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THE CHURCH, A COMMUNION OF PEOPLE WITH GOD

Trinity Sunday
5 June 1977

Proverbs 8:22-31

Romans 5:1-5

John 16:12-15

... that sense of pilgrimage.¹ All of us who are reflecting together as Catholics are a pilgrim people. Throughout the liturgical year the church marks out our itinerary with the light of faith. Each Sunday we take another step in our journey toward our encounter with the Lord. And the mystery of Christ gets unfolded in the course of the year, starting from the expectation of Christmas and culminating in the cross and Easter. After Easter we continue our pilgrimage full of joy, but this joy flows from the cross. Therefore, both sorrow and joy characterize this Easter church, the pilgrim church.

Last Sunday we solemnly concluded the Easter season with Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Now, a week later, we pause in our journey to review all the ground we have covered, and today we have before our eyes the origin and the goal of this pilgrimage. We come from God, and we walk toward God. This is the Sunday of the Blessed Trinity, a very important Sunday because it tells us the reason for our hope. It explains the intimate joy felt by us pilgrims on earth since we know that we come from God, that we have been born out of love, and that we walk in the hope of an immutable, eternal God who awaits us with open arms. It is good, therefore, that we pause this morning to reflect on the beautiful readings that we have just heard, that we reflect on who God really is.

The first reading gives us a philosophical, metaphysical answer that perhaps does not impress us much, for we are not generally impressed with metaphysical explanations of God. The Council says that the reason for this phenomenon of modern atheism, the fact that so many people have forgotten God, is that those of us who believe in God do not know how to speak of him to others, and this is made all the worse if we do not know how to live in accord with that faith (GS 19). I read this week a tremendous statement; it talked about «the world and those who have disregarded God because they do not believe in a God without the world and without people». This is terrible. Perhaps we believe in a God who is isolated from us, a God who is hardly interested in our anxieties and our tribulations. But thank God, Christ and all the New Testament and Old Testament literature reveal in our days a God who dwells with us, a living God—we might even say a dynamic God. The Old Testament tells us that he is «the God of Abraham, the God of Jacob, the God of Isaac, the God of our ancestors» (Exod 3:6,15), and Saint Paul writes that he is «the God of our Lord Jesus Christ» (Acts 3:13; Eph 1:17).

¹ The greeting and opening words were not recorded on the tape of the homily.

Thus, this divine figure becomes more interesting. This is a God who accompanies us in our history. This is a God who reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush: «I am who am» (Exod 3:14). This is a difficult text; it is perhaps one of the ones most studied by Christian exegetes. The words «I am who am» can be understood in a metaphysical sense that communicates the very essence of God, a being who cannot cease to be. But it is much more appealing to present God as the God of revelation. God is not simply the result of my thoughts or the culmination of my efforts to discover him. Rather, he is a God who comes looking for me, a God who reveals himself. He is a God who tells me, as he told Moses, «I am who am». He is the one who is with you, the one who is with your people, the one who at this moment hears the cries of an anguished people enslaved by Pharaoh and wants to use you to free them. This is a God who is concerned about the people's enslavement and wants to set them free. This is a God who lives among underdeveloped peoples so that they will develop into the true image that he desires to place on every human face. This is a God who is concerned about us. This is how God presents himself to us this morning in our reflection: from the perspective of church, let us feel that we are truly church, a communion in God.

This is the message that I want to engrave on your hearts this morning: the church is a communion of men and women with God. From there we naturally descend to a second level: the church is the communion of those children of God marked by baptism and united in Christ, the Son of God. Finally, at the third level, the church is in communion with the whole world, with all of creation. This is the greatness of our Christian people. At this time as always, sisters and brothers, I want to repeat once again that our work in the church is not the result of circumstances; rather, it arises from the conviction that the pastors and priests of the church and all Christians who feel themselves part of the church must identify themselves more and more with their reason for being. Whether or not there is persecution, let us build our church on the conviction that the church is a communion of people which brings us closer to God.

