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THE VIOLENCE THAT SADDENS THE COUNTRY

Ascension Sunday

22 May 1977

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:17-23

Luke 24:46-53

Message of the Salvadoran Bishops

... for this reason¹ the bishops in their «Message to the people of El Salvador in response to the wave of violence that saddens the country»² begin by giving this testimony of unity and solidarity:

We the bishops of El Salvador are profoundly concerned about the present situation of the country and of the church. We want to make the following declaration to help form the opinion of the Salvadoran people: we are united with the archbishop of San Salvador, and with him we condemn the wave of violence, hatred, slander, and revenge that saddens the country. We share the pain that overwhelms his heart as pastor in the face of the cruel assassination of two of his priests and of the innocent victims who fell with them. We identify with the suffering of the parents, the wife, and the children of Mauricio Borgonovo Pohl; with the suffering of the parents of the young man, Luis Alfredo Torres; with the suffering of those who mourn the cruel death of Roberto Poma³ and the humble employees who shared the same fate; and with the suffering of so many fathers, mothers, spouses, and children who in this hour of horror—one that fills us with shame before the civilized world—mourn helplessly the death and the «disappearance» of their loved ones. Once again we declare that neither violence nor hatred nor slander will ever solve the problems that weigh upon us.

I want to thank publicly my beloved brothers, the bishops of El Salvador, for their solidarity. In the light of the word of God, Saint Paul (Eph 1:22) tells us that Christ ascended into heaven but left his church here on earth, placing responsibility for her on the shoulders of the hierarchy with a message of conversion and forgiveness of sin.

¹ The greeting and initial words are not recorded on the tape of this homily.

² In this homily Archbishop Romero reads and comments on «The Message of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador to the Salvadoran People in Response to the Wave of Violence Covering the Country» in *Orientación* (22 May 1977). The quoted passages in this homily are taken from this message, except where indicated otherwise.

³ Roberto Poma, member of a prominent business family in El Salvador and president of the Salvadoran Institute of Tourism (ISTU), was kidnapped by the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) on 27 January 1977.

Therefore, the church is authorized to denounce sin in order to announce the forgiveness of sin. The episcopal conference is composed of ordinary men, for even though we are part of the church's hierarchy, we are human. We began writing this statement the Friday before last, and as we concluded the work last Tuesday, we immediately carried out an internal examination of ourselves. We too need conversion. Since bishops, the pope, and all Christians experience this tension that Christ left to the world, we need constant conversion. Woe to the pastor who does not live this tension but who accommodates himself to a comfortable life style!

We have to share our own conversion with the people, and even as we cry out against hatred, disunity, slander, and all the demonic forces that divide the world, we have to begin with ourselves. I am happy to tell you, sisters and brothers, that we bishops have reflected on our need for spiritual conversion so that we will avoid the scandal of disunity and live together in harmony. I am pleased that my brother bishops place me alongside all those who suffer, both rich and poor, and that they at the same time express their solidarity with the voice of the archdiocese in their rejection of violence, wherever it comes from.

This week we have denounced the acts of violence in Aguilares. We have also denounced the violence against Father Victor Guevara who was taken to the barracks of the National Guard and treated with contempt. Father Vides, chaplain of the National Guard, was sent by the archbishop to remove the Blessed Sacrament from the church in Aguilares, but he was not allowed to do so. Not even the archbishop was allowed to fulfill this obligation of removing the Blessed Sacrament in order to prevent its profanation. Father Vides was finally permitted to do this, and I hope that last night he came away with the Blessed Sacrament.⁴ Therefore, my sisters and brothers, because so many persons are being tortured and mistreated, the church cannot remain silent, for she is the voice of Christ who in his ascension reveals human dignity in his glorious heaven. Christ tells us how he loves humankind and how he is distressed that there still exist in the world these places where human dignity is trodden underfoot. I was pleased to hear on the Voice of America this morning something about bishops. Many of you probably heard the news that three bishops are going to be honored by the University of Notre Dame in the United States. President Carter will pronounce a discourse in defense of human rights and place medals on the chests of three bishops who have been defenders of these rights of humanity. I am very pleased that our bishops of El Salvador have placed themselves in this same line of thought.

