believe that all of us have been witnesses of the sad and depressing situation that is about to occur once again in those areas that produce coffee and the other products of our land. The poor workers have to recuperate their strength and yet are forced to sleep outdoors, in the cold, often in public parks. This is not a beautiful scene. If we truly want to put a beautiful face on our nation, then we must be most just and more understanding. If people do not want to listen to the Church's call, then, as I said at the funeral of Father Navarro there are many beneficent institutions. For the love of humankind I call upon these institutions to maintain themselves active and to provide for the just demands of those who are not asking for alms but asking for some benefit as a result of their work.

Life of the Church

I also want to share with you some good news about our Catholic communities. October 12th, the feast of Our Lady of Pillar, is also the day when we celebrate the discovery of America. According to history, it is said that there was no priest on the first voyage of Christopher Columbus. Thus it was lay people who planted the cross of Christ on the beach and sang a hymn to the Virgin. A prayer of thanksgiving to the Virgin was the first Christian greeting that our land heard. Without a doubt, from the first day, the Virgin wanted to be present here among us as the mother of this continent. This day on which we celebrate the discovery of America is also a very special day in Spain.

Here in this Archdiocese we celebrate this event in the town that bears the name of the Spanish city where the statue of Our Lady of Pillar is guarded, namely, the city of Zaragoza. I also had the opportunity to preach to the people there about this Christian faith that gathers us here today in this place and enables us to appeal to God and pray with confidence. This Christian faith is an apostolic faith. This calling of the Virgin of Pillar has its origins with the Apostle, James. Therefore we profess an apostolic faith because it is the same faith that Jesus handed down to his disciples.

I also told the people that our faith is a missionary faith and we see this reality in the Spaniards who discovered America. There was a missionary sense in the hearts of the Catholic kings and they wanted to place these new lands under the feet of Christ. Yes, we must admit that in the course of history, the Indians of our land were greatly abused and treated unjustly. The central idea, however, of this adventure was to establish a missionary enterprise --- and later I will speak at greater length about this.

But first of all I want to remind you that this apostolic and missionary faith is a Marian faith. Pope Pius XII said that it is a Marian faith that has made this land of Latin America like a heaven adorned with stars. Each shrine that is dedicated to Mary is like a star and these stars form a constellation of shrines --- shrines dedicated to the Virgin under different titles, shrines where we honor the patroness of all the nations of Latin America. Besides these shrines, there are countless churches and hermitages that bear her name. Indeed the name of Mary has given a visible and tender character to our faith. Therefore, it is worthwhile to renew our faith in Mary during this month of the rosary. Let us continue to give thanks to God for having given us the rosary. From the mountains of Tepeyac she spoke to Juan Diego, the representative of our race: *Am I not here who is your mother?*. How beautiful it is to feel that we are sisters and brothers! How beautiful to not only be children of God but to bear in our hearts the love and tenderness of the mother of Christ who is also the mother of our Church.

The pastor of San José Las Flores sent me a sad telegram. His best catechist has been killed. *I am sad*, says Father Cofragua, *because this catechist was my right hand in the parish ministry of catechetics.*² We want to express our condolences to our beloved pastor and I ask all who are here at this time of prayer and to offer your prayers for the eternal rest of this new victim of this criminal violence. I also ask you to pray for the conversion of these sinners.

Yesterday we traveled to the parish of San Martín where we installed Father Rutilio Sánchez as the new pastor. This was the result of serious deliberations and I was very pleased to see how the people of this area ratified the decision of the bishop. It was like another Palm Sunday. Some have interpreted this nomination as a provocation, but I state that this is a pastoral decision. Father Sánchez has done great work in this area and he is known for his maturity in faith. His work is not finished, though it is moving forward and we wanted to support him with our presence, as well as the presence of many priests, and men and women religious from other parishes. As Father Sánchez said: *this is a new commitment to my people* and this will certainly result in much glory for God. I ask you to pray for him so that this new era in the life of the parish of San Martín might result in giving greater glory to God and provide many benefits for souls and for the Church. Indeed, the only thing we seek to achieve in our pastoral ministry is the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

On the last Sunday in October, all the Knights of Christ the King are going to meet in Conjutepeque at 3:00pm. We call upon all the men of the Archdiocese to become members of this group and thus renew this army of Christ the King. Again this gathering will take place in two weeks in Conjutepeque.

