

15

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time 19 June 1977

Zechariah 12:10-11

Galatians 3:26-29

Luke 9:18-24

Now we have finished the feasts that crown the Easter season, such as Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi, the Heart of Jesus last Friday, and the Heart of Mary just yesterday. These feasts are like Easter flowers that allow us to gather all the fruits of the liturgical year. This week begins again what we call «Ordinary Time», which is divided into two parts: the first period begins after the celebrations of the Christmas season, after the feast of the Epiphany, and continues until the beginning of Lent. Ordinary Time is then interrupted to allow for the celebration of redemption: Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost. When this Easter season is concluded, the second part of Ordinary Time begins and continues until Advent, the season that prepares us anew for Christmas and marks the beginning of another liturgical year.

What the church does, then, is present us every year with a course of intense spirituality. All through the year she unfolds the mystery of Christ in which we are to keep growing. This cycle of 1977 should signify for us all a higher level, just as a student in school moves on to a higher grade. The subject is always the mystery of Christ, but in an upwardly moving spiral. Each year should signify a higher level in our following and our knowledge of our divine teacher and redeemer, Jesus Christ. That is why it is interesting to study well the message of each Sunday. Those who say that they do not go to Mass because they are bored and it is always the same thing have not penetrated the depths of the liturgical year. Every Sunday is different, and just as students interested in taking advantage of a course don't miss a single class because they learn something new in every session, so too, good Christians grow every Sunday in the contemplation of and reflection on the saving mystery. Just think about the readings you heard today. I believe we can take from them a precious message which we might spell out with these three ideas: first is the central figure, Christ our Lord; second, his liberating work; and third, his call to conversion.

Christ, our Lord

The first point that stands out in today's message is the interesting dialogue of Jesus with his disciples: «Who do the crowds say that I am?» (Luke 9:18). This question becomes real for those of us gathered here in the cathedral and for those reflecting by way of the radio. If Christ were to ask us, if Christ were to stand before me now and say to me, «Who do people say that I am? What do you say about me? You who call yourself Christians, what do you think about Christ, from whom you take the name you bear?»

How many of us would stumble in responding, as did the apostles, «According to popular rumor, some say that you are one of the prophets». «But I'm asking you», insists Jesus, «who do you say that I am, you who live with me?» The one who answers is Peter, inspired by the eternal Father because no one knows the Son except the Father and those to whom the Father wants to reveal him (Luke 10:22). This is the grace of knowing Christ. By a singular grace Peter defines Jesus with a few brief words: «You are the Messiah of God» (Luke 9:20). «You are the long awaited, the one promised to Abraham, the one foretold by the prophets. You are the center of the Bible. You are the heart of God's promises. You are the one hoped for. In you all people have placed their longing, and all peoples have desired you even without understanding why. You are the Messiah. You are the name that God has given to save every person, and apart from that name there is no salvation».

This is the essence of Christianity. For this the church lives. And that is why they persecute the church, just as when Christ said that he was the Son of God, he was accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death (Mark 14:61-64). And the church continues to profess that he is the Lord and that there is no other God. When people kneel before other gods, they are bothered because the church preaches there is only one God. That is why the church clashes with the idolaters of power, with the idolaters of money, with those who make the flesh an idol, with those who think that God is irrelevant, that Christ is unnecessary, that the things of earth are worthy idols. The church has the right and the duty to tear down all idols and proclaim that only Christ is the Lord. How much bloodshed this has cost the church! How much persecution and humiliation has resulted from this faithfulness to the one Lord! Imagine what it must have meant to proclaim Christ as Lord in the middle of the Roman Empire, when Caesar proclaimed himself a god. The church suffers the same difficulty when she confronts the idols and the caesars that erect themselves as gods today, because we have only one God: Christ our Lord. This is the first message. I beg you to take this message to heart so that you might spread it through the world after our Mass, with the sincere conviction that Christ is the only Lord, and that we must adore him alone and give him all our heart.

The liberating work of Christ

The second message of today is that this Christ presents himself to us with his great liberating work. I would like to explain this word «liberation» clearly. Many are fearful of this word; many also abuse this word. Well, there should be neither fear nor abuse. The truth is that «liberation» is a biblical word that expresses the whole work of the Lord in saving us from sin. The first liberation that Jesus proclaims is described marvelously by Saint Paul in today's second reading: Christ has come to overthrow sin. By baptism which cleanses us of sin and by repentance which converts us if we have grown apart from God, we are incorporated into Christ and become new men and new women. New human beings are the liberating work: it means making new men and new women who separate themselves from sin, cast aside their selfishness, idolatry, and pride and become humble followers of Christ the Lord. «Because of faith in Jesus Christ, all are children of God» (Gal 3:26). This is the work of Jesus: calling all people without discrimination. Saint Paul has stated that there is no place for discrimination in Christianity: «There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus» (Gal 3:28). There are no longer social classes for

