

TO MOTHERS, FOR DISAPPEARED CHILDREN

December 1, 1977

..... disappeared.¹ Dear brother priests who concelebrate this Eucharist, we come together with the beloved faithful and on this occasion express our solidarity with the anguish of those families whose loved ones have disappeared. We ask God to give mercy and consolation to their hearts and we also ask God to intervene in this mystery of iniquity that has resulted in the disappearance of so many people from our society.

The three readings that we have heard were chosen because of the present circumstances. The first reading recounts the heroic example of the mother of seven sons who during the time of the Maccabees offered themselves as a holocaust before a tyrant who wanted them to adore him as if he were a god. (a) But the mother and her seven valiant sons (including the youngest) confronted the tyrant and defended the rights of God. They told the author of this crime that they willingly handed over their lives to the God who brought them into existence. They trusted that God would once again give life to those who, without fear, handed over their lives to defend God's divine rights. Thus the seven brothers died, professing the primacy of God, professing their rebellion against men who wanted to trample on the rights of God as well as on men and women who are created in the image of God.

The second reading from the writings of Saint Paul tells us that this Christian elder experienced human weakness, but also experienced within himself the power of faith and hope that God gives to those who trust in him. The Spirit encourages us in our weakness. Paul then proclaims this beautiful phrase that I would like the mothers of those for whom we are praying today --- I would like them to engrave these words in their hearts as a motto for their life: *We know that all things work for good for those who love God* (b). There is no disaster, no catastrophe, no pain, however grievous it might be that, if suffered for the love of God, cannot be converted into a crown of glory and hope.

The third reading presents us with a woman whom I would like to be the model for all these afflicted mothers: Mary. Mary presents her Son in the Temple and hears the prophet announce the bloody destiny of her Son: *Behold this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed* (c). I feel that these mothers are sorrowful mothers whose hearts have been pierced. During this ceremony dedicated to the Virgin Mary we want to be mindful of this mystery of the Presentation.

The image that will be devoutly venerated after Mass by these mothers and all of you, my beloved faithful, is the first image of Mary that arrived in our country. It has been venerated as a great relic in the Church of San José, but now it will be venerated in a new parish. This image is a great treasure, not the image, but the trust in this mother who can say to all mothers who suffer that no one has suffered like her. During her lifetime, no other mother has carried within herself the prophecy that Mary carried from the time that she cradled her son in her arms. No other mother has heard at the beginning of the life of her son a prophet proclaim a disgraceful, bloody end to his life. If a mother were to hear during her child's infancy that this son would be tragically murdered and that a sword would pierce her heart,

then, my sisters and brothers, the whole life of this mother would be one of suffering, a Calvary.

Mary, then, is the model of mothers who suffer because no other mother has carried during her lifetime the sword of uncertainty, waiting for the time when tragedy would become the harsh reality of Calvary. I believe that no one can give this Mass a profane meaning since we are celebrating this Mass with a true religious meaning. We have not come here, as we have been accused in these slanderous campaigns, to celebrate a Mass-meeting. This is sheer sarcasm to put these two words together. To go to Mass by nature means that one is not going to a meeting. The Mass is a prayer of thanksgiving, a holy prayer, the sacrifice of Calvary that is applied to a concrete situation. In this case, the Mass is the suffering of Christ on Calvary, with Mary, his blessed mother, who becomes a sign, a redemptive sign for the suffering of these mothers and their families.

Presence-denunciation

In the presence of these families that suffer I see the three gestures that are presented to us in the three readings today. The first gesture is the heroism of that mother who lived during the time of the Maccabees. We see her courageous accusation. The presence of that woman in front of the tyrant was an accusation. Her very presence as mother, encouraging her children to die rather than betray their devotion to God is a presence that cries out against all those who want to put aside the rights of God and hold themselves up as gods of the earth and lords of the life of men and women. No one but a mother can understand the value of a human person, especially when that person is her own son or daughter: why have they tortured my child? Why has my child disappeared? The presence of a mother who weeps over the disappearance of her child is a presence-accusation. It is a presence that cries out to heaven --- a presence that cries out and demands the presence of her child who has disappeared.