The church is a communion of people with God

The first teaching document of the Second Vatican Council begins with these words about the church: «The church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament, that is, a sign and an instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men» (LG 1). The church exists for this reason; this is her main reason for being.

On this first level of the church as communion, then, we encounter a God who becomes present in this church. I recommend that you read this first chapter of the constitution on the church, which presents the church as a mystery of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It shows that God is not isolated and alone. Christ has revealed to us that God is a communion of three persons with the same capacity as those who have been created in his image, with the same openness to receiving from one another and to giving to one another. The Father is the initial «I», and the Son is the «you» who ignites a current of love so intense that a «we» is brought forth, a community of indestructible love, the Spirit of love, the Holy Spirit. This «we» is uttered in the Blessed Trinity as mutual giving and receiving and builds on earth the community we call church.

In the first place, then, this is a God who gives himself to this community that has discovered him in Christ. Christ is the man in whom God becomes visible. Christ is like the bush that Moses saw illuminated with God. The apostles told us, «We saw his glory, glory as of the Father's only Son, and we reveal to you this life that he gave us so that you also might be in communion with us and with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit» (John 1:14; Acts 2:32-33).

From God comes the life of the church. From the divine truth comes the church's preaching on earth. From God's eternal life come the forgiveness of repentant sinners and the holiness of souls who grow to the heights of contemplation. From God come all the church's strength and her reason for existing. This is the church's most magnificent and most intimate relationship: her relationship with God. From this relationship she derives her mission and her reason for being. That is why, when the wise men come to adore the Child Jesus, and Herod, governor of the earth, is resentful that a new king has been born (Matt 2:1-16), the church tells Herod, «Do not be afraid, Herod! The One who is coming to establish the kingdom of heaven does not come to take away your earthly power».² We do well to remember this also in our own day when the church's mission is often misrepresented as political competition and desire for political power. This is similar to Herod's seeing Jesus as a rival; this is the Herod who even has babies slaughtered to preserve his power. The church does not come to take away temporal powers. A church that comes from God is not competing for earthly powers; rather, she comes to offer the world love, grace, truth, and forgiveness.

How I wish that people understood this sublime mission of the church which flows from communion with God. All of us, dear Catholic sisters and brothers, should understand that this is our primary obligation: our relationship with God. There are times when the Spirit of God asks us to strive harder to make God's presence more visible in the world. This presence will be made visible to the degree that all of us—bishops, priests, religious, laity, married couples, students, professionals, all who call ourselves Catholic—strive to intensify this communion with God by renewal, by conversion, by holiness. Sin in all its forms is the fog that gets in the way. Let us distance ourselves from every kind of sin so that we—the people of God, the church of God, all Catholics united in communion with God—may make the sacred image of God present in the world! God is communion, and the church participates in this communion of God.

The church, the communion of the baptized

The second level, sisters and brothers, is the communion of the baptized. Christ, who brought us the truth and the life of God, established a church. I want to read you a paragraph from the Council—it is number fourteen of the Constitution on the Church—so that you can see who is truly a member of this church that is in communion with God. Those who fulfill these conditions are in communion with the church founded by Christ. Those who lack one of these conditions should not be called Catholic if they willingly reject that condition. They are excommunicated by their own decision.

The text reads as follows: «Fully incorporated into the church are those who possess the Spirit of Christ» (LG 14). This is primary: possessing the Spirit of Christ.

