

THE STRENGTH OF THE WORD

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

November 25, 1977

Apopa

.....why does this community of faith come together year after year, come together this morning, November 25th, 1977 to continue the rich tradition and honor your patroness, Saint Catherine of Alexandria?¹ This is an event that invites us to reflect on a life that will not end, a life that will continue until the end of time, namely, the life of the Church. We are the Church. When we are not here in this temple, when we are at home, on our farms, doing our daily chores, in our villages --- there we carry the faith in our hearts. So when a moment like this or some other moment in the life of Church arises, we come together and we celebrate as we are doing this morning. This event invites us to reflect and, my sisters and brothers, we are going to reflect together after having listened to the Word of God that speaks to us about a life after death, a value that rises above persecution and a triumph that becomes greater to the degree that others desire to tear us apart. No one can prevail against God and the life of God encourages this holy Church that is the beautiful spouse of her divine Redeemer.

St Catherine of Alexandria and the persecuted Church

Who could have told the young woman of the third century, Catherine of Alexandria, that her name would become known beyond the circle of her family and friends, beyond the boundaries of that city of wisdom where great philosophers and theologians came together? The School of Alexandria is famous in history. There the most profound philosophers in Greece met. At the same time the great Christian theologians tried to unite this human philosophical science to God's revealed wisdom, that is, to the divine Word that is read in Church. As a result the beautiful catechisms of Alexandria, theological treatises and Biblical works and commentaries were produced, works that centuries later continue to be admired by students. In this city of Alexandria, famous for its knowledge and for its philosophy which was baptized by theology, this young woman Catherine was born. In the beginning she was a non-Christian, but through reflection, like all those persons who deepen their thoughts, she came to realize that the simple parables of Jesus, his life, his gospel and his Beatitudes were more beautiful than the thinking of the great philosophers of the earth. She discovered the great pearl of the gospel and she embraced it. She became a Christian and one day, persecution became a part of her life.

My sisters and brothers, we should not be surprised when people speak about a persecuted Church. Many are scandalized and say that we are exaggerating, that the Church is not persecuted ... but persecution is one of the marks of the Church. She must always be persecuted because of her doctrine that speaks out against immorality and preaches against all forms of abuse. She must always be persecuted because she proclaims that which is good and attacks that which is evil. The Church has been given a doctrine by Christ that enables her to sanctify people and renew society. Naturally when there is sin and selfishness and corruption and envy and avarice in society and in women and men, sin rises up like a snake that rises up when it feels it is in imminent danger --- sin rises up and pursues those who attempt to persecute evil and sin. When the Church is persecuted, however, this is a sign that she is being faithful to her mission. The Church attempts to banish sin from the world and

naturally, the world will rise up against the Church's goodness and reject her, slander her, defame her and discredit her --- we are experiencing all of this in these days. You read in the newspapers and see these paid campaigns that insinuate that the Church is responsible for the bad state of affairs of our country. The radio and television have launched campaigns against our Church. We see that sin has risen up against the Kingdom of God that attempts to establish itself here in the world.

The same occurred during the time of Catherine of Alexandria. With the simplicity of the gospel and the parables, the Church proclaimed the goodness of people and invited people to repent of their sins. Naturally, the Roman Empire, under the control of the emperor Maximinus and according to the beliefs of that time, considered the emperor a god and demanded that the rulers of the Empire to be adored as gods. Christians cannot adore any other god but the one true God. Thus when a government, call it whatever name you want --- in this case is was Maximinus --- when the Roman Empire wanted to make the rulers idols, Catholics said: *No! we have only one Lord, one God, our Lord!* Then the false gods persecuted those who would not adore them and the persecution spread. Thus there arose this glorious multitude of men and women who are called martyrs.

