

THE WORD, FORGIVENESS, THE EUCHARIST

Priestly ordination
December 10, 1977

Dear Monseñor Luis Chávez y González who honours us with your presence in this cathedral; dear Jorge and Héctor who this morning will be raised from the people of God to become their priestly servants; dear brother priests, we who have already received this gift which unites the people today in thanking Christ the priest for the gift of priesthood with which he has honoured us; dear seminarians, courageous young people and hope of the Church; dear sisters; dear brothers and sisters who fill the cathedral:

. What a great comfort! It could be said that this morning the cathedral is a figure of the Archdiocese for as she cleanses herself with the tears shed because of the assassination of two priests, she experiences that her womb is always fertile and this morning she produces two substitutes, two new priests who become part of the presbyterate: Jorge Benavides and Héctor Figueroa.

Let us allow the Word of God to illuminate us so that we might understand the sublime moment that we are living. Today we find ourselves on one of those high mountains where God dialogues with humanity. After the dialogue, like that which took place on Mount Sinai, Moses, now anointed by God, descends the mountain to lead the people. Each time that a man is ordained as a priest, the people, together with the bishop and the presbyterate participating in this event --- indeed, all those who are present are engaged in a fertile dialogue in which men speak like the prophet Jeremiah: *Before you formed me in my mother's womb you knew me; you called me for this service; you gave me priestly qualities and now that I have lived the years of my childhood and my youth in innocence and with the desire to arrive at this height, now Lord I am afraid* (a). Like the prophet, almost all new priests say: *How difficult is the mission that I desire! I am too young!* (b). God continues the dialogue: *Say not, "I am too young." I will anoint you and make you a participant in my wisdom, my revelation, and my power. Do not say, "I cannot do this." I will be with you.* Then the bishop, who represents God's power, imposes his hands on these men and gives them a tremendous responsibility, a responsibility that at the same time is also a great honor.

Christ, the one and eternal priest

My sisters and brothers, it is a great honor. Here the primary person in this ceremony is not those who are about to be ordained, nor the bishop, nor the priests. The central figure is Christ, the eternal and only priest. There is only one priest who has reconciled heaven and earth, one priest who died on the cross, rose and lives eternally, singing glory to God and now, through his Church that has been established in the world, saves all of humanity.

God sent his Son who became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin. God anointed him at the first moment of his existence. Thus, Mary is the only person who has given birth to a son-priest. Our mothers gave birth to us as children of the flesh. Then comes the priestly anointing that makes these sons of the flesh ministers of God. Mary, however, had the honor of seeing Jesus, her son, consecrated from the first moment of his life within her womb.

When this woman, the only woman who can say that she is the mother of a priest --- when she gave birth to him, cared for him, nursed him, watched him and stood beneath his cross at the time of his death --- in all of this she saw him celebrate his Mass. The Mass of Calvary is the only Mass for there Jesus was hung on the cross, in pain crucified and died so that women and men who had lost their way might be redeemed by this act of profound submission to the Eternal Father. This is the only eternal priest, but this eternal priest wanted to make those who were redeemed a priestly people.

My sisters and brothers, this morning, after the central figure of Christ, the only priest, the next in importance is not our brothers who are going to be ordained nor we who preside at this ceremony, rather it is you, the priestly people or perhaps I should say it is us, because I and all the priests have been baptized. The greatest moment of our life occurs at the time when, as children of the flesh, we are raised up to become members of this priestly people. All those who are baptized, all those who are part of this Church, all of you --- religious and laity --- we are all a priestly people. The Eternal Priest has desired to make us participants in this dignity and therefore the Church lives in the world with a priestly history and priestly action. As Saint Paul has just told us (c), each person is called to live out a different vocation (religious life, marriage, professional, rich, poor, etc.). Yet with diverse callings and charisms we form one people and are called to integrate this priestly mission of Christ into history.

