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THE CHURCH OF THE ARCHDIOCESE

Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

24 July 1977

Genesis 18:20-32

Colossians 2:12-14

Luke 11:1-13

This Mass being transmitted by radio from the cathedral and celebrated by this servant of God's people, one charged with being a sign of unity in the whole archdiocese—this Mass always seems to be a family gathering. I would like us to feel that way during this time of reflection: we are a family with time off on the weekend to see how things are going in the family and to assist and collaborate with one another. I understand that when a family comes together, if it is a very important family, then there will be many enemies who spy on it and criticize it—or even, who knows, they may seek to be converted. How greatly we desire that all those spies who are listening to us on the radio would hear us not with the suspicion of those Pharisees who sought to entrap Jesus but with the affection of family members so that they might help us expand the kingdom of God, which brings nothing harmful to our homeland. To the contrary, the more Christian our people are, the better citizens they will be. Therefore, in this family setting, sisters and brothers, I hope we can share the joys and hopes, the anxieties and problems that all of us necessarily have. All of us have our own problems. Blessed are those who have problems, because those who say they have no problems are so poor that they are hardly aware of being alive, because everyone alive has problems. We all bring the intimate problems of each family here as personal concerns to offer to the Lord, and that is precisely what we do; they are our problems, and we offer them to the Lord. As the Council stated, nothing that is human is foreign to the heart of the church (GS 1). The church is so human that it feels as her own all these problems: the stomachache of the child at home, the debt that cannot be paid, the inability to find a job, etc. The church is touched by all these problems, by all the pain and anguish of those who suffer unjustly.

Life of the church

This week, all the same, we have been enriched as church and as community. I want to highlight the witness of holiness and serenity that our Jesuit brothers have given us. It has been a week of terrible threats, and yet not one of them has fled the country.¹ A story is told of a very young Jesuit saint named Aloysius Gonzaga. During a recreation period the question arose, «If the final judgment were to come right now, what would you do?» One of the other young Jesuits responded, «I would run to the chapel so that I would be found praying». Another said, «I would go to the library to be found working». But Aloysius Gonzaga replied, «I would continue playing because this is God's will for me at this time». It seems to me that this phrase of Aloysius

¹ The paramilitary organization Union of White Warriors (UGB) had issued an ultimatum setting 20 July 1977 as the deadline for all Jesuits to leave the country.

Gonzaga has been the motto of the Jesuits this past week: «Where do you want to be found on July 21?» No one has fled. All of them responded, «We want to be found at our posts». Many thanks to you, Jesuit fathers, because in this way you have shown your love for truth, your love for duty, and your love for life. That is your vocation. «Let death come, it doesn't matter; it will find me at my post». May all Christians experience at this time this same calm courage that is found only in those who know that they are working for the true good, even when they are swamped with calumnies that attempt to discredit their noble work.

While speaking about the Jesuits, I want to highlight with gratitude the many expressions of solidarity shown by the Christian faithful. I was especially moved by the thousands of signatures that nearly filled an entire book and that were sent to the president by the poor folk helped by *Vivienda Minima*. What a beautiful example! And the letter of Father Ibañez gives the testimony of persons who feel that not everything is lost, that there is real gratitude, that our people are noble, that not everything is calumny, that there is true nobility in the hearts of the poor, and that the poor are grateful for those they know to be their true friends. I was also moved by the collaboration of the young people and the young students, many of them no doubt from the upper classes. This nobility, in whatever social class it is found, is always manifested as gratitude for the good that is done; it does not forget that they are who they are precisely because of those whom they persecute. As father of this church family, I also thank the men and women religious who have expressed their solidarity with our Jesuit brothers. I am grateful as the father of this family and happy to see the unity among all our sisters and brothers. This week I have experienced a new joy because the Jesuits are not alone. I am truly saddened, though, whenever a Christian voice utters an ignoble word or shows a lack of love and solidarity. These are Christians who in the moment of trial fail to manifest their unity or solidarity because the problem does not touch them personally. May the Lord lead them to be converted and to understand that there is no Catholic, much less a priest or a bishop, who does not feel pained when a sister or brother is attacked, even if there is no personal sympathy between them. This is my family, and if they offend a member of it, they offend me. I want to take advantage of these circumstances to strengthen that unity even more. Blessed be God.