This morning at 10:00am we will install Father Samuel Orellana as pastor in Ayutuztepeque and at 7:00pm Father Díaz in the parish of Candelaria.

My sisters and brothers, we want to enlighten these events of our history and our Church with two thoughts based on today's readings. This homily could be entitled: the Church at prayer and the missionary Church.

The Church at prayer

In the first reading we can highlight a person that I would like to interpret as a figure of the Church at prayer. There, on the plains, Joshua, the leader of the people of Israel, was engaged in a battle with Amalek, who opposed the journey of Israel to the Promised Land. Amalek and his people dominated this area through which the people of Israel had to pass on their journey south. Therefore, they had to be conquered so that the People of God could move forward. This was one of those just wars where we see that all the human, natural means had been exhausted. War, like a strike, is a last recourse. When one has attempted to dialogue and no understanding can be achieved, then a just war is the only way in which the just demands of the people can be obtained. By the command of God, the people of Israel had to travel to the Promised Land. There is, however, an obstacle: Amalek and his people. Therefore, Moses and Joshua declare war. But there is a beauty in this event. While Joshua led the army in battle, Moses was on the mountain in prayer, with the staff of God in his hand (the staff that God had given him as a sign of his divine power --- the staff that Moses used to work wondrous signs). Moses raised his hands on high. As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, the armies of Israel had the better of the fight. When his arms grew tired and his hands fell to his side, the armies of Israel retreated. So two of Moses' aides, Aaron and Hur, supported his hands so that they would remain in a raised position. (c)

My sisters and brothers, I would like all of us to engrave this image on our hearts. The pastor of the Church and the leaders of the People of God, we all need to keep our hands raised up in prayer. Thus there is a need for everyone to become those aids of Moses, to become another Aaron and Hur and together to become this people of prayer. There is nothing more beautiful than the Church at prayer. My heart is filled with joy when I listen to people who tell me: *We are praying for you. We lift you up in prayer.* Yesterday news was spread about that I had been abducted. Many calls arrived at the chancery assuring us of prayers. I do not know what people hope to achieve with these threats or with this news that is broadcast on radio. I want to denounce these actions and warn you, my sisters and brothers, that the Church is living in dangerous times. She is in battle with the Prince of Evil, the powers of hell. The devil is not an illusion. On earth, he has many ministers, many people who are willing to serve and act in collaboration with him. Therefore, God also has to have the power of the People of God who cry out to him in prayer.

Within a short time I will pray these words that fill me with great emotion: *Do not look on our sins but on the faith of your Church.* I think of this Church, you, all of you who are Church. I think of all of you at prayer. I also think of how the prayers of so many priests and religious women become present on the altar together with Christ, the divine Moses. It is also wonderful to know that in certain Novitiates and among several religious communities, this prayer takes on other forms as men and women kneel like angels and adore Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament. It is beautiful to know that in a chapel, like that of the hospital Divina Providencia, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed all day. There the sick, the sisters, benefactors and volunteers pray for the Church and her needs. It is wonderful to consider how many thousands of people are at prayer even though they are unable to come to Church. It is you, the many men and women who are ill and unable to come to Church, yet as you listen to yours radios, you are joined in prayer with all those here in the cathedral. Many