Only in third place, after Christ, the eternal priest, after the priestly people anointed by Christ in baptism, only then can we consider ourselves, the priest-ministers, chosen from among the people, called from our families, bearing a surname, rooted in a people --- be it the people of El Salvador or a people from any other part of the world. We fulfill the biblical requisite: *the priest is a man chosen from among other men* (d). Priests are chosen from among other men precisely to serve people. When we speak about ministry we speak about serving the priestly people. My dear Héctor and Jorge, this is our mission. Now with the surname of your family, chosen from among others, you are called to represent this priestly people. Christ has chosen you and me and my brother priests and the seminarians who desire to serve in this way --- we have been called to the service of the Word, to the service of forgiveness and, above all, to the service of the Eucharist.

Ministers of the Word

We have a message to communicate to the world and we are responsible for communicating this message. When Jesus chose twelve men to communicate his divine wisdom, he concluded by telling them: *I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now* (e). *So great is the deposit of divine revelation that I can only offer you my divine Spirit who will be with you in every moment throughout history when you preach my word according to the needs of the era, when you incarnate my word in the needs and sins and virtues of the people that you must minister to.* This is the great ministry of the word --- a very difficult and incomprehensible ministry. Many times the dialogue that the Church wishes to establish with the world, to illuminate the world through the Word of God, the world answers with persecution and offenses such as that which the ministry of the Word is enduring at the present time. We can say: *He came to his own and he came to testify to the light but the darkness did not want to receive him* (f). Through the ministry of the Word, the Church attempts to root out from the world and history the ministry of iniquity and sin, but the world attempts to suffocate the Word of God.

Therefore my brother priests, you who have arrived at the height of priestly ordination to proclaim the Word that, like the prophets said, is a fire burning inside your hearts --- you will want to flee from this devouring flame. I do not speak of this ministry as an honor but rather it is a prophetic responsibility to proclaim the authentic revelation to the people.

Do not be inauthentic in your service to this ministry. It is easy to be servants of the word and not disturb the world, easy to proclaim very spiritual words, easy to speak words that commit no one to the present historical situation, easy to speak words that could be spoken in any part of the world --- but this is not any part of the world. The proclamation of the Word in this way creates no problems or conflicts. What causes conflicts and persecutions, what characterizes the authentic Church is the fact that the burning Word of God announces and denounces: announces the marvelous works of God to those who believe and worship God and denounces the sins of people who are opposed to the kingdom of God --- denounces these sins so that they might be uprooted from the hearts of people, from society, from the laws and organizations that oppress and imprison and trample upon the rights of God and humanity.

This is the difficult service of the Word of God, but the Spirit of God is with the prophet and the preacher because Christ is prolonged when his kingdom is proclaimed to men and women of every era.

The Ministry of forgiveness

I also tell you, my brothers, that like myself and my beloved brother priests, you are going to be servants of this people in order to forgive their sins. No one else has the faculty that you are going to receive, the same faculty that Jesus gave to his disciples after the resurrection: *Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain, they are retained* (h). What more solemn time than that moment of silence in the confessional, when one is weighed down by sins that one can no longer bear and hears the anointed priest proclaim the same words that were spoken to Mary Magdalen: *rise up! You are forgiven! I forgive you* (i). The priest himself needs the consolation of confession. We also must confess our sins and so we need another priest to exercise this ministry of forgiveness for us. The Pope confesses and so does the bishop. We confess because we need this service of consolation that not even the wisest person on earth can give. Indeed, there are no more comforting and healing words than those pronounced by the priest: *I forgive you in the name of Jesus Christ*.

The Eucharistic Ministry

Above all else, my brothers, is the ministry of the Eucharist. We as priests call the people to celebrate the Word, we purify them by denouncing their defects, we forgive them and lead them to penance. We ourselves are part of this sinful people in need of penance. We know that the Church is holy because she is the spouse of Christ, but she is also sinful because she is composed of women and men. We ourselves, as ministers in the Church, need to make every effort to overcome our weaknesses so that day by day we become better and one day are able to arrive at the altar to offer to God the Father the bread and wine as the immaculate host. This solemn gesture of the priest occurs when the priest receives the hosts and the chalice from the people and says to the Father: *This is the fruit of the work of my brothers, fruit of the work of professionals working in the world, fruit of the work of those who live on the highways and byways of life, the fruit of the work of married people, the fruit of the work of my own home, my brothers and sisters, my companions at work before I entered the*