Speaking about solidarity, I also want to highlight and give thanks for an excellent study that was done.² I want to tell the dear author that he moved me to tears when I read the study he did of the tons of correspondence I am receiving. This profound psychological and pastoral study was prepared thanks to Father Guevara, who is an advisor in the area of news and information at the curia. The basis for this study was the thousands of letters, mostly from *campesinos*, but also from other people who understand and experience the problems we talk about. They have not locked themselves up in frigid selfishness but are trying to understand. Other letters come from religious orders, from federations of priests in other countries, from national conferences of bishops, from cardinals. They are the voices of European bishops who have read press reports about the sad image being projected of El Salvador as a persecutor of the church.

Thanks be to God, the church stands as a gallant figure of this kingdom of God, undaunted and serene in the face of the persecution that many want to deny but that the church is feeling very directly. These letters are a testimony, sisters and brothers, and they give me profound satisfaction because they are the best endorsement possible, despite all the

² «Reading the Letters Sent to Archbishop Romero» in *Orientación* (24 July 1977).

contrary pressures and the harsh criticism of what the archbishop and the archdiocese are doing. Nevertheless, *vox populi, vox Dei*. I truly feel that the voice of God is revealed in the humble messages of these letters, some written in pencil with spelling errors, others beautifully typed on IBM typewriters and arriving from Europe and the United States. They express admiration and affirm solidarity with our church, with our priests, with our religious, with our Catholic schools, and with the church's stand. Even the primate of England has written to state that the archdiocese has encouraged the church around the world.³ My sisters and brothers, let us not be proud of all this, because nothing of what is happening is of our doing. It is the work of God. It is the Holy Spirit who has found fertile soil in the archdiocese.

I invite you to continue to live in this solidarity. Today's edition of *Orientación* contains the first part of this valuable study of those who have written to me.⁴ The humble person to whom the letters are written feels that he represents a church which is the hope of *campesinos*. It is also a church which encourages the government and the economic sector to be sincere in this dialogue of reflection so that the church can occupy its rightful place. Another valuable item I read this past week was a study about the tragic events of these days; it was published in *Estudios Centroamericanos*, a journal of the Universidad José Simeón Cañas. I recommend this article to you all, for it is a theological analysis of the church's action during these times. In its conclusion the author states clearly:

The church wants our nation to move beyond the present crisis. She wants order and justice to be restored. She also wants to be allowed to join together with all the forces that are truly interested in building a more just society. The church wants to be understood and therefore wants all the persecution and slander against her to cease. The church wants to win her battle, but even if she loses it, we believe that she has already won the fundamental battle, for history will remember that in the moments of greatest crisis in the country the church with all her limitations and errors humanized the country with the transparency of her words, with the honesty of her actions, with her strength in suffering, and with her option for the dispossessed.⁵

This excellent study goes on to tell how the church has responded with confidence, hope, history, work, and honesty. Thanks be to God, we Catholics have experienced in the intimacy of our church true nobility, truth, and sincerity while all about us there are lies, distortion of news, biased untruths, and calumnies. History will record that the church, thanks be to God, has lived a time of sincerity, even when she has been misunderstood. *You* have understood, and for that I thank you, dear priests and religious, Catholic movements, base communities, and active parishes. How wonderfully you have lived through this precious hour! Let us continue to cultivate its fruits.

I also want to thank you for responding to the question that I posed in a dialogue broadcast by radio. I asked, «How would you like the feast of August 6 to be celebrated?» I was tremendously pleased with the sense of faith and true devotion that you have for our Divine Savior. Everyone wants this feast to be purified of its secular elements, for it should call

³ A reference to the letter sent by Cardinal Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster, in which he writes: «The position which you personally have adopted, with the support of your companions in the diocese, is an inspiration for the church in the whole world». See «Universal Solidarity with the Salvadoran Church» in *Orientación* (17 July 1977).

⁴ «Reading the Letters Sent to Archbishop Romero» in *Orientación* (24 July, 31 July, and 14 August 1977).

⁵ «Between Persecution and Hope: Chronicles of Six More Weeks in the Archdiocese of San Salvador», ECA 342-343 (1977) 313-316.

solemnly to mind the Liberator of our people and the true liberation that the church preaches: the Divine Savior! We are going to gather together all your suggestions, and on Thursday those in charge of the radio will begin to broadcast the novena of the Divine Savior. The novena will be based on current topics that you have suggested to us. I ask you, then, to tune in to this station YSAX starting on Thursday at 5:45 in the morning, 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon, and 8:00 o'clock in the evening. Let us reflect together on what it means for our country to have a patron as magnificent and as divine as the Divine Savior of the world. And let us prepare for the celebration.