campesino communities and many families put aside their daily work and gather around the radio in order to be in communion with the prayers of the people in this cathedral, the mother Church of the Archdiocese. As the children in their catechism classes and in their preparation for First Communion lift up their innocent and pure hands in prayer, how could God not listen to these prayers? This is the Church at prayer. The Church is also at prayer when the father of a family does not have time to kneel down and pray, but is working in order to provide food in an honorable way for his family. We see the Church at prayer in those who are looking for work and trusting that God will provide. This is the People of God at prayer. It would be impossible to describe all of this which can only be appreciated with the power of God's sight, with the power of faith.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I invite all of you to be people of prayer. It is necessary to become part of this movement of human development that the Church has placed in a position of priority in her ministry. Yes, it is necessary to become part of the transcendent development. If people work to develop the nation economically, socially and politically but do not pray, then they are simply looking for material goods. Such work might be called immanent development, a worldly development, a development that will continue only as long as things continue to progress well, but in time, it will be unable to achieve its goal because people have not placed their trust in that which is transcendent, in the power of the Christian community. Transcendence means that even though we do everything possible here on earth, we will achieve nothing unless God establishes a new order. God has offered himself up as Savior and God is the only one who can redeem our situation. Let us ask God for this redemption! Let us do our part and collaborate in this process! Let us imitate Joshua who in the valley is bloodied and yet continues to struggle and confronts the danger! At the same time, let us also imitate Moses who in prayer lifts up his voice to God. There is one single cause, the immanent cause, the struggle for justice on this earth and the transcendent cause that enables us to lift up our hands and cry out: *Only you, Lord, can bring the victory of justice and love to this world that has such great need of these realities.*

Yes, this is the way that we should build, with prayer and work. *Ora et labora*, this is the beautiful motto of the Benedictine Order whose members spend the whole day at work. But they make their work an on-going prayer to the Father --- the Church at prayer. We have to incorporate this value of prayer into our work for human development for if we do not pray then we view reality with myopic vision and then resentments and hatred and violence arise. Only by relating ourselves to the heart of God can we understand God's plan. Only through prayer with the Lord can we learn how to see in the face of men and women --- especially those who suffer and are poor and most ragged --- the image of God and thus carry on God's work. Only through contemplation can we experience the power of the Spirit that becomes interwoven in history, a power that can be abused by people. Abused up to a certain point until then God says: *Enough!* This is the hour that we are impatiently awaiting. At times it appears as though that hour will never come; but fear not, it will come.

Through contemplation we also come to understand that perseverance is necessary. Perseverance is necessary when we, like the widow in the gospel, (d) must confront the iniquitous judge and others who should justly distribute the goods of this world but fear the power of money and arms and political power and forget their their own power is relative since everything comes from God. Like the woman in today's gospel, let us not fear the iniquity of judges who favor certain groups of people who have influence! (e) Let us not fear judges who will not enter into dialogue with the poor who, like the widow, ask for a better salary in order to eat and a home where they can rest. Today's gospel tells us that this

perseverance will obtain the victory. Violence will accomplish nothing. Everything, however, can be achieved through prayer and placing our trust in God. I invite you my sisters and brothers to make our Church a Church of prayer. This is the greatest power of the Archdiocese.

This week I heard a phrase that touched my heart. A person from outside our country told me: *Do you want me to give a name to your Diocese?* She continued: *I call your Diocese the Church that dreams.* I asked: *why the Church that dreams?* She replied: *Because I have found here in the Archdiocese a Church that has placed its trust in the power of God, in the desire to become an authentic Church, in the values of renouncing all those things that perhaps at a former time gave one power, but that are now seen as having nothing to do with the power of God.*

This phrase has led me to reflect at length. I do not say these things to you because of vanity, but rather I want to invite all you, my sisters and brothers, to continue to make our diocese a Church that dreams. Let us continue to dream like Christ who placed the Church, with all its weaknesses, under his protection. Saint Augustine spoke these words that I would like all of you to remember: *Prayer is the power of God because it is God's weakness.*³ It is like a father who experiences the weakness of his child. He feels weak also and approaches his child and helps the child in his weakness. This is the situation of our Church: we are weak but we have the power of God. We pray often because we draw God near to us and God becomes weak when the weak ask for God's protection: *In you, Lord, I trust, do not let me be disgraced* (f).

The missionary Church

My sisters and brothers, I want to speak about the Church as a missionary Church and I want to briefly present this as an announcement concerning next Sunday. On the penultimate Sunday in October, that is, on October 23rd, the Church celebrates World Mission Sunday. This does not mean, however, that we must be missionaries for just one Sunday. Next Sunday awakens our conscience and forces us to ask ourselves: *what is our missionary spirit like?* We have to be missionaries for the duration of our lives.