Rejection of communism and capitalism

The message of our Salvadoran bishops goes on to present a doctrinal orientation that I beg you to study, sisters and brothers. If you don't have this issue of *Orientación*, we are going to print more copies in the coming days. I ask Catholic organizations to reproduce this message because here, in the second part, there is a very useful orientation that will help you distinguish between the message of the church and that of communism. And

⁴ On 19 May 1977 members of the Armed Forces and the National Guard carried out a military operation in Aguilares. They repressed the peasant population, causing several deaths; they went to the church, where they captured and expelled from the country the three Jesuit priests responsible for the parish; and they also profaned and destroyed the tabernacle and used the church as a barracks. See «Information Bulletin of the Archdiocese, No. 16», ECA 342-343 (1977) 339-340.

just as the church rejects communism, it also rejects capitalism. Listen to this beautiful doctrinal declaration: «The church believes in God the Creator, in Jesus Christ the Redeemer, and in the Holy Spirit the Sanctifier. The church believes that the world is called to submit itself to Jesus Christ through a gradual establishment of the kingdom of God. She believes in the communion of saints and in the love which unites all human beings. The church believes that the human person is called to be a child of God. She believes in the kingdom of God as a progressive movement from the world of sin to the world of love and justice, a kingdom which begins now in this world and is fully realized in eternity». This is a beautiful profession of faith; let us not forget it. Today, instead of our Creed, we will recite this proclamation of the Salvadoran bishops which expresses the church's faith in God and in eternity.⁵ We judge the realities of earth in light of that faith and from the perspective of Christ who ascended into heaven, who being man is at the same time God, and who is seated at the right hand of God. For this reason, the church can be neither communist nor capitalist, because both are forms of materialism.

Listen to this clarification: first, «the church condemns communist Marxism, because as ideology and revolutionary practice it denies God and denies all spiritual value, which is said to be alienating». Communism does not recognize our coming together to worship as we do in the church; it calls religion alienating, the opium of the people; religion puts people to sleep so that they won't protest. But we will see that this is not true. Because communism bases everything on matter, it is eminently materialist, whereas the church is eminently spiritualist. Communism «exploits the class differences in society in order to provoke struggle and uses people purely as a means to obtain a political power that conforms to its ideology». This is a synthesis of communism.

«But the church also condemns the system of liberal capitalism with the same intensity. Even though this ideology professes a belief in God, in practice it denies God and places its faith in profit as the essential goal of human progress. It views the human person purely as an instrument for increasing wealth while it leaves people in poverty and thus foments class differences in society. It tramples upon human rights, human dignity, and even life itself in order to preserve the political, social, and economic power that some have acquired». Why do capitalists attack the church today? Why do the politically powerful attack the church? Precisely for that reason: because the church cannot go along with the idolatry of money or the idolatry of the state. Today Saint Paul tells us in his letter (Eph 1:20-21): Only Christ is the Lord, and the church's mission is to preach to humankind, especially to those who bow and scrape before the idols of earth, and to tell them that it is not licit to create idols out of the goods of the earth. Only Christ is the Lord. The church tells her faithful: blessed are you Christians poor in spirit, poor in your detachment, poor in your efforts to create a better world, for you follow the true liberator, Christ the Lord, the one who gives human beings their true dignity. Neither communism nor capitalism adores Christ; they adore their idols. The church adores her Christ, and on this day proclaims him to be the goal toward which she directs the ideals of all Christians. Christ ascending into heaven is the ideal of true human development, which culminates in identification with God himself.

⁵ Several days later the Farmers Front of the Eastern Region (FARO) accused Archbishop Romero of having changed the Creed. See «A New Creed?» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (31 May 1977).

The church's contribution to the liberation of the world

The bishops' message then asks: what is the church's contribution to this struggle for liberation in the world? It can be neither communist nor capitalist. The message cites the words of the pope in the consultation he made with the world's bishops in 1974. One year later the pope published the famous exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, where he stated, «We have listened to the voice of our brother bishops» (EN 30), and he mentioned especially what the bishops of the Third World said about malnutrition, illiteracy, and marginalization. The pope said that the church could not remain indifferent before the voices of millions of people who need the help of the message of redemption. Then the pope asked, what about the collaborators that the church prepares for this work of liberating the world? They are neither Marxists nor capitalists, but Christians, he explained: «The specific contribution of the church and of Christian "liberators" should not be confused with tactical attitudes or with the service of a political system». These are the words of the pope. «The church is providing these Christian "liberators" with the inspiration of faith, the motivation of fraternal love, [and] a social teaching. Christians should be aware of the church's contribution and use this contribution as the basis for their knowledge and experience in order to translate this liberation into categories of action, participation, and commitment» (EN 38).