Like Mary at the foot of the cross, every mother who suffers the abuse of her child is a accusation. Mary, the sorrowful mother, before the power of Pontius Pilate who unjustly killed her son, is the voice of justice, love and peace; the voice of what God desires as she stands before the voice of what God does not desire, before the abuse and that which should not be.

This is the meaning of the presence of these mothers. This is not politics but is the voice of justice, the voice of love. This is the cry that the Church gathers up from so many abandoned wives and mothers and homes and proclaims: *This should not be! Return these children to the place that the rights of God and the law of God demands!* This is a cry against sin. And this is what the Church is doing, crying out against the sin that has been enthroned in the history and life of our nation. We cry out that we do not want the devil to reign. We do not want hatred to reign. We do not want violence or the fear of terrorism to reign. We want love to reign. We want peace to reign in our homes. We want tranquility to reign in those places that no longer experience this tranquility.

All these injustices become good for you

My dear sisters and brothers, in the second place --- and I have already told these dear mothers who are suffering that the phrase from second reading of Saint Paul to the Romans should be their motto --- but I also want to say that when the Church takes on this tone of

denunciation, she does so not with resentment but rather from the perspective of the gospel that calls out for the conversion of sinners.

I have a very tranquil conscience and know that I have never incited anyone to violence. All these paid campaigns and slanderous words and these voices on the radio that cry out against the bishop as a revolutionary are slanders because my voice has never become stained with cries of resentment or anger. I cry out against injustice but I do so to tell the unjust: *be converted!* I cry out in the name of suffering and in the name of those who suffer injustice, but I also tell the criminals: *be converted and do not do evil!*

The voice of Saint Paul today cries out to those who look for God, who love God and says: *all things work for the good for those who love God* (d). My dear mothers, do not allow yourselves to be seduced by violence. Do not allow the serpent of anger to dwell in your hearts. There is nothing more unfortunate than a heart filled with anger, even anger toward one who tortures one's child. Do not hate. Listen to Saint Paul and to God who tells you this morning that if there is love in one's heart, then all forms of injustice work for your good.

At this time when the cause of liberation is proclaimed by many voices, the Church also cries out for liberation. The Church, however, does not cry out with a tone of hatred or vengeance or class struggle because this is not constructive. We are in agreement that there should be a struggle against terrorism, but one act of terrorism is not solved by another act of terrorism. An evil will is not destroyed by another evil will. Hatred sows nothing that is good. Therefore, the Church is in agreement with those campaigns against terrorism in as much as those campaigns sow love and seek the conversion of those who are evil. The rebels, whoever they are, should be punished. If they have committed a crime, they should be tried and we have to demand the punishment of those who have done evil and do not convert to that which is good.

But from the Christian point of view the voice of the Church says that those who are oppressed, who suffer, who are tortured, who have disappeared, who have died at the hands of criminals, to those mothers and homes who suffer, to those who live on the margins of society, to those who suffer injustice --- to all these people the Church says: *Amen to God! Amen to God because for those who love God even these oppressions work for your good!* Look at the crucified Christ, the most oppressed person, the One who suffered the most criminal injustice on earth, the innocent One who died on the cross. Look at his mother, crushed in the sorrow of injustice. In this situation Jesus cries out: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do* (e). This suffering, unjustly inflicted, becomes redemption for humanity.

