

## SAYING THANKYOU AND SORRY

December 31, 1977

Numbers 6, 22-27

Galatians 4, 4-7

Luke 2, 16-21

My dear sisters and brothers and radio audience.

Let this community that gathers around the Cathedral altar and all those people who with a Christian understanding join in this reflection through the use of radio --- let everyone experience themselves as heirs of that People of God, Israel, the people on whom God had chosen to bestow his blessings and promises when the Promised One arrived. When these promises were fulfilled as Jesus came into the world, the new Israel, the Christian people, were born. We are that new Israel; we are that Christian people. What we have heard in the first reading refers not only to the relationship between Israel of the Old Testament and God but also refers to the relationship between God and this people, this modern Israel, this Christian community of 1977 that is going to become the People of God of 1978.

The relationship with the same God of Israel gives us reason to feel great pride and profound satisfaction and also gives us reason for our hearts to be filled with hope and joy. In this way we can understand the grandeur of this night when many people forget about their relationship with the Creator, the Lord of time and eternity and hand themselves over to the pleasures of the world. This is almost ironic for at a time when we are mindful of the passing of time, others attempt to cling to and bind themselves to this world. Our Christian reflection this evening revolves around the Eternal One --- for only God will not pass away. Time passes for all creation just like a river that continually carries the sand to other shores.

This year is coming to a conclusion and as time passes we turn toward the God who blessed the people who believed in him: *May the Lord bless you and keep you! May the Lord let his face shine upon you! May the Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!* (a). What a beautiful promise to hear at the conclusion of the year! To invoke the name of God is a classical Biblical expression. This phrase means that we not only call upon God with our lips but that we are profoundly aware of the fact that we are the People of God. In this way the Church of God becomes committed to the history of humanity. Therefore, for people to invoke the name of God means that people have a commitment to God and as a consequence as people journey through history, they must give glory to God --- not only by expressing this glory with good feelings but by making real in their midst a society where the children of God can live with dignity. They must create a society of peace that not only provides a counterbalance to fear, a peace that is not simply the peace that we find in our cemeteries, but a peace that reveals the joyful dynamic of a God of peace. Indeed, our God is a God of peace who builds --- and we might even say --- a God who scatters about his goodness and makes real the multiple marvels of creation. God's children must do the same: they must create a peace that is founded on justice, love and goodness.

My sisters and brothers, from this perspective let us look at the year that is about to come to an end. Then let us look at the year that will begin in a few more hours. If we look at this

present year from the perspective of the hearts of this People of God that is at the same time the Church established by Christ, the heirs of the promises of the Old Testament that has been communicated to this Christian people, we see that this year invites us to a profound act of thanksgiving and also invites us to offer a prayer for forgiveness.

### **An act of thanksgiving**

The Church, the People of God in this community of the Archdiocese of 1977 is passing through a time of the cross and a time of Easter. The cross is experienced in the pain of the persecution and the assassination of priests who died this year. They should not have died and they should still be ministering among us, but now we number them among the deceased --- this is not the will of God but the result of criminal actions of human people. We also experience the cross of persecution in the many communities that no longer have a priest ministering there. We experience the cross in the fear that exists in those communities that reflect on the Word of God. Finally we experience the cross in those places where Christianity is seen as suspect and threatening to the established peace --- the same that occurred in the primitive Church. Jesus says: *the days will come* (b), yet at the same time that Jesus spoke these words he was saddened by the fact that people believed they were serving God as they killed Christians.

This is a time of the cross because for the Church the many abuses of human life, liberty and dignity are heartfelt sufferings. The Church, entrusted with the earth's glory, believes that in each person is the Creator's image and therefore anyone who tramples that image offends God. As a holy defender of God's rights and of his images, the Church must cry out. The Church takes as spittle in her face, as lashes on her back, as the cross in her passion all that human beings suffer, even though they be unbelievers. They suffer as God's images. There is no dichotomy between men and women and God's image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being, abuses God's image and the Church takes as her own that cross, that martyrdom.