My sisters and brothers of Apopa, one of these martyrs was the woman who is our patroness. Saint Catherine knew that in that environment of wisdom and as a Christian, a Christian of deep faith, she could not escape this persecution. She was brought before the court. She was flattered because the persecutors always try to flatter, to tame an individual. When one has bowed down before this flattery then there is no need to persecute this individual for that person has been conquered. For this reason, my sisters and brothers, be very careful with flattery. When flattery comes from sin and attempts to create situations in which sin will not be disturbed or sacrificed, situations in which everything will appear to be well, situations in which sin can accommodate itself to the world --- be careful, for this is evil and as a result, one becomes a persecutor.

Catherine did not allow herself to be seduced by flattery. Then began the second phase of the persecution: threats, tremendous threats in the form of a very refined scientific discussion. Look at how God enters the heart of a human being: he enters the hearts of wise people by the path of wisdom and enters the hearts of the simple people by paths of simplicity. God tried to enter the heart of Catherine who was very wise and simple, by the path of wisdom. Thus, Catherine came to a knowledge of God. But the devil and persecution enter the hearts of people by the paths of flattery and attempted to enter the heart of Catherine by the path of wisdom. Her story of martyrdom, the study of her life, tells us that the emperor said to her: *You are going to discuss these matters with the wise men of the Empire.* Thus they brought to her the philosophers who were the counselors at the Court, the wise men of Alexandria. We see Catherine in the midst of the wise men who tried to bring objections against her beliefs, attempted to dissuade her of her belief in God, tried to show that it was ridiculous to believe in a Christ who is God and man and the same time tried to uproot from her heart her faith in a Church that would continue in existence until the end of time. They told her: *Do you not see the ridiculousness of all of this! There is no greater wisdom than human knowledge! Furthermore, if you renounce this ridiculous Creed of Christians, the Empire offers you great advantages!*

As Catherine responded one by one to the objections of her adversaries, she convinced them. Tradition tells us that instead of convincing Catherine to renounce Christianity, she convinced the wise men to become Christians. Look at how great is the wisdom of God.

When God illuminates human knowledge and when people listen with good will, like the good will that you demonstrate as you listen to me ... I hope that all listen to me in this way. I hope that no one is listening to me just to see how you can entrap me and to then communicate misinformation about what I have said. Be very careful, because those who come to listen to the Word of God with evil intentions in their hearts are perverting the Word of God. God may punish these people and reject them and not give them this knowledge of divine wisdom and truth. As Saint Catherine listened to the theologians and the wise Christians of her time, let us listen to the Word of God in order to learn God's doctrine --- not to spy on or persecute the Word. Let us listen to the Word of God to receive with love that which God has revealed. Those wise men of Alexandria began their discussion with Catherine, perhaps with evil intentions, but the grace of God prepared their hearts and they came to believe in the same faith that Catherine professed.

Strength of the word

My sisters and brothers, this beautiful example of your patroness leads me to reflect on a page from the Second Vatican Council and apply it to you who are participating in this holy Mass in the parish chapel of Apopa to honor Saint Catherine. Listen to this beautiful thought of the Council: *Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Kingdom of His Father both by the testimony of His life and the power of His words, continually fulfills His prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses and to whom He gave understanding of the faith (sensu fidei) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life (w).*

I want to repeat this here because this, my sisters and brothers, is the explanation of the question that I asked you at the beginning of this homily: why today, November 25, 1977 does the community of Apopa come together with faith and kindness to honor your patroness, Saint Catherine? Why do you come together in the same way that your parents and grandparents gathered here? You know why? Because Christ continues preaching, not only through your pastor but also through all parents, devout and good men and women of this community. Christ continues preaching through all those who are Christian. This community of men and women who form the Church has been anointed by Christ at the time of their Baptism and sent forth to be prophets. In other words, through the witness of our lives, our good example and the power of our words, we are called to provide good counsel to the world. Parents are called to enlighten their children and spouses are called to enlighten one another. The community moves forward not because Christ is speaking to people in some perceptible way, but rather because Christ makes use of each one of us, each one of you, to continue to preach the Kingdom of God. For this reason the Kingdom of God is present here in Apopa. For this reason Christianity and faith are lived realities among the families and the people of this area. Christ continues his prophetic mission through his holy people --- not just his ministers: the priests and the bishop with whom the priests collaborate and who live and minister together in communion. It should be said that all baptized people minister in communion with the bishop. The bishop is like the authorized teacher, the cornerstone that confronts the doctrine preached by the priests or the doctrine proclaimed by families and declares that this doctrine is either authentic or inauthentic.