Christianity. There is no more racial discrimination. That is why Christianity is shocking: because it must preach this liberating work of declaring all men and women equal in Christ Jesus. Interior renewal of the heart is what makes all people equal, so let us renew ourselves! As long as there are no new men and women, there will only be pride and discrimination. Rich people and poor people, when they are truly converted and interiorly cleansed by this baptism of Christ, and when they truly believe in the Lord, will no longer distinguish themselves as rich or poor because there will be only a feeling of fraternity in Christ Jesus. There is no longer superior and inferior because both know that they are nothing in the order of grace without Christ the Redeemer. Only one is great: Christ who redeems us. There is only one liberator.

That is why, sisters and brothers, we make the very prudent distinction in our time between true and false liberation. This is very important. Look at how the church has been persecuted because her message has been misunderstood as subversive and thus disturbing the country. The church preaches liberation in Christ Jesus. The church promotes the dignity of the *campesino*, the dignity of the worker. She promotes the dignity of those who are humiliated by the situation that confronts our country, as if they were not human. There are truly people among us who live subhuman lives! And the church proclaims the liberation of these people which will come through the banishment of sin and the denunciation of injustice, abuse, and violence. She announces to all that we are children of God, for we have been baptized by Christ.

This is a liberation that places hope in people's heart: hope for a paradise that is not given on this earth. Therefore the church cannot be communist. The church cannot seek only liberation of a temporal nature. The church does not want to liberate poor people so that they can *have* more, but rather wants them to *be* more. She promotes people so that they *are* more. The church is hardly concerned with having more or having less. She is interested in making sure that all persons, whether they have many possessions or not, make progress and become true human beings and children of God. She wants people to be valued not for what they have but for what they are. This is the human dignity that the church preaches. It is the hope people have in their heart that tells them: when you complete your life, you will participate in the kingdom of heaven. Don't expect a perfect paradise here, but the kingdom will exist to the extent that you work on this earth for a more just world, one in which you try to be more neighborly to your neighbors. This will also be your reward in eternity, but on this earth there is no paradise. This is the difference, then, between communism which does not believe in heaven or in God and the church that promotes community which hopes for that heaven and that God.

Christ's call to conversion

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, Christ our Lord becomes present among us on this Sunday and calls us to conversion. This is a hard saying of Jesus. Jesus accepts Peter's divinely inspired definition: «You are the Messiah of God» (Luke 9:20), but he then complements it with a description of his own passion and death. Immediately after Peter has said that Christ is the Messiah of God, Jesus adds, «The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised». Then Jesus said to them all, «If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever

wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, will save it» (Luke 9:22-24).

What a mysterious saying! What a difficult saying! All of us want to save our lives, but there is an immediate salvation and there is a definitive, eventual salvation when our whole life is over. Those who want to save their lives here and now, those who do not want to forego their comfortable life style, those who want to live well without being concerned for others—those persons will lose their lives. On the other hand, those who truly want to save their lives will lose their lives for Christ. What does it mean to lose one's life for Christ? This is the difficult thing at this moment, sisters and brothers. I received a letter analyzing this situation we have in El Salvador; the writer tells me, «Those who have to part from you will do so, but there will remain with you those who must remain». I feel that is what today's gospel is saying, for Jesus declares, «If you want truly to save your life, come with me, take up your cross, and do not become attached to the advantages of earth. Detach yourself, live as one poor in heart, and work with me for the liberation of the people». But there are those who want to be well-off. How sad it is when people approach me and say, «Bishop, I am with you, but please understand my situation». Such people might be employees, people who have many valuable possessions, and naturally it is hard for them to commit themselves to Christ; it might even mean the loss of their lives. This is the hour of discernment, the hour of knowing who is who; this is the hour of coming face to face with Christ who says, «Those who are not with me are against me» (Luke 11:23). Blessed are those who say to the Lord, «Even though I lose my life, I am with you, Lord». This is conversion.

I want to congratulate, here in public, the Jesuit fathers for the declaration of culpability and repentance that they published in the newspapers.¹ They confess that they have perhaps served power and wealth, but now they understand that they must forego these advantages and honors in order to serve Christ crucified wherever Christ wants them to serve. The point is not that the upper class should be disregarded. We esteem them, we love them, we would give our life for them, we would serve them so that they take stock and commit themselves to Christ our Lord. We truly do love them, and I ask you all to pray hard that we will all be converted so that we no longer distinguish between rich and poor but between those who are converted to Christ and those who are not. Even if we lose our life and our comforts, we still have the satisfaction of following in the love of the Redeemer, who being rich became poor to make us rich with the true wealth of heaven (2 Cor 8:9). Let us not be deceived by the illusion of earthly advantages. Let us not take the risk of losing heaven for the things of this world. Let us embrace true liberation, the liberation that we feel in our souls when we are not dependent on praise or money or political and social advantage. Let our hearts be free to follow Christ and say to him, «Lord, I hand my life over for you, even if I have to lose it in this world». This is the conversion that Christ asks of us.

