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THE PROPER USE OF THE GOODS THAT GOD HAS CREATED

**Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time
25 September 1977**

Amos 6:1a, 4-7
1 Timothy 6:11-16
Luke 16:19-31

My dear sisters and brothers.

As we previously announced, I invite you to pray today for the Holy Father. May all the intentions of this Mass and all the prayers being offered in large communities and small in union with this reflection by radio be oriented to the welfare of Pope Paul VI, who will celebrate his eightieth birthday tomorrow. The Lord has preserved him with a clear mind. He has the aches and pains of an octogenarian, but he still possesses a clarity that is a true instrument of the Holy Spirit for guiding the church in these very difficult times. Therefore, as a sign of our communion with the pope and of our faithful allegiance to him—indeed, our people are characterized by this love for the pope—let us orient our prayers, our Mass, and our communion to asking the Lord in our customary way, using this ejaculatory prayer that I hope you all have learned: «Let us pray for our Holy Father, Pope Paul VI», to which the people respond, «May the Lord preserve his life, make him happy on earth, and not allow him to fall into the hands of his enemies». This is a very beautiful liturgical prayer that throughout the centuries has given expression to the communion of the people of God with the one who has been placed as the visible head of this same people. I believe that we do homage to the Holy Father and are in full harmony with his heart as pastor when we refer to the realities of our people.

Events of the week

Very unpleasant events have occurred this week. For example, radio stations were taken over, several policemen were wounded in a shootout, and demonstrations were held at the university to protest the assassination of the rector.¹ Above all, we are pained because the disappeared do not reappear.

The kidnapping of Mrs. Chiurato remains a mystery. Once again, in the name of charity, we ask those responsible to negotiate and not to deprive this woman of her freedom. We also raise our voice on behalf of so many mothers who are crying out for their children who have disappeared. I have been visited by mothers in tearful anguish who have gone as beggars from one police station to another, asking for their children.

¹ Reference to Dr. Carlos Alfaro Castillo, assassinated 16 September 1977.

Ridiculing their pain, the police tell them, «They are not here. Look for them in another place». We mention the cases of our young catechists, Amadeo Recinos Quintanilla, Salomé Rodríguez Carrero, and Antonio Álvarez Menéndez Rodríguez. We are criticized because we call them humble catechists while they accuse them of being criminals. I am not defending their innocence, but I am asking that their situation be made known. Are they dead or alive? If they are alive, then bring them before the courts. If they are criminals, let them be punished according to the law, but don't continue to commit this horrible crime of tormenting the hearts of so many mothers. Also, many letters are arriving from Amnesty International supporting the case of Professor Emma Rosales de Alegría who was taken prisoner on July 17 while she accompanied her little daughter to the school of Soyapango. The daughter was beaten because she did not want to be separated from her mother.

Finally, my sisters and brothers, I lament the publication and extensive distribution of a flyer that many of you have seen. It places me at the head of all subversion. The people suspect the source of these flyers, and there are indications about who might be informing others about my travels around the countryside. Half-truths are worse than calumnies. It is true that I traveled to El Jicarón, El Salitre, and many other villages. I delight to be in the midst of my people and to feel the kindness of all these folks who through their bishop see the church as a sign of hope. But I have never done what this flyer states: inciting people to subversion or distributing subversive literature. That is calumny. In these villages I have told the people frankly, «I know that we are being watched and observed. Let them at least be honest in giving information about what is occurring here». There are thousands of people who can testify that all the claims of that flyer are pure calumny. What most concerns us priests whose names appear on that list is whether this is a sign that new crimes are being prepared. The people know who is to blame for all this propaganda, for the people are not deceived in these matters.