Very close to here we have an example of what I am speaking about. In Quezaltepeque there is a priest in rebellion against the bishop. He is confronted with the fact that he is no longer in communion with the Church and that his doctrine is not a proclamation of the

Kingdom of God. Ah! The men and women who follow the preaching and the counsel of a rebellious priest who has broken this communion with the bishop. Hopefully this word arrives in Quezaltepeque where a political group has tried to make Father Pineda Quinteros a poor foolish instrument for their political objectives of hindering the Church instead a minister in whom people can find the Word of God. I invite you to repent and be converted! Do not play with the holy Kingdom of God! Hopefully you do not fall into deceit and believe that you have political support. This is very easy while one continues to live but when the time of the judgment of the Kingdom of God arrives, those who have built up the true and authentic Kingdom with Jesus, even though they have been persecuted, will live forever. On the other hand, those who desired to save their lives by sharing in the advantages of this world --- Jesus says that they will lose their life forever. (b) Thus, my sisters and brothers, this prophetic mission must be confronted. It is easy to see if my word, the belief of my home, the doctrine that I teach --- it is easy to see if these are true or false. If I am in communion with the bishop and the bishop is in communion with the Pope, then there is no doubt that my word and beliefs and doctrine are true and pertain to the Kingdom of God that Christ has established in the world. Therefore I hand myself over to the power of the Word of his Church and to the grandeur of Christ's witness.

Therefore my sisters and brothers, like Catherine of Alexandria, I invite all of us to become converted into workers on behalf of our mission of evangelization. What else is the Church doing in this world? The word *evangelization* says everything. It means that we bring the gospel into our homes, our towns --- into all places. How do we accomplish this? With the power of the word and the witness of our lives. There are the two great instruments of evangelization. The power of the word. The word is power. When the word is not a lie it has the power of the truth. This is why there are so many words that have no power in our nation --- so many words are lies and as such, they have lost their reason for being. If the word does not bear witness to the truth, it has not reason to exist. The word exists when it is a vehicle of the truth --- then the word has power.

The word has power when it communicates God's doctrine and the Kingdom of God. My sisters and brothers, I hope that at this time we renew the content of our doctrine. I say this to you, dear parents, catechists, those who celebrate the Word in your communities and you who collaborate with Christ to spread the Kingdom by the power of the Word. This ministry is most necessary. You know that in Rome representatives of the bishops throughout the world have come together with the Pope. They have just concluded a meeting in which they studied the problem of catechesis, that is, how to transmit the treasure of the true doctrine to children and young people. What is this true doctrine? The true doctrine is that which Christ brought to the world: that a God exists; that God created us; that this God sent his Son to save the world; that there is no salvation apart from this Christ, Redeemer; that this redemption of Christ is not only a redemption that we wait for at the time of our death but it is also a redemption that is operative in this life.

And that liberation, a word that disturbs many people, is a reality of Christ's redemption; that liberation does not mean that men and women should live in conformity with this reality while they are alive; that liberation is a reality that begins on this earth and that liberation means that the exploitation of one human being by another human being no longer exists in this world. Liberation is another way of saying *redemption* which desires freedom for all women and men --- freedom from so many slaveries. Illiteracy is a form of slavery. Hunger is a form of slavery. Lack of money to buy food is a form of slavery. Slavery and misery --- these two go together. When the Church preaches that Christ has come to redeem all women and men and that as a result of the power of redemption no form of slavery should exist on earth, when the Church preaches in this way she is not preaching subversion or some form of

politics or communism. The Church is preaching the true redemption of Christ. The Church is saying that she does not want slaves but desires all people to be saved --- that rich and poor are loved as sisters and brothers, that liberation has to penetrate all these situations so that slavery no longer exists in the world and so that no form of slavery exists in our world. No person has to be a slave of another or a slave of money or a slave of any sinful situation in the world. This is the content of revelation, our doctrine and our evangelization.