I conclude now with the beautiful prophecy of the first reading where the prophet Zechariah presents a mysterious, prophetic person. This is the prophecy that Saint John will call to mind when he narrates how the side of Christ on the cross was pierced by a lance: «They shall look on him whom they have pierced, and they shall

¹ «The Jesuits Address the Salvadoran People», ECA 344 (1977) 434-450.

mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a firstborn» (Zech 12:10; John 19:37). What is the prophet saying here? After a catastrophe has struck the people of Israel, Jerusalem is desolate, but there is hope that God will have pity on the people and that a mysterious person will raise them up. That person is Christ who is being foreseen as the price of redemption. The people have been humbled and tormented, but there is someone whom the people themselves have pierced—it is Christ on the cross. They will look upon him, and from his side, pierced by the ingratitude of many, hope will spring forth. He alone is our hope, and to him the people look. This is what I want of all Salvadorans: to look on the one we have all pierced because we are all sinners. At this time when the church defends the dignity of the human person and the rights of God, she must also say that all of us offend the Lord, and all of us have to look on the One we have pierced with our sins, Christ our Lord. May he have mercy on us so that these concerns, these anxieties, and these offenses against human dignity may cease.

There are also human hopes, no doubt inspired by God the Creator of humankind. This morning I heard on the radio that tomorrow in Grenada the representatives of the Organization of American States are going to present a denunciation of the offenses against human dignity in the Latin American countries. They are going to protest the tortures. They are going to protest the long prison sentences that are imposed without any trial. They are going to protest the «disappearance» of so many people. These people come to me as pastor, and my soul aches—wives and mothers who do not know where their husbands and children are. Where are they? What has been done with them? I pray to God that the Organization of American States will exercise its influence and collaborate in this great concern of the church so that this situation of sin and abuse in our countries may come to an end. We are happy that people are concerned about this matter. Hopefully this long nightmare will cease, and we will wake up again to a normal life where we experience peace, where there is tranquility, where we are all equal as sisters and brothers. May there no longer be Salvadorans who take up arms against other Salvadorans. May there no longer be Salvadorans who act viciously against their sisters and brothers, against people who sometimes are fellow citizens living in the same village. May our sentiments be more Christian. May we look on all the people whom we have pierced with these actions. May Christ the Lord give us the sanity and equanimity we need to be a nation where all can truly live in the tranquility proper to their homeland. Christ's liberation orients us toward eternity.

There is more good news this morning. Today in Rome (there is a seven-hour time difference, so it is now afternoon in Rome), Pope Paul VI raised to the honor of the altars the first North American saint, John Nepomucene Neumann. He was a bishop very dedicated to the promotion of the human person. He opened many schools and sowed wisdom in many hearts. This is how the church works, not for some reward here below. A full century after his labors John Neumann's work endures in the youth of the United States and in tens of thousands of pilgrims, many of them formed in the schools of this holy bishop of the last century. The church works for eternity. The church brings about a liberation from sin in order to promote the new man and the new woman in Christ who, as Saint Paul says, will live forever, or as Jesus himself says, «If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me» (Luke 9:23).

Sisters and brothers, I would like to offer my cordial best wishes to the teachers' union; they will celebrate their special day on June 22. During my priesthood I have always had much sympathy for these collaborators in promoting our culture. They are often misunderstood; however, they also often misunderstand the church and do not allow her to enter their schools. I would like, dear teachers, to anticipate your special day and congratulate you for your work in the schools, and I pray that there will be cooperation with the church so that we can sow in the hearts of our children and young people the true sentiments that assure a better future for our nation. In our classrooms, as in our church, may we sow a profound respect for God, without which there can be no respect for fellow human beings. For this special day of the teachers I would ask the pastors to make every effort to approach the schools so that, in response to all the violence and the abuses we suffer, you pastors and teachers may find ways to create new children and young people in a healthier and more Christian environment. Christ has proclaimed to us this morning that we need to school ourselves in sacrifice and the cross; we need to be willing to lose our lives for Christ; we need to be free of selfishness and therefore of pride, arrogance, and vulgarity. Only after doing this can we make our country truly a home where we all feel that we are sisters and brothers, where we behold our elder brother whom we have pierced, but from whom flow all the life and true progress that our people need.

Let us celebrate our Eucharist this morning as we embrace this beautiful message of the word of God. The central figure is Christ; his message is one of liberation, freeing people from sin so that they might become new men and women in their hearts. A call still echoes in every heart, the call to repentance and conversion. Let us therefore proclaim our Creed.