Life of the church

On the other hand, my dear sisters and brothers, we experience the church's great joy as she becomes ever more organized as the people of God. I want to congratulate Chalatenango and that entire department because yesterday they gave a wonderful demonstration of their communion with the church when I went there to install Father Fabián Amaya as episcopal vicar and Father Efaín Lopez as pastor of the city. That means that the authority of the bishop is delegated in such a way that this department, so rich in the Christian faith, can be organized with greater attention and better pastoral care. Both the religious and the laity are enthusiastically trying to make Chalatenango, as we said in establishing the vicariate, «a moral preserve of the church, a precious mine of vocations, and a sanctuary of the Christian faith in so many families who are well-organized there». Therefore, my dear sons and daughters of Chalatenango and the whole department, I send you from here my sincerest congratulations, and I ask you to collaborate with these new pastors who in communion with me are going to try to give you the best of church life, which is what you deserve.

Last Sunday in Santa Tecla there was a very consoling meeting with the priests, religious, and laity who want to coordinate the admirable efforts that Santa Tecla is making not only for the city but for the whole archdiocese. I also want to greet and

thank the Catholics of Comasagua who celebrated their patron, Saint Matthew, on the twenty-first. They gave me a demonstration of their loving communion with all their priests. These are experiences that fill me with joy.

Tuesday I was greatly consoled when a group of well-prepared young students from the Externado San José received the sacrament of confirmation. I take advantage of this opportunity to tell you who are parents that the age for confirmation is precisely that: the age of adolescence. It is a sacrament of adolescence. How wonderful it was to listen to these young people who after the confirmation gave me a letter which makes it clear that the true spirit of the church dwells in the noble hearts of all, no matter what their social class, as long as they sincerely hear the saving message of Christ. These young students of the Externado San José said this: «We are very happy to have you here with us on this day when we clearly recognize and accept our commitment with the Lord and with his people». I was also very happy to receive a letter from Colonia San Benito. Beside each signature were written the words: «I, a humble cook»; «I, a nursemaid»; «I, from within»; «I, a washerwoman», etc. All of these persons express their communion with the church and are thankful for the saving mission that the church is developing.

I also want to greet the communities of Zacamil and the Colonia El Porvenir where I had the joy of meeting with the people and celebrating the Eucharist. In those communities and in others where the priests are working with a true sense of the church, I was able to see how the people are maturing in the faith that we profess.

There were many other events, my dear sisters and brothers, and I always like to illuminate the word of God through these events of our civil and church life. That way the word, like sunlight, finds some concrete objects. Just as sunlight becomes color in flowers and the energy of life, so should the word of God shed light on my life, on your life, on society. Let us take care that this light from the Holy Bible truly illuminate us every Sunday and that we not be like those who heard the word of the prophets in times past. Look at the prophet Amos who lived seven centuries before Christ but whose social situation was very similar to ours. His voice does not belong to long lost-centuries. His voice becomes real for San Salvador in 1977. This frightening parable that Christ tells about the change of fortune of the rich and the poor in this life and the next is not some idle tale he told to tickle the ears of his audience twenty centuries ago. It is a serious warning from God who is telling us why we were created and how we must make use of things.

And this is precisely the theme of today's homily: the proper use of the goods that God has created. There is also an improper use, and we will refer to this negative aspect first, even though it is not the most important aspect. In the message of God, sisters and brothers, we should always try to look for what is positive. But alongside the positive, which is God's law and the Lord's loving plan for us, we humans always exalt a negative dimension which is sin and the struggle against the kingdom of God. And this will continue through the centuries. No one should be surprised that the church is said to be persecuted. Yes, she must be persecuted by the kingdom of darkness. If the church proclaims the will of God, she will always clash with the will of the anti-God, the anti-Christ, the shadows of sin, the mystery of iniquity which also attempts to exalt itself.