The basis of all of this is found in Saint Paul's letter to Timothy, in the passage that was read today: *remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you have learned it and that from your infancy you have known the sacred scriptures* (g). The family of Timothy were converts and he learned from his grandmother and mother the religion that he professed. Saint Paul helped Timothy deepen his faith. We can say that Timothy's family was a missionary family. Indeed, all parents who catechize their children are fulfilling this missionary obligation to communicate the great message of salvation. Speaking about this revelation, Saint Paul says: *the sacred scriptures are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus* (h). This is a great aspect of our faith. It is not a philosophy that promises us happiness on earth. It is not a psychology like those that flourish at this time and that want to make us good salespersons of their product. It is also not a psychology that wants to make us happy here on earth and thus eliminate our earthly concerns. It is a wisdom that comes from God. Again we are in the presence of transcendence. Only that which comes from God can bring salvation because salvation comes from the Lord. Thus Saint Paul says: *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction and for training in righteousness* (i).

My sisters and brothers, if the Church is concerned about bringing her gospel to all people, it is not because she desires to meddle in the affairs of the State like some foreign country meddling in the affairs of our country. Those who speak of the Church as some foreign power do not understand anything about the Church. The Church could be compared to the words of the hymn that are sung on the day when the three Kings come to adore Jesus. The Church sings: *Do not be afraid Herod. The One who is coming to establish the Kingdom of Heaven has no desire to deny you your earthly power.*⁴ He is coming to give the Church and the kingdom and the powers of this earth the spirit of heaven. Saint Paul has stated this when he said: *scripture is useful... for refutation, for correction and for training in righteousness* (j). As the Church preaches her gospel, she respects history and the nature and way of being of every people. But the Church corrects, elevates and trains people in righteousness so that the people of El Salvador can be better; so that the people of Africa can be better. The Church is the Kingdom of God that grafts itself, like a new seedling, into all cultures and races. She does not destroy the originality of cultures or people but elevates all things so that they might become part of this Kingdom of God. Thus, I and each one of you, after we have lived out our religion, with all of our defects, we will disappear and die, but Christianity will continue. The Christian is nothing more than the perfect person. Therefore, human virtues are needed because Christianity does not destroy the human virtues of anyone rather it respects these virtues. Indeed, this is the mission of the Church.

Saint Paul says to Timothy that the mission of the Church is to communicate this revelation to all people, this revelation that elevates, sanctifies, dignifies and strengthens peoples' way of acting. Thus Paul says: *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word... encourage through all patience and teaching* (k). When I denounce the injustices and the abuses from this pulpit, it is because I am not in agreement with certain attitudes. But it is not just I who am speaking. I am nothing more than a messenger of this word that is proclaimed to all people, to refute, to correct and to exhort. Those who listen to me do not just listen to me but to God who wants the people of El Salvador to live more honorably. You listen to God who wants greater justice and respect to become realities in our midst. The Word of God has to be heard with this attitude that touches me profoundly as I speak here in this cathedral. It is the Word of God that, through my humble and inadequate words, touches the hearts of all of you. As you listen and as I learn, together we try to be better people, each one of us according to our vocation. I as pastor, the priests who listen to me and the women religious whom I want to thank for their presence here in the cathedral, as well as those who are listening to this celebration on their radios, we are all trying to be better people. Young people, married couples, professionals, the rich who are not excluded and whom I love deeply but whom I also hope will be converted to this truth that brings salvation --- all of these people are trying to be better. For after you have found happiness here on earth, I do not want you to be condemned because you were not good administrators of the goods that God has given you. To the poor who live on the margins of society and with whom I have expressed my solidarity, although not approving your vices, I say to you: develop yourselves, work and put aside those vices so that you can be true human persons. This is what the Church preaches. It pains me when I hear these slanderous words that say that I want to be the bishop of one social class and that I despise those of another class. This is not so my sisters and brothers. I try to have an all embracing heart like Christ. I try to imitate him and call all people to hear this Word that saves. I want to see all people converted. I know that I must be the first to change. Let us all be converted to this Word that exhorts, encourages and elevates. This is the Church's mission.

My sisters and brothers, to help the missions is to help those men and women, priests and laity who minister in those lands where Christ is not known. Perhaps people are practicing natural religions, adoring false gods but perhaps in a more honest way than many Christians. These missionaries attempt to bring these people to worship the true God that will ultimately make them happier --- happier because when we speak of the missions we are not saying that only those who are members of the Church will be saved and therefore we have to make everyone a member of this Church.