The Church continues to preach that this Kingdom of God that proclaims evangelization also wants to form community. As long as evangelization does not terminate in the formation of community it is incomplete. Evangelization that concludes in the formation of a community means that we, who believe in Christ and his revelation, who believe in God and our temporal and eternal salvation --- we share this faith with other women and men who believe the same thing and thus we form a community with these people: a community of faith and love, a community of the redeemed. This is what the Church is doing on earth: creating the Church. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, when others try to scatter the community and sow terror in those who proclaim the Word of God and in those who gather together to reflect on this Word of God --- these people are persecuting the Church. We have a right to gather together to complement one another, to help one another in our community reflection so that our faith continues to grow, so that our worship of God becomes more profound, and so that we become more united among ourselves. To create community is a command of Christ: *Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Gather together those who share the same faith* (c). This is the Church: the coming together of women and men, the convocation of all those who believe in the one God and in Christ, the Redeemer.

My sisters and brothers, this community reveals that Christ is the focus of our lives and that Christ uses signs that make his redemption present in our midst. We call these signs sacraments. When a child is born into a Christian family, the parents bring this child to the baptistry of the parish church where the priest pours water over the child's head as he says: *I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. This is a sign that Christ is present in Apopa for Christ has gathered together these children, these children of the flesh and made them children of the Kingdom of God. When people are overwhelmed by sin and need forgiveness, they approach the confessional. Repentant they tell the priest: *Father, I accuse myself of having sinned ...* The priest responds *I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. Christ is present in Apopa through the ministry and the gesture of the priest who is forgiving this community that is called the parish of Apopa. At this moment in which I, as bishop, and my beloved brother priests who surround this altar --- as we take from you the bread and wine and in the name of God offer these gifts as symbols of your work and land, symbols of your concerns, hopes and joys, we then consecrate these gifts so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord: *This is my body! This is my blood!* Through our human hands, Christ becomes present in this community of Apopa and nourishes all those who wish to partake of this holy communion.

My dear sisters and brothers, it is beautiful to know that this community of the Church does not journey alone. She should not be afraid for Christ is with her. My sisters and brothers, at this time when the bishop of the diocese is explaining the Word of God, do not focus on my poor words. Focus on the heavenly message that through my humble ministry Christ, the Eternal Teacher, is communicating to you, his beloved people. Blessed are the people and the community that gathers together to listen to their bishop, to listen to their priest, because at that moment they are being nourished not by the word of a man but by the Word of God. I experience this great responsibility each time that I preach. I feel that I am

nothing more than a humble channel, like the microphone that is transmitting and magnifying my voice.

I am nothing more than God's microphone and I am an instrument that brings to your ears the message that God wants to communicate to you. Then each one of you, in the serenity of your hearts that are receiving this Word of God can repent and become converted to the Lord or give thanks to God or enter into a personal dialogue with God or you can reject this Word. When people criticize me, when they slander me in the newspapers saying that I preach subversion, when they call me names --- my sisters and brothers, I am saddened by all of this, but I weep not for myself but weep because I know this does not end with me. Christ commands me to say: *If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first* (d). Those who carry on campaigns on the radio and television to insult the Church --- they are not only insulting people but they are insulting God and will have to give an accounting of their actions to God. These offenses, so vile and senseless --- how could these offenses against God's ministers not offend God, our Lord? My sisters and brothers, the Church is Christ present on earth. Therefore, when Catherine of Alexandria, who was a member of the community that is said to have been founded by Saint Mark, the evangelist, when she came together with others to listen to the bishop and the priest (as we have come together here in this celebration), she knew that she was being nourished by a doctrine that gave her eternal life. Thus the memory of her will continue forever because the souls of all those who are nourished by the eternal Word are immortalized. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, when the community²....

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

² The final words were not registered on the tape of the homily.

Margin References (a) LG 35: (b) Mk 8,35: (c) Mk 16,15: (d) Lk 10,16.