My sisters and brothers, at the same time this hour of the Church's cross has been like the cross of Calvary --- painful for our mother Mary and the God-man who was anguished, but this cross is like the seed that must die in order to provide a fruitful harvest. (c) Let us give thanks to God for beneath the cross of 1977 we have seen the flourishing of seeds of hope and renewal and conversion and new vocations and faith. How many people have come to the Church and said that they had lost their faith, but thanks to the cross of 1977 they have recovered their faith! Yes it is also true that many people have distanced themselves from the Church. Those people separated themselves from the Church who had to be separated --- like leaves of the tree that have changed color and are no longer able to withstand the strong winds. They had to be uprooted --- perhaps waiting for better times to return and become what we earnestly desire, people who repent of their cowardice and weaknesses and betrayals.

### **A prayer of forgiveness**

My sisters and brothers, while we have been saddened and cried out against the persecution, while we have rejected and repudiated the violence that has caused so much bloodshed in 1977, our cry has never been a cry for vengeance. The slander that has been made against us is revealed as lies. As Jesus was able to say: *I have spoken openly and people have heard my message on radio. The Church has rejected all the abuses that have*

*been committed against her and against the dignity of human beings but never have we called people to act with the violence of revenge against anyone* (d). I challenge all of those who have listened to me to convince me that the Church has sown disorder and violence. I have the clear conscience of a Church that has not only rejected violence but that has at the same time called sinners to repentance and forgiveness and penance. The Church does not hate. The voice of the Church cries out like Stephen the martyr (whose feast we recently celebrated) who as he was being stoned to death said: *Lord, do not hold this sin against them.* (e) *Forgive them Lord, they know not what they are doing* (f).

This is the act of thanksgiving that we offer on this night as we conclude this year: we gather together and offer all the pain and suffering and injustice and abuse. As was said in our newspaper *Orientación*, ... *we have perhaps lived the most tragic year in our history, yet for the Church this has been the most fertile and productive year in our ecclesiastical history.*

Let us give thanks to God, yes let us give thanks even for those offenses and insults, for just as the bloodied and beaten Jesus turned toward his Father and said: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do* (g), so too this voice of Jesus during his passion has become the voice of the Church --- the voice that asks for mercy for those who have offended her. My sisters and brothers, the Church turns toward God and says: *Father, forgive us also, for as human beings who are part of this Church, we too have committed our own faults.* Why should we not also recognize this fact? When we admit our faults we give honor to ourselves because even though we are fragile and weak, yet if we are humble in all of this we are able to receive forgiveness.

As we look toward 1978 I want to call upon all the living forces of our Church: priests, men and women religious, laity, communities of every type, Christian families, those who have no faith in our Church, our Protestant sisters and brothers, those who have no faith in Christ but love peace and desire that which is good --- I call out in the same way that I did during the funeral services of one of our priests who was assassinated earlier this year.<sup>1</sup> I renew this call at the conclusion of this year and at the beginning of a new year: I call upon everyone to make every effort to establish peace. Let us build that dynamic peace that is rooted in a Church that attempts to be authentic and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is another reason to give thanks to God: the way in which we have tried to be faithful to the gospel and to the holy spouse of the Church, Jesus Christ. The Church has been very clear about her program: to be faithful to the gospel and in light of the gospel to analyze her life, her social relationships and her place in the world. Those things that can withstand the light of the gospel are authentic. The happiness of the children of the Church is true happiness when it is rooted in the gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ who said: *Blessed are those whose hearts are freed from the prisons of wealth, of selfishness, of hatred, and of rancor* (an adaptation of Matthew 5:3). At the beginning of this New Year I ask all my beloved Catholic sisters and brothers to adopt this attitude of Jesus

For all those who glory in the fact of being children of the Catholic Church, may this new year of 1978 be a year of conversion. We, all of us, I your bishop first of all, then my beloved priests and women and men religious and laity --- we all need to be converted. We need to be converted to our baptismal promises when we renounced all forms of evil and turned our hearts to following the gospel. For those persons who do not want to live this profound meaning of Church, it would be more honorable if they would say: *I do not believe in the Church, therefore do not consider me as one of those who have been baptized.*

Many people outside the Catholic Church --- Protestant Christians --- believe in Christ and view Christ not from the perspective of the Church but from the perspective of their own conscience and from the perspective of their own following of Christ. I am glad that a serious examination of living the gospel is being made among Protestants. There is conflict --- God be blessed --- for when a sore spot is touched, there is conflict and pain. Protestantism is putting its hand on the sore spot. It is saying that one cannot be a true Protestant, a true follower of the gospel, if one does not draw from the gospel all the conclusions that it contains for this earth; that one cannot live a gospel that is too spiritual, a gospel of compliance, a gospel that is not dynamic peace, a gospel that does not also make demands with regard to temporal matters.

