

CONFIRMATION

Citalá

December 5, 1977

Isaiah 35, 1-10

Luke 5, 17-26

My dear faithful in Citalá,

to come to you as Pastor is a very great honor and therefore I want to thank once again the Oblate Sisters of Divine Love who truly honor here the name of God for they have offered their lives to the Lord in service of their people. I also want to thank those who have collaborated in organizing this celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation because this is the principal reason for my coming here. As a successor of the Apostles, the bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation, that is, the bishop has the obligation of administering this sacrament that is called Confirmation. I want to express my thanks to those who have prepared these children and I call upon all the families of this diocese to second the will of Church by having your children confirmed. The Sacrament of Confirmation, however, should not be administered to small children who are not aware of what is happening but rather should be received when they are young adults for it is at that time that they need the power of Confirmation that consists of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The new born child should be baptized as soon as possible so that this child of the flesh becomes a child of God. This is the meaning of Baptism. Jesus said to Nicodemus: *What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit* (a). Thus this is what Baptism is all about. The child who is born in the flesh is nothing more than flesh, a natural child, stained with original sin that we all bear. The child is cleansed of this sin and Christ applies his redemption to this child through Baptism thus making the infant a child of God. Thus it is urgent to give this sacrament to a new-born. Hopefully families are not careless with regard to baptizing their children as soon as possible. There are some very Christian families who baptize their children on the same day that the child is born. I am not going to ask you to do this but please do not allow months and years to pass by without baptizing your child. Baptize them as soon as possible.

Thus we come to confirmation and this means exactly what the word says: *to confirm one in the faith that was received in Baptism*. This should be done when the child is aware of what is happening. Confirmation means to reclaim, that is, to ratify the new birth in Baptism through means of this new sacrament which is properly a sacrament of maturing. It is not enough to be borne by one's mother. As soon as a child is born the child is nourished and begins to grow and mothers are proud when they see their child grow --- the child that came forth from their womb --- and become a young person who faces life and thinks about his/her duties as a man or woman. Confirmation corresponds to this young period of a person's life, to this time of their growth. For this reason I am pleased to be here in this city among the people of Citalá where these young men and women are going to be confirmed. They are aware of the fact that they are going to receive a sacrament that is distinct from Baptism, a sacrament that is going to prepare them to enter their youth with a new power of God.

The sacraments, God's life in the desert of human beings

The readings of this Advent Season that we have just heard are most opportune. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah (b) compares the coming of the Lord into the world to a small stream that springs forth in the desert so that the water begins to make all the arid land of the desert fertile. In the desert there is no vegetation. The desert is the image of death. The desert is arid and there is no life in the desert. But when a stream of water flows in the midst of the desert, this stream begins to make the land fertile and changes the desert into a garden. Flowers and fruits are produced and there is shade and life. My sisters and brothers, this is the beautiful image that is presented to us by the sacraments. Baptism and Confirmation and Reconciliation and Communion are signs that God has come to the world and men and women who by nature are a desert are able to produce fruits of eternity. The sacraments produce vegetation, fertility and fullness of life. Before we quoted the Word of God and said: *what is born of the flesh is flesh* (c). In view of an eternal life of happiness with God there is no value in being born or having many abilities or as a woman being beautiful or as a man being strong or as a professional being intelligent. Yes these things have a value but in light of eternity and the life of God these things have no value for all of these things remain behind us on earth when we die. No matter what qualities we might produce as human beings, we are still nothing more than a desert. If God wants to gather up from our lives works that are valuable for eternal life then it is necessary that God must inject us with his life. Only when children of the flesh become children of God do they begin to produce works that enable them to obtain eternal life. It was for this reason that Christ instituted the sacraments.

Baptism makes new-born children, children of God and if this child dies he/she will rejoice in the very happiness of God. Confirmation bestows upon those who have been baptized the gifts of the Holy Spirit and strengthens them with the power of God so that they produce fruits for eternal life. Confirmation is the sacrament of martyrs. If it were not for the power of the Holy Spirit that the first Christians received in the sacrament of Confirmation from their bishops and from the Pope, those first Christians would not have endured the trials of persecution --- they would not have died for Christ.

My sisters and brothers, now the Church needs this power of the Holy Spirit and it is for this reason that we want young people and children to be aware of what they are receiving in this sacrament. What value is there in receiving the sacrament, as was our custom, at a young age, if one is not aware of what is happening? If we have not had parents and godparents who have taught us about this, then why have we been confirmed? I believe that many times neither the parents nor the godparents at Confirmation had understood the meaning of the sacrament that was to be conferred upon the child they carried in their arms. And if they, as adults, did not understand this, how are they going to teach their children when they become young men and women that the sacrament of Confirmation that they received as children is now so necessary for them as young men and women? If we had parents and godparents who by their word and example taught these young people about the meaning of Confirmation then there would be no problem in confirming small children. But it is better instead of waiting and seeing if perhaps their parents will teach them this --- it is better that they themselves understand the commitment that they are going to acquire as a result of this sacrament.