My sisters and brothers, there are priests, and there should also be laypersons, who are fully involved in this struggle to free people from marginalization, but our people should not ask for help from communism nor should they trust in capitalism. Both of them are forms of materialism. They should receive from the church the inspiration of faith, the motivation of love, and a very clear social doctrine. I take advantage of this moment to tell all of you, sisters and brothers, that the more true faith in Christ grows in your hearts and the more true love of God and neighbor grows in your hearts and the more you study the social doctrine of the church, the more you will become true instruments of true progress, instruments of the true liberation of our church. This is the time for priests and laypeople to embrace this motivation of love. May our words never be inspired by resentment, hatred, or class struggle. Listen carefully: the church cannot preach with resentment; it is the inspiration of faith and love that motivates the church to feel that she is a sister to all people, especially those who suffer poverty, torture, or abandonment. They are my brothers and sisters. How am I not going to love them? And on the basis of this love and this faith let us study the social doctrine of the church. This is not the time to be confusing the documents of Medellín with Marxism.

There is a newspaper in the city that is publishing a venomous column that attempts to interpret Medellín in Marxist categories.⁶ That is pure calumny. Medellín was a meeting of the Latin American bishops, authorized by the pope in 1968 to make the teaching of the Second Vatican Council relevant to this continent. It was a marvelous event! I remember the words of a holy prelate, Bishop Pironio: «The Holy Spirit has breathed upon our continent». But if some people are ignorant about this event and want to present it with the aim of maligning the church, then that explains why they call Medellín subversive. In the Vatican II documents, written with a profound theology for

⁶ FUENTES CASTELLANOS R., «From Medellín to Riobamba and San Salvador» in *El Mundo* (23, 24, 25 March 1977).

our modern times, and in the social encyclicals of the popes we find solutions that are far superior to all the systems. The church does not offer any system, but it does offer a social doctrine that Christians can develop according to their conscience, not committing the church as an institution but drawing inspiration from the church and her doctrine.

The bishops' message then condemns this false understanding of tradition that seeks to present the church as simply spiritualist—a church of sacraments and prayers but without social commitments, without commitments to history. «We would betray our mission as pastors if we were to reduce evangelization merely to practices of individualistic piety and disincarnated sacramentalism. As the pope tells us, «Evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social» (EN 29). This is not the time, brothers and sisters, for us to confine our faith to our personal lives and to live in public as though we had no faith. The Council warned us that this divorce between faith and practical life is one of the great errors of our times (GS 43). So great is this error that it results in the church's being called subversive, precisely because she wants to lead Christians to a faith commitment in their concrete lives. Please study, dear Catholics, these wise and true doctrines of the church, and you will see how far from being communists or Marxists or subversives are the priests and Christians who live out their Christian commitment to the world.

A call to make social justice effective

The bishops' message concludes with an urgent call and an invitation, directed mainly to those who hold political and economic power:

... to join with the other vibrant forces of the country so that together we may search for a way to make social justice effective since only this can save us and prevent the country from falling further into violence or some kind of totalitarianism. If we cling ever tighter to particular interests and forget the cries of the dispossessed, then we will surely create a propitious environment for totalitarian violence. As the bishops of Chile have stated, the true struggle against Marxism consists in eliminating the causes that engender it, changing the seedbed in which it develops, and offering a viable alternative. Often, however, the anti-Marxists are themselves the very ones who create the evil they claim they are combating. They also unwittingly help Marxism when they consider Marxist or suspect of Marxism those persons who struggle for human dignity, for justice, or for equality, or those who seek political participation or oppose the abuse of power.

This call of the bishops concludes by trusting in the solidarity of the priests, and it makes particular mention of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, who are being so maligned at the present moment. «The campaign being waged against the Salvadoran bishops, directed from the shadows of anonymity, attempts to choke and silence the voice of the church and to justify the most horrendous abuses against human rights».

My sisters and brothers, I take this opportunity to tell you that in the seminary the church is preparing her priests to be collaborators of this true progress of the world

and that next Sunday, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, we will also celebrate Seminary Day in our country. For next Saturday, the day before, the seminaries have prepared a special get-together, and those who wish may come to the church of María Auxiliadora. . . .⁷

⁷ The final words were not registered on the tape of the homily.