² Hymn for Vespers on the feast of the Epiphany

That is to say, Christianity is not of our making but of Christ's since he founded the church. Second, those persons are members of the church «who accept her entire organization». As a human organization, the church is hierarchical: a pontiff who is the center of the whole church, bishops in each diocese, and priests in each parish. Another condition is that they «accept all the means of salvation established in her [the church] and in the visible body of those who are united with Christ». «All the means of salvation established in her» means «the sacraments and the laws of the church». This is her truth: «Christ rules [the church] through the supreme pontiff and the bishops». These are the concrete persons. Those who are not in agreement with their bishop cannot be called Catholic, just as the bishop who is not in agreement with the pope is no longer a minister of the church. You have heard of the famous case of Lefebvre, an archbishop in France who declared himself in open opposition to the pope. He cannot be called Catholic, and he is no longer in communion with the church. If he is proposed as a model, that would mean schism. If I myself were not in communion with the pope, I would not be worthy of this honorable position as pastor of this archdiocese, but the pope is the one who must tell me this, not others. The pope has just affirmed his communion with me and mine with him.³ We are in communion, sisters and brothers, and no one should doubt that this person who is preaching to you today is a true pastor of the church and is in communion with the pope. We can also say that those who are not in communion with their bishop should not receive Communion either. Communion is a sign of communion with the church. I know that there are persons who take Communion and then destroy the unity of the church by murmuring against priests and bishops. Those people are already excommunicating themselves because they are destroying unity by murmuring against priests, defaming them in the media, and blaming them for things they have not done. Excommunication by the bishop would simply be an official sanctioning of the repudiation that the people have already pronounced. The church organization knows itself, and just as a living organism expels a foreign body, so the mystical body of the church feels the invasion of foreign bodies and expels them as if they were dead cells.

The text of the Council goes on to mention «the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion» (LG 14). These are the characteristics of our unity of faith, so that those who do not accept the creed that the bishop professes with the church are not in the unity of the Catholic faith. Those who do not accept one of the seven sacraments are rejecting one of the signs of unity and so are not Catholic. Those who do not accept the government of the church as a jurisdictional power are not Catholic, and those who interfere with this government of the church and do not allow her to exercise her functions among the people are not Catholic. For example, at this time we are unable to go to Aguilares to celebrate Mass or to care for our Catholics in that martyred town⁴—those who are preventing our governance there are not Catholic. Ecclesiastical communion is this full communion that God has transmitted through Christ to this people of God made visible

³ Archbishop Romero refers to his audience with Paul VI in Rome on 30 March 1977.

⁴ After the military operation in Aguilares, Archbishop Romero wanted to go there to support the people and recover the Blessed Sacrament, but the authorities prevented him. He sent Father Antonio Vides who was also prevented from recovering the Sacrament and was arrested for an hour in the barracks of the National Guard whose chaplain he was. See «Information Bulletin of the Archdiocese, No. 16», ECA 342-343 (1977) 339-340.

in her ministers and her pastors who have been given power to govern and to maintain unity of faith, sacraments, and organization. Those who want to belong to this people of God organized by Christ and called the Catholic church must accept these conditions. If they do not accept them, if they willingly reject them, then they are schismatics, destroyers of the church, and they have morally excommunicated themselves by their own decision.

Naturally, my sisters and brothers, this communion at the level of the baptized is also a condition of salvation. Therefore, note well this question: will those outside the church *not* be saved? I have not said this. I said that those who know the conditions for belonging to this people of God and who consciously reject them are outside salvation (LG 15-16). But if there are non-Catholics who are convinced in conscience that they are in the truth, be they Protestant or Jewish or Muslim or pagan, and if they try to fulfill the laws of God as they understand him, then these individuals are in the heart of Christ and in the heart of the church even though they are not in the body of the church. The opposite is also true. There are many people who have been baptized into the body of the church, but because of their attitude and because they reject certain realities, they are not in the heart of the church (LG 14). They call themselves Catholic, but they are not Catholic and are outside salvation. Those who are outside the church but live their religion in good faith are on the road to salvation. They are in the heart of the church, not outside Christ. Christ overflows the Catholic church and makes salvation present to Protestants, to Muslims, and to Jews who live as they do in good faith. It is Christ who is saving them.