My sisters and brothers, I repeat that to be Christian is very difficult and that fact is being demonstrated by people in our country. How few Christians will remain when being Christian means that one is persecuted! When people gather together to listen to the Word of God and reflect on this Word, they know that they are being watched because others believe that we come together for political reasons and that we are communists. They are mistaken. We come together to become aware of the serious responsibility that is placed upon us as Christians. We gather together to be Christians so that tomorrow we do not become traitors of our religion.

At the present time there are many cowards and many people who prefer to be well off on this earth. They give no importance to the judgment of God, that time when God will ask them to give an accounting of their lives. To be Christian means to be courageous and to have the courage to obey God rather than those who persecute the Church. It does not matter if people persecute or torture or defame us. You know, my sisters and brothers, how they are slandering your bishop. They call me the number one subversive and say that I preach subversion.

I am grateful to the good Christians for the words that Father Vito has just spoken. In La Palma your parish is praying in solidarity with the Church. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I want to tell you that I want you to be courageous in preaching the true doctrine of the Church and do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to preach those difficult realities that will cause problems. Indeed, at this time, to be Christian means that one has the courage that the Holy Spirit has given us at the time of our Confirmation so that we might be courageous soldiers of Christ the King, so that we might make his doctrine reign and touch the hearts of people. To be Christians is to proclaim the courage that one should have in defending the law of God.

My sisters and brothers, all of this is the meaning of Confirmation. This is what the prophet Isaiah wants to tell us when he says that when the life of God is lacking in a person then this person is nothing more than a desert. There are no flowers, no fruit, no shade. How arid are men and women when the Spirit of God is not in them! How cruel people become when they are not animated by the Spirit of God, by the Spirit that exhorts them to live good lives!

My heart is pained by the knowledge of the ways in which our people are tortured and how the rights of those created in the image of God are trampled upon! This should not be. The person without God is a beast and a desert. The hearts of those people have no flowers of love and their hearts have become perverse persecutors of their sisters and brothers. This explains why there are hearts that are able to betray their sisters and brothers and to point them out to the authorities. It does not matter to them that these sisters and brothers are led away and tortured and murdered. How cruel is the heart that is not animated by the love of God and the love of one's sisters and brothers! These persons have lost the sense of their Baptism and Confirmation and have become deserts, dry tree trunks and steppes.

The sacraments call for conversion

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ tells us the same thing. Today's gospel is most beautiful for we see Jesus before a sinner and he proclaims: *your sins are forgiven* (d). The unbelievers considered these words blasphemous because they were not courageous nor did they have faith in Jesus. If Jesus had been the Archbishop of San Salvador they would rain

down upon him more insults and slanders than are made against me... When Jesus, the Redeemer of humanity, says: *your sins are forgiven*, these people did not believe in Christ's power to forgive and so they said: *who is this that speaks blasphemies? Who but God alone can forgive sins?* (e). Through a miracle Jesus proves to them that he is able to forgive sins and that for God to restore health to a sick person is the same as returning a sinful person to grace. Therefore, he says to the paralytic: *Rise!* (f). They saw that he was able to cure the sick man and thus should have seen that he was also God. Thus he asks them: *Why do you say that I blaspheme?*. God is also able to say to those who are sinners: even though you cannot see it, your sins are forgiven as long as you are repentant.

My sisters and brothers, the forgiveness of sins is a beautiful thing. This allows us to change the desert into a garden. The fierce soul becomes gentle as a lamb. The one who preferred sin and vice and disorder has repented and asked God for forgiveness.

My sisters and brothers, when I preach against abuses, against those who flatter and commit injustices, against those who denounce their own sisters and brothers --- when I preach against all these injustices committed by one person against another person, I do not do this with hatred or resentment. I do this with the love of Christ who told sinners (and Sunday we heard these words proclaimed by John the Baptist): *You brood of vipers! Repent and be converted! Do not be hypocrites for if you do not convert you will be lost* (g). *Even now the ax lies at the root of the tree* and God begins to strike down the tree of life and cursed is that tree that falls on the side of hell because it did not repent on time. Yesterday Saint John the Baptist said: *he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn* (h). Just like our harvest of coffee when the coffee and the chaff are mixed together. But the wind comes and through the process of aeration the chaff is separated from the coffee. John the Baptist says that Jesus is aerating his wheat and so the chaff and the wheat become separated. This is what will occur at the final judgment, like a great wind or tempest those who have converted will remain like the wheat. Because of their good works they become God's harvest.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, when today the Church preaches against injustice and the abuse of power and every other form of abuse she is saying: *Be converted! Do penance before it is too late! Become the wheat that God is waiting for! Build communities of love and communities of the Church!* The Church is not communist or subversive. The Church is the Kingdom of God that reflects on the Word of God in order to make this Word a part of our lives --- this Word that brings divine life and grace and the sacraments, this grace that allows us to experience the beauty of being gardens instead of deserts.