My sisters and brothers, at this time Christ, the Redeemer, needs human suffering, needs the pain of these holy mothers who suffer, needs the anguish of those prisons where there is torture. Blessed are those who have been chosen to continue on earth the great injustice that enables Christ to continue to save the world. Let us convert this suffering into redemption. My sisters and brothers, for me this time is a blessed time because it is as though I am injecting the pain of these mothers into the life of the Church. This bread and wine that represents the prison, the anguish and the pain of so many mothers who do not know the whereabouts of their children, this bread and wine that will be presented at the Offertory that we will soon begin, this bread and wine that will be placed on our altar will be changed into the pain of Christ on Calvary. I assure you that today this holy pain of so many homes that

have unjustly been orphaned is also the pain that nourishes, the pain that injects the life and the love of God into this Church that proclaims hope, that proclaims that we should not be discouraged, that proclaims that the days of justice will come, the days when God will triumph over human iniquity, the infernal iniquity of human beings.

Mary, the symbol of a people who suffer

Thus my sisters and brothers, we come to the third reading where the prophet tells Mary: *You will be the victim of injustice. You will suffer greatly but this child will bring about the salvation of the world.* My sisters and brothers here is the secret: pain is useless when it is endured without Christ. But when human suffering continues the suffering of Christ then it is a suffering that continues to save the world. It is a suffering like that of Mary: calm and full of hope. When all were discouraged at the hour of Christ's death on the cross, Mary was calm, waiting for the hour of the resurrection. My sisters and brothers, Mary is the symbol of people who suffer oppression and injustice because hers is the calm suffering that waits for the hour of the resurrection; it is Christian suffering, the suffering of the Church that is not in agreement with the actual injustices; it is a suffering without resentment because we wait for the hour when the Risen One will return to give us the redemption that we await.

My sisters and brothers, the Church is not deceived for she awaits with surety for the hour of redemption. Those who have disappeared will reappear and the suffering of these mothers will be changed into the joy of Easter. The anguish of this people who do not know where they are going and who live in the midst of much anxiety, will become the Easter of the Resurrection if they unite themselves to Christ and hope in him. Men and women cannot bring about the liberation of our land. The people of El Salvador are incapable, with their own human effort, of saving our nation. But if we wait for this liberation from Christ, the Redeemer, then yes, our nation can be saved --- and this is the hope of the Church. My sisters and brothers, it is for this reason that I proclaim that we must have great faith in Jesus Christ, great faith in Christ who died to pay for all our injustices and rose to bury in the tomb all evil. This gives redemption to all those who suffer and becomes hope and eternal life for all women and men.

Blessed be this hour in which the Church, together with those afflicted mothers, wishes to plant in the heart of all her children hope, tranquility and serenity. My sisters and brothers, this is the voice of the Church. I am not pessimistic and I exhort all the children of the Church to put aside their pessimism and become optimists. But place this optimism in Christ, the only one who can save us. Place this optimism in our Divine Savior and in his Blessed Mother who together with him are the agents of the world's redemption. Then, without a doubt, there will be redemption and joy will return to the afflicted homes and hearts.

We are going to celebrate this Mass with this tone of optimism, serenity and faith. Let us put aside all resentment and anger. Let us love God with our whole heart, even when we are experiencing the worst situation in our history --- because *we know that all things work for good for those who love God.* Christ, who is love, becomes the victim on the altar and this morning gives us once again the gift of himself in this Mass of Divine Providence that is offered for the holy intentions of these kind mothers who weep for their children who have disappeared, for the intentions of those homes that have been orphaned, and for the intention of so many victims of the actual injustice. We pray together with these holy victims because suffering sanctifies. Even though one is a criminal, this does not give one a right to torture another person. Sanctify the suffering and draw all people to God. My sisters and brothers,

though we may experience ourselves as most sinful, let us draw near to the divine victim of Calvary who becomes present on our altar. Let us ask to him to pour forth his blood like a rain of blessing and consolation on the many needs of our country.

Now let us stand and offer the following prayers for the intentions of this moment. One of the mothers is going to offer this prayer.

¹ The greeting was not completely recorded of the tape of the homily.

Margin References (a) 2M 7,1-39: (b) Rm 8,28: (c) Lk 2,34-35: (d) Rm 8,28: (e) Lk 23,34.