In this regard, I want to tell you that this week I was immensely pleased when a Protestant denomination came to visit me and we spoke in great depth. They expressed their support for our church, and they told me that they were not swallowing the line of the church's persecutors, as if these were the good Christians and it was the church that had gone astray from her mission. These Protestants come to the Catholic church to tell her that she has not strayed from her mission. They support this church and do not want to be accomplices in the persecution of their Catholic sisters and brothers. I want to thank them publicly. One of the young women who visited me said, «Keep making the call you made during the burial of Father Navarro». At that time I said, «If Father Navarro represented a church that has lost credibility due to slander and persecution, then don't believe in her; he would be like the Bedouin who kept crying out, "Follow the right road"». At that time we called upon the moral forces, and we called upon Protestants, who hold the Gospel in their hands, to preach this kingdom of God in the world (Homily #7 of 12 May 1977). We called on all the forces of our land, and now we do so again so that instead of sowing discord and calumny we may sow good seeds and do good in the world. I therefore renew my call.

I want to add my voice to the Voice of America, which yesterday reported that Amnesty International had examined seventy-five tortured persons and discovered frightful consequences. Even after the scars of the tortured bodies had healed, the victims' psychology remained damaged. A call was made for doctors in all countries to declare themselves against torture. I second that call and hope that our own doctors will use their technology and science to testify that torture is not only abusive of human dignity but also destructive of the health of individuals and of peoples.

The church is communion with the world

Accordingly, sisters and brothers, the third level of the church's communion is communion with the world. You know that the Council promulgated a whole document called *The Church in the Modern World* (GS 2). The church does not identify with the world. As Jesus said, «You are not of the world, but you are in the world» (John 17:14-16), because the church is composed of men and women of this world, people like all of us who are here this morning. The church wants to learn the languages and the cultures of the world's peoples in order to translate her divine message into those languages and those different ways of being. The church does not identify herself with cultures or political parties or social systems. Rather, her message is a light that illuminates social systems, political systems, and people's lives. It is a light in the world, a light that truly exalts human reality. The church has been taught by the Creator that human beings are the image and likeness of God, and she has been taught by Christ that what is done to any person is done to him (Matt 25:40). The church is therefore humanly very capable of drawing near to the world and identifying with people's aspirations and noble desires. She also identifies with those noble hearts that reject violence and all that is evil in the world. The church seeks to provide hope and consolation to mothers who suffer, to wives who are widowed, and to all who suffer in our present situation.

The church is in continual dialogue with the world. The church suffers with those peoples that are suffering. The church feels the tortures and the ways in which towns and people are riddled with bullets. The church longs for the true progress of people, and she experiences the reality of human life. The church does not claim competence in politics or sociology, which are outside her ken, but she does seek to make the light of God present in the world from the perspective of human science and God's revelation. The church is also in intimate dialogue with the world, for nothing human is foreign to her.

Dear sisters and brothers, our reflection on the Blessed Trinity has brought us to this point. The Blessed Trinity is nothing but God in a communion of persons, an expression of love and truth, of light and happiness. God wants to bring all people together into one family, and he does so in this circle of light that is the church. And so as Catholics we are all called to intensify our holiness, our unity, and our relationship with God in order to illuminate the world with the light of God.

Here I want to call upon the laity in a special way. It is with intense joy that this pastor manifests his gratitude to God because lay people are becoming ever more aware of discharging their role as church in the world. We priests who are ministers of the altar serve the church with a specific vocation, as do religious, but you who are parents, school teachers, professionals, workers, day laborers, employees, market vendors, laity in general—it is you who transform the world by bringing to it this presence of God that you carry in your heart like a torch that illuminates your activities! I summon you specifically to realize that the church is not just the bishop and his priests and his religious. The church is all baptized persons living in communion with the bishop and thus making ever stronger the unity of faith, truth, sacraments, and governance, as we have just said. Let us reject all that might divide us. Give no credence to this whole campaign of slander. Meet with the priest or the bishop to clear up any doubts there may be. From our places in the world, let us all strengthen the hierarchical communion

with the bishop so as to make present to the world the light of God that is reflected in the church. Then we will have given the explanation, the testimony, and the personal and professional service that God has a right to ask of us, because God has made us and redeemed us, and he awaits us in his heaven. And God does not want us to arrive all alone; he wants each of us to bring along a constellation of souls who have been won over because we were God's light in the midst of humankind. We will now profess our faith.