Many told us that August 5, the day before the great feast, should be a time of prayer. Let us then intensify our prayer. I want to invite all our beloved pastors to make the fifth a day of preparation in all the parishes, a day of prayer and penance. Make confession available to as many men and women, children and young people as possible so that they will come in pilgrimage on the sixth to receive communion. We invite everyone in San Salvador to come and pray with us on the fifth in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, which houses the statue that will be carried in the traditional procession of the *Bajada*. The prayer groups which already exist, thank God, in our parishes should meet together in the basilica. Let us intensify our prayer for our nation. May the procession in that tsunami of people coming from all parts of the republic and the incomparable attraction exercised by the Divine Savior be converted into a clamor that is also prayer, applause, and a cry to the Divine Savior. May it be a cry of hope that this nation will be transfigured in these times of sorrow and suffering through its great faith in the transfigured One.

On August 6 our main Mass will be outdoors, on the steps facing the plaza. We would like all the parishes to bring their special banners so that their own pastors can give them communion. We want all the priests to take part in this concelebration so that no pastor is left out. The absence of even one priest would be seen as a lack of unity with the faith of the people, the hierarchy, and the Divine Savior. Let us all come together to celebrate the Divine Savior of our nation. If even a single priest is absent unjustifiably, it will be misinterpreted by the people. We want this to be a feast of the people of the Divine Savior, a concelebration which reveals the fervent piety of our nation.

The church has the duty to denounce sin

Given the many events of both this past week and the coming week, I want to focus on them in light of the word of God that was read today. It is very easy to say, «There is no persecution», but when the church's mission is analyzed in the light of God's word, it is clear that there is persecution. In the light of today's readings, it appears that the church has the duty to denounce sin. The first reading speaks about social sin, and the other readings refer to the church's mission of raising humanity in prayer to true development, the goal of which, the pope tells us, is our relationship with God. The truly free person is Moses; it is Abraham; it is the leader of the people who speaks with God. Look at the first reading: the sins of the people of Sodom are very grievous. God tells Abraham, «I am coming to see with my own eyes» (Gen 18:21). This is a beautiful anthropomorphic image; it is as if God became human. Naturally, this is a rhetorical, biblical image that represents God as a man who comes to investigate and see for himself the sins of his people.

This reading tells of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Bible doesn't say exactly what they were, but a very reliable interpretation holds that the sins were grave disorders of lust,

sins of the flesh. Social sins change over time, but their substance remains the same. The bishops meeting in Medellín in 1968 said that social sin exists also in Latin America. «Situation of sin» were their precise words (M 2,1). These words appear harsh, but think about: what is sin? Sin is the death of God. Sin was able to make God die on a cross because only in that way can it be forgiven. Sin is an offense against the law of God. It is tantamount to trampling on God's plan. Sin disdains what God desires and leads people to seek their happiness apart from God or against God. They find their delight in creatures, in money, in political power, in the flesh, in lustfulness, in adulterous love. Sin is turning your back on God for the sake of a creature, whether it be money, politics, lust, or anything else. Therefore, this scorned and offended God cries out to the people, «The sins of this people are many, and I am coming to see». Punishment is already hovering over the sinful people.

Medellín stated that this is a sinful situation of social injustice that cries out to heaven (M 1,1). I believe that we all feel this reality crying out to heaven. My sisters and brothers, I assure you that I study liberation theology in the work of sound theologians, such as Cardinal Pironio, present prefect of one of the Vatican congregations and a trusted confidant of the pope. He analyzed social sin in Latin America and said that God is offended by the social inequality that exists in our countries. It exists because people do not understand their dignity. There is no development, and people live in a state of conformity that is the true opium of the people.⁶ There is much in this, sisters and brothers. Rich people should not think that they alone are responsible for social sin. The fault lies also with passive people, those on the margins of society who do not struggle to realize their dignity and do not work for a better life. All those who remain indolent and silent, as if someone else was in charge of their destiny, are also sinning.