When we speak about mission we believe that there are many lights that reveal the presence of Christ, many lights even in the so called non-Christian lands. There is also much truth and grace among these people. Christ and the Spirit are leading these people who do not know God and they will be saved as they live in fidelity to their non-Christian laws. The Church feels that she is the depository of an integral redemption by Christ, the depository of all those religious values that are found in Judaism, Islam and other religions and that cry out for truth and unity --- values that are so dear to the heart of God. Thus mission means to take advantage of these human values, to esteem them and raise them up to God. Yes, this is the meaning of mission. Thus the missionary endeavor of the Church is a work of human development on a worldwide basis. This endeavor allows the plan of God to be realized, namely, that all people form one family with Christ as the head. Then one day this Christ will place at God's feet all humankind, all races, all ways of thinking. All people will then affirm a true faith in Christ.

This is the call that the Church will announce next week and that I wanted to address this week because the word of Saint Paul demands this. I also want to ask you, my dear sisters and brothers, to reflect on the mission and the missionaries during this week. If it is possible, speak with your children and some young people about this theme. God has great plans for the young people of El Salvador. So many missionaries could arise from our families if we lived this missionary spirit, this missionary endeavor. We could place before young people no greater heroic work, no greater adventure than that of becoming a missionary. Even though one is not a priest, there are groups of doctors, nurses, professionals, engineers and catechists who work in mission lands. Some work there for short periods of time and others for more extended lengths of stay. How many people minister in these lands! If we are not able to be part of that heroic group of missionaries that minister in other lands, we can be part of the rearguard as we fulfill our obligations with our family --- faithfulness in marriage, seeking holiness together as a family, and offering up our illness for the missions. In the Profession of Faith we pray: *I believe in the communion of saints*. The good that is done in your home redounds upon the well-being of all. It is a way of praying for the missionaries.

My sisters and brothers, also remember that the missions are in need of money. Next Sunday, in all the parishes, there will be a special collection. This money will be sent to the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of People that administers large missionary territories where so many works have to be sustained. Let us not just say that we are poor people and need all our money. We know that large amounts of money from El Salvador are invested in foreign banks and we experience the injustice of this situation. The best foreign bank where we could invest to receive help in our situation of poverty and at the same time express our solidarity would be to invest in this missionary endeavor of our faith and to thank the Lord for the gift of faith that we have received. This investment will make it possible for others to receive the same gift of faith. In exchange for the few dollars that we are able to send to the Sacred Congregation, I want to remind you that as Catholics in El Salvador, we

receive much more than other countries. For example, Germany sends us a subsidy of thousands of dollars for our ministry here. The United States and several other countries that have international relief agencies have understood the meaning of living in solidarity with the poor. So we as a people are able to express our solidarity by sharing our poverty. We are not going to make the missions wealthy with our few dollars, but we are going to demonstrate that we understand the meaning of mission and even though we have little, we are still able to help the missions.

My sisters and brothers, we have spoken about the Church at prayer and the missionary Church. These are two great dimensions that we cannot neglect if we want to be an authentic Church. Now we are going to place ourselves in prayer and offer this Eucharist to God, together with Christ, the Divine Moses who raises up his hands to ask for mercy for our nation that has such great need of this.

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

² On 7 October 1977 Simón Córdova, leader and Cáritas representative in his community, was assassinated in Nueva Trinidad (Chalatenango). See “La palabra del arzobispo. Un mensaje y un pésame”, *Orientación*, 23 October 1977.

³ Phrase attributed to St Augustine but which doesn't appear in his writings and meditations on prayer.

⁴ Hymn for Vespers on the feast of the Epiphany.

Margin References (a) Mt 5,13-14: (b) Lk 18,12: (c) Ex 17,11-12: (d) Lk 18,1-8: (e) Lk 18,8: (f) Ps 31,2: (g) 2Tm 3,14-15a: (h) 2Tm 3,15b: (i) 2Tm 3,16: (j) 2Tm 3,16: (k) 2Tm 4,1-2.