priesthood --- Lord, this is the fruit of the work of all people whom I must sanctify with my example and my word. Now I offer all of this on the Eucharistic altar. It is at that moment, my brothers, when the whole community that believes in Christ, the whole priestly community, finds their priestly expression. It is for this reason that the Church obliges us come to Mass at least on Sundays so that we might experience ourselves as one priestly people. Then, through the ministry of the priest, the host and wine that is elevated becomes the body and blood of the Lord. The body of Christ is then distributed as food for eternal life. And the people say: *Amen.*

See how the priesthood is a continual dialogue between the infinite mercy of God and the infinite misery of humanity. What a great position for the priest who is between two great abysses. On the one hand is the infinite mercy of God who desires to forgive all people who repent of their misery and on the other hand is human misery, the shadows that are a disgrace to society and that must be proclaimed as they are so that people will repent and be converted and receive God's forgiveness.

Today, the second reading of Sacred Scripture told us that all the people who have been formed through the ministry of the priests will achieve their fulfillment. One day there will no longer be any Masses; there will be no need for the priests of this earth. Through the ministry of the priests, bishops, catechists, those who celebrate the Word of God, all members of this priestly people will be incorporated into Christ and Christ will be the only priest formed in the fullness of time and eternity for all those who were born in history. There will be one priesthood, one offertory, one Mass that will continue eternally to sing the glory of God. This is the destiny and the objective of priestly ministry in the world. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, the priests together with all those who have been glorified will have the great satisfaction of having collaborated with Christ in making humanity the living temple of God and the living image of the Spirit of God in eternity.

Let us allow ourselves to be led by the priest. Each day let us become more closely united as a priestly people. Each day let us become more holy and through our example, encouragement and demands, let us sanctify these priests so that they might be holy in the way that the people need them to be holy and in the way that God wants them to be holy. My sisters and brothers, this is the objective toward which these two young men have been called. Thus, with my beloved predecessor Bishop Chávez y González and with my beloved brother priests we give thanks to God for the gift of our vocation and our priestly mission. We feel that as our hands are imposed on these two new heirs and as we share with them this heavy inheritance --- we feel that with this priestly spirit and character that anoints them as priests forever we are going to share our joy, confidence and gratitude as we incorporate these two new priests into the presbyterate of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

Here as pastor of all the priests, it is appropriate to extend a loving call to all those who form the presbyterate of this Diocese and who are unable to be here physically --- priests who are in so many different parts of the diocese, following the same vocation, ministering. I thank you for your sense of solidarity and ministry and may we continue to minister together for the glory of God and Christ. To those priests who have unfortunately separated themselves from this priestly communion because they have discovered that their vocation was not one of priestly ministry but something different and now they have found happiness in their new destiny --- may you be happy in this new life but do not forget that you are marked forever and therefore even when you are married and living as laymen, you carry the mark of your priesthood forever. To those priests who have separated themselves from their

priestly ministry not only because they feel the call to holiness is found in another vocation but also have separated themselves from priestly ministry because of rebellion and because they are not in agreement with certain aspects of our ministry --- the Church continues to love you; you are her priests and she continues to hope that with the eternal priesthood of Christ and with the priestly people you will become part of this great family of God that walks toward the glorification of the Eternal Priest, Christ. Do not be like those who have broken away from this unity and do not give that sad testimony of Judas who betrayed the communion of the apostles. May we call one another brother and may the Lord, as he receives this prayer of the people and these new priests, have mercy on our ecclesial unity and may all of us grow in our vocation and be faithful followers of Christ, the Eternal Priest. So be it.

Margin References (a) Jr 1,5: (b) Jr 1,6-8: (c) Rm 12,4-5: (d) Heb 5,1: (e) Jn 16,12-13: (f) Jn 1,5-11: (g) Jr 20,9: (h) Jr 20,22-23: (i) Lk 7,47.