For this reason the church must awaken these indolent folk. That is why there are centers for *campesino* development and groups of biblical reflection. All this invigorates the people. Thanks be to God, we are witnessing how many workers, *campesinos*, and other poor people are becoming more aware of their dignity. To the extent that they realize their dignity, they will also recognize the great injustice that keeps them marginalized. They will tell themselves, «If I also am a child of God, if I also must be alert, then I must participate in the politics of my country's common good. I also have a right to the goods that God has created for everyone». But we repeat: we are not for class struggle or violence because the church does not preach communism. Certainly we struggle side by side with all those who are fighting for social, economic, and political demands, but the church carries in her heart a very different spirit that sets her apart from other liberators. Just because the church spends an afternoon participating in a gathering of teachers, we are called collaborators of ANDES.⁷ The church agrees with the teachers' just demands but does so from a Christian viewpoint, from Christ's viewpoint. Sympathy with a secular movement would never make the church renounce her God or the promotion of her people as children of God. Be sure to keep this in mind: the position of the church with regard to human promotion does not follow communist lines but rather the lines of the Gospel.

This is a situation of sin, and the church must keep struggling. If the church is considered subversive because it promotes *campesinos* or other marginalized people, and if for that reason she is persecuted and her priests are expelled, then the church is truly being persecuted. The

⁶ PIRONIO E., *Escritos pastorales*, Madrid, 1973, 91.

⁷ National Association of Salvadoran Teachers (ANDES).

church cannot stop promoting human beings. She must continue to tell them, «Do not fall asleep! You are children of God! Work to reclaim your dignity! Be forgers of your own destiny! Work for your own common good!» The church cannot neglect or renounce this mission of promotion because the Gospel itself obliges her to preach this reality. Catholic schools, youth centers, and all the places where the church speaks her word must promote development and awaken the true consciousness of the men and women who have been marginalized by society but have also been accomplices in social sin.

But there is another source of sin, says Cardinal Pironio, namely, the personal sin of those who hoard all the things that God has created for the happiness of all people.⁸ We don't say that they must give their wealth away. That is a stupid objection that they have often thrown in the church's face: «How can everything be shared equally? By tomorrow people will have done away with everything!» We are not referring to this at all. Rather, we are speaking about a transformation of private property while still respecting it. It is a question of giving it true social significance, which consists not only in producing more but in producing more for the common good of everyone. It is a question of making what God has created and enriched in our lands a source of happiness for all those people who lack the basic necessities. Yes, this also is a source of social sin, and as in Sodom and Gomorrah it cries out to heaven and makes God come down to investigate what is going on. Another social sin that cries to heaven is political marginalization. All men and women have received from God the capacity to contribute to the common good. Preventing people from developing themselves by contributing what they can to the good of the nation is also an abuse of power. It is another way of hoarding the goods that God has given for the benefit of all.

The church cannot keep silent in the face of these economic, political, and social injustices. If the church failed to speak out, she would be an accomplice in marginalizing the people and lulling them into unhealthy, sinful conformity; she would be an accessory to those who take advantage of people's passivity in order to abuse them, accumulate economic and political power, and keep the vast majority living in misery. This is the voice of the church, brothers and sisters, and as long as there is no freedom for her to proclaim these truths of her Gospel, there is persecution. These are substantial issues, not matters of little importance. It is a question of life and death for God's kingdom on this earth, which is where Christ wants it to be established. That is why these offenses are institutionalized sin, sin that has become part of the environment.

We already know, sisters and brothers, that sin depends on the heart of every person, for it is the heart of every person that organizes a society with unjust structures, which is a society where people cannot develop as images of God. Therefore all of us—the politically powerful, the economically powerful, social leaders, professionals, skilled people, and the church as well—we must all contribute to doing what God wants so that God's designs are not frustrated by human sin. What happened in Sodom and Gomorrah was simply that people were searching for happiness apart from God, and that is how Latin America is seeking it today: it is seeking happiness without God, against God, and so it is destroying God's image on the earth, which is the human person.

⁸ PIRONIO E., *Escritos pastorales*, 92.