Need for catechesis to prepare the sacraments

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, on this occasion of the Confirmation of these children I also want to speak to you, the adults: Let us live our Baptism! Let us become aware of our Confirmation! I said this to the Sisters when they told me that they were preparing a group of children for Confirmation. When I administer the Sacrament of Confirmation to those who are prepared for this sacrament I also want to tell those who have been confirmed, beginning with myself as Bishop and then those who are priests or religious or catechists or parents --- all those who are now adults and have received the sacrament many years ago but perhaps are not aware of the fact that they have been confirmed --- I want to tell all of you that the Holy Spirit that is given in the Sacrament of Confirmation by the imposition of the hands of the Bishop, the successor of the Apostles --- this Holy Spirit is often hidden in our lives and at times dead in our lives. Perhaps the fruits of the Spirit of God have not been produced in us

because we have allowed ourselves to become people of the flesh and therefore Baptism and Confirmation and Reconciliation and the Eucharist, sacraments that we have all received, have not produced fruit in us.

This is the great deficiency of the Christian people but thanks to God since Vatican II the Church is correcting this deficiency. We have administered many sacraments to the people and baptized many children, confirmed all those who presented themselves for this sacrament and done so perhaps without even asking people to repent. We gave Communion to all who drew near. We sacramentalized people but did little evangelization.

Now thanks to God we do not reject sacramentalization because the sacraments are necessary and the channels through which God shares with us his divine life. But now with the administration of the sacraments we provide a catechesis and a more profound reflection on the Bible and people now confess their sins with a greater awareness.

Before baptizing children we demand that parents and godparents be instructed in the meaning of this sacrament that they are asking to be conferred upon their children. Baptism is not simply a social event that provides our children with godparents and gifts but rather provides the parents with godparents who will share with them the responsibility of bringing up their child in the Christian faith. Above all Baptism means that one is aware of the fact that this child of the flesh has become a child of God and parents and godparents become co-responsible for educating the child on the meaning of the sacrament that has just been received.

With regards to Confirmation the bishop no longer wants to administer this sacrament to a multitude of children who are brought to him. People would say: *Confirmation is coming! Confirmation is coming!* as if the only thing that the bishop comes to do is confirm children who have no idea what is happening, the children are crying and then they leave the church with no awareness of the great sacrament of the Holy Spirit that they have just received. These children are us because we received Confirmation and many times had no idea about what was happening. We were not aware of the greatness of that moment.

Therefore, my sisters and, brothers, now that we live in this time of the Church's renewal, I urge you to see this renewal as something positive. When the priest or the sisters demand that you participate in a catechetical program before the reception of baptism and First Communion, do not view this in a negative way. This is being done so that people are aware of what they are doing and conscious of the celebration that is taking place. In fact the priest or sister who does not demand this form of preparation is not fulfilling their obligation.

Thus, this morning this is a great joy for me, for I tell you again, I am going to administer the sacrament of Confirmation after the Sisters and catechists have prepared these children not only for Confirmation but because now these young women and men know that this church in Citalá has been changed into the Cenacle. They know that they are going to receive the Holy Spirit in the same way that the tongues of fire rained down on the Apostles on that first Pentecost (i) and then, filled with the Holy Spirit, they were able to leave the upper room and courageously proclaim Christ. They no longer feared the authorities who wanted them to be quiet. (j) The same people who before were cowards and afraid, now with the power of the Holy Spirit said: *If you do not want us to speak of Christ, then you must forgive us for we cannot obey you. We have to obey God who commanded us to preach about those things that*

we have seen --- the salvation of Christ. No one can detain this Word because this is the power of the Holy Spirit.

We, who have already been confirmed, are now going to renew our grace of Confirmation. My dear sisters and brothers and parents, may the celebration this morning be for us, especially for me, a time of renewal in the Holy Spirit and in the values that we should have as Christians. If it is necessary, may this sacrament become for us a sacrament of martyrdom so that we are willing to give our lives for Christ and will not betray him with the cowardice of today's inauthentic Christians.

Therefore, we are going to proceed with the administration of this sacrament of life in which Christ the Redeemer tells us: *I am the Life! I am the fountain, the living water that changes the desert into a garden,*(k) the One who gives to the lives of men and women the life of God. The Holy Spirit invites us to allow our hearts to be animated and also wants to gift us with his grace and power.

At this time let us be renewed so that we become what we must be: men and women who have received the power of the Most High to give courageous witness to the fact that God exists, that Christ is a reality and that his Church on earth is doing good and not evil. Let us have the courage to spread and defend the Church in the same way that we defend that which is good.

Margin References (a) Jn 3,6: (b) Is 35,1: (c) Jn 3,6: (d) Lk 5,20: (e) Lk 5,21: (f) Lk 5,24: (g) Mt 3,7-10: (h) Mt 3,12: (i) Ac 2,1-4: (j) Ac 5,29: (k) Jn 4,10.