Moving beyond the gospel and Christianity we also ask that during this year of 1978 all people of good will --- from simple human sentiments and because they are men and women --- will know how to give our country a face that is different from that of 1977. May we live a fraternal life that is inspired by a sense of a democratic society --- and we say this in the true meaning of these words. We ask that the legitimate rights, the birth-rights that every person has received at the time of their creation --- we ask that these rights be respected and not abused. All of this, my sisters and brothers, arises from the message that God has commanded us to speak: *Thus shall my name be invoked in a society that values the protection of God.* (h)

My dear sisters and brothers, we are going to celebrate our last Mass in 1977. The Mass is the sacrifice of Christ and we place all our trust in Christ. Lord, we do not trust in our own merits --- our hands are empty and so we trust in the infinite merits of Christ, the Lord of history. As we conclude this year we renew, here on this altar, your sacrifice on the cross --- a sacrifice which you made and which we make for the many ways that we have offended you during this past year. Forgive so much bloodshed. Forgive so much hatred and so many insults and so many slanders. Forgive, Lord, this people so stained, such an ugly face --- yet this people is created in your image, the image of a people who bear your name. Wash them with your blood and purify them.

My sisters and brothers, let us enter 1978 with a profound sense of hope and joy and optimism. Regardless of how sinful a person might be, when that individual hears God's word of forgiveness, that person becomes a new creature.

This is what we ask on this day when on January 1<sup>st</sup> we celebrate the divine maternity of Mary, the Virgin and Mother who gave birth to the man who saved the world. May her name be invoked in our land on this day so that she might also be the author of new light during this coming year. At a time when we have seen so much bloodshed and hatred and evil may we call upon Mary to give us a new year and a new humanity. May the hearts of people be renewed. May the pains of conversion become pains of hope and the pain of the cross become a cross that redeems. May all the pain of 1977 become a redemptive pain --- redeeming even those criminal hands that spilled so much blood and the criminal hands that wrote words of hatred on the pages of our newspapers (for defaming a person is the same as killing a person --- it destroys the good reputation of another). How many persons have had their reputation destroyed! May all these criminal hands that have spilled so much blood be converted! May their pain be converted into repentance and may they become the builders of better world during this coming year of 1978.

We proclaim in song: *I have faith. I have faith that everything will change.* I have faith in Christ the Lord who with people of good will can make a better a year and write a cleaner page in our history. Together with the tears of Christ who suffered on Calvary, we wash with our tears, love, prayers, and conversion all the stains that we leave behind as we conclude this year and open the page on a new year. My sisters and brothers, let us write this new page of history with more love and more fraternity and with greater acts of thanksgiving to the Lord.

The Lord says: *Thus will they call upon my name!* (i) Hopefully Lord, I have been able to interpret what you wanted to say through your intermediary Moses when you commanded him to invoke your name in the midst of people. I have wanted to do nothing else but invoke your name in our midst, in the midst of the people of the Archdiocese --- and I do so in order that your name might be glorified and so that we, as we move through history, might give you glory (the glory that you desired when you created us, for you created us in your image and likeness). My brothers and sisters, let us proclaim our faith in God.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the call in his homily at the funeral of Fr Alfonso Navarrrto Oviedo, 12 May 1977. See Monseñor Oscar A. Romero, *Homilias*, Vol I, San Salvador, 2005, pp. 75-78

*Margin References* (a) Nb 6,24-27: (b) Jn 16,2: (c) Jn 12,24: (d) Jn 18,20: (e) Ac 760: (f) Lk 23,34: (g) Lk 23,34: (h) Nb 6,27: (i) Nb 6,27: (j) Gn 1,26.