The church teaches us to pray

Another role of the church is revealed in another gospel passage: «Lord, teach us to pray». Jesus taught them to say «Father». This precious word would resolve everything. If we could only learn to call upon the Creator of all things as «Father», then we would feel that all of us are brothers and sisters, and we would pray, «Your kingdom come» (Luke 11:1-2). This is the deepest desire of the human heart because when God's kingdom comes on earth there will be more justice, more love, more harmony, and more equality among us all. Forgive us for we are sinners. My sisters and brothers, this beautiful prayer is the height of human development. Human beings should be valued not for what they have but for what they are. And human beings most truly *are* when they come face to face with God and understand what marvels God has done with them, how God has created them as intelligent, free, and loving beings.

If any of you who are following this development of my thought do not pray and say you have no need of prayer, then I invite you to undertake this intellectual exercise. Develop your personal abilities, affirm your gifts and qualities, and allow people to shower you with praise and applause. Look at how great you are—you are almost a god. That is why you believe you are God; that is why you don't pray. But no matter how much you extend your being and your abilities, if you feel that there is a greater mystery and that your own immensity meets up with that other greater immensity, at that very moment you are praying. Prayer does not mean losing your greatness; prayer means expanding your greatness. Prayer also does not mean that you expect God to do what you can do. Do all that you can do. Put your technology to work; devise irrigation systems for your fields; fertilize your soil; feed your cattle as best you can. And after you have done all this, then pray. Don't expect everything from God, but after you have done everything you can, then leave the rest in God's hands. Do the same as those we mentioned here once before, those who prepared for a flight to the moon. A Christian technician said, «Technology has done everything that can be done. We hope this will be a success, but now all we can do is pray and ask God to bless our work». That is prayer, sisters and brothers. Prayer does not make us smaller. When we pray expecting God to do everything while we stand idle with our arms folded, then that is a false god. But when we work and develop our mind and our ability to organize, then we should say to God, «Lord, despite this mystery of greatness which I am, I understand that you are greater, that you embrace me, that you understand me, that you complete me».

When we recognize our limitations, we are at the peak of our development. On the other hand, when we don't pray and when we place all our trust in our capital and our money, then we should listen to these words of *Populorum Progressio*, the encyclical of Pope Paul VI: «One of the surest indices of moral underdevelopment is the avaricious person» (PP 19). When people trust in themselves, in their money, in the things of earth, then God is useless to them. Poor things, they are morally underdeveloped. When people pray and trust in God, then they are fully developed, and they have found their true vocation.

That is what the church is for, sisters and brothers: to teach people to pray. But the church must teach people to pray in the right way, not the lulling kind of prayer that says, «Resign yourself to living poorly, for after death God will give you heaven». This is not Christianity. That is why they accused us Christians of giving opium to the people. In this communism was right, because they were working hard while Christians were only praying and doing nothing. But Christianity proves to be better than communism when people work like communists and hope in God like Christians. Do you see the difference, sisters and

brothers? The church must work for a twofold development, urging people to develop their abilities and bringing them to hope in the transcendent God without whom nothing is strong and nothing has value, as we said in today's prayer.

The church should be granted this freedom. That is why we have told the government that dialogue is necessary so that we all learn to speak the same language. We need a reflection group representing the government and representing the church so that Christian development according to the Gospel is not branded subversive and political and so that priests are not expelled just because they teach people to work and to pray in this true modern sense of evangelization. When there is reflection and when there is some confidence in the church, then it will be seen that the church is working for human development and is most willing to collaborate in this humanization of people, of capital, and of labor. The church desires nothing but this. I believe that this message is sufficiently clear, and it is fully confirmed by today's reading about how the people of Sodom sought happiness while turning their backs on God. We also have the example of Abraham, who sought ten just men but could not find them in that sinful society, and we have the example of Jesus.

Let us conclude here, sisters and brothers, with the second reading, in which Saint Paul tells us that Christ is like the great document on which all the sins of humankind are written. When he was nailed to the cross, all the sins against us were canceled, and we were pardoned (Col 2:14). I find no image more beautiful than the one where Saint Paul describes Christ on the cross for us: the devil has a bill demanding payment for the sins of humankind, but God pays off the bill with the sacrifice of his Son. Sin no longer has dominion over humankind. The devil no longer rules in the world. Now it is the kingdom of God that Christ has won with his cross and his blood, and Christians must work with that Christ and even die on that cross if need be. But we must not retreat, sisters and brothers; we must work for the true development that the Salvadoran church and the archdiocese always seek. May the church be truly faithful to the Gospel; may she know how to work and how to pray and how to develop men and women who become builders with God of a better world. We are now going to proclaim our faith in this God.