The abuse of private property

The prophet Amos describes this empire of darkness in terms of a luxurious lifestyle. The prophet describes very well that soft life of the rich even though he himself was just a shepherd in the desert of Judea. God sent him against his will to the northern kingdom of Israel, where during the reign of Jeroboam II there was an epoch of great peace and prosperity. But the people did not know how to take advantage of this peaceful period to adore God and give him thanks; rather, they sought only a life of luxury. «Lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on your couches, you eat lambs taken from the flock and calves from the stall» (Amos 6:4). These were calves that were nourished on milk alone so that their meat was very tender, and this was a delicacy for the dissolute folk of the north. «You improvise to the music of the harp, you drink from bowls of wine, and you anoint yourselves with the best oils; yet you are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph!» (Amos 6:5-6). Similarly, Christ our Lord in his parable gives echo to this lavish lifestyle: «There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day» (Luke 16:19a).

Sisters and brothers, don't you think that these realities still exist here among us in 1977 even though they describe situations of centuries ago? The rich people in the north of Galilee and all those who today enjoy a commodious life might well ask, «What sin is there in that?» It seems that there's no sin, but in truth the very first sin is undermining the meaning of property. The pagans defined private property in terms of *ius utendi et abutendi*, the right to use and abuse. Some people say, «If this is mine, then I can do with it as I like». No, the right of private property has limits, and these are pointed out to us here in the reading of Saint Paul's letter to Timothy (1 Tim 6:13). God gives life to the things of the world, and we have to recognize why God created these goods.

It is true that private property is a right, yet it still has a social function, as our constitution states so well. This social function is not limited simply to greater production, as those defending their own interests stated with regard to the threat of the agrarian reform law proposed by the ISTA.² Social function is not just a matter of producing more. We must produce more, yes, but for the common good. The goods that God has created for everybody must be channeled through structures that work for the benefit and happiness of everyone. We must avoid this terrible contrast that is pointed out in today's reading, where the rich man was feasting and the poor man was unable to eat even the scraps that fell from his table.

Insensitivity to the poor and to God

Here we see, sisters and brothers, the consequences and the tremendous errors of this luxurious lifestyle. Besides this false concept of private property, what is most terrible is this: it hardens people and makes them insensitive to others. What is it that Jesus is denouncing here when he says that while the rich man was feasting, Lazarus was «lying at his door covered with sores and would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, but nobody gave him any» (Luke 16:20-21)? Even the dogs came and licked his wounds. The dogs were more fortunate for they could eat the scraps

² Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria.

that the rich man tossed on the floor, leftovers that the poor man desired but was never given. Or as the first reading says after describing those orgies, «Yet you are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph» (Amos 6:6). The tribe of Joseph was considered the poorest and most needy; its members were the expression of extreme poverty and misery. Meanwhile those who enjoyed abundance were insensitive to their need.

Insensitivity is a grave sin. Here I am not speaking only about those who have great wealth. I am referring to all of us. When we have something to eat, even an ice cream, some crumbs of bread or a tortilla, we can perhaps become insensitive to those who do not have even these. Why don't we share, as the prophets bid us, even in our poverty? Insensitivity, according to the prophet Amos, is a betrayal of the covenant with Yahweh. God has established a covenant with this people—«You will be my people, and I will be your God» (Jer 31:33)—but on the condition that all feel that they are one people of God, brothers and sisters to one another. So much is this the case that we read this law in Leviticus: «The land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants» (Lev 25:23).

This was the concept that rich people had in Israel: they were renting from God. It was as if God had rented some land to them. Private property was understood in the light of God. The poor were God's representatives, and the rent that was to be paid for the land had to be paid to them. Therefore, both the rich and poor were beggars who had to sit down and share together. God gives alms to the rich, and through the rich he wants to give alms to the poor.

How beautiful is this biblical concept of poverty and wealth! It is not evil to possess things. Would that we were all rich! What is evil is insensitivity. What is wonderful is when those who *have* share! They should share with others as if in a family or as if with a fellow beggar. You are a beggar. I am also a beggar because I possess only what God has lent me—lent me! At the hour of death I must return it all. Let us share, then, what is a mutual gift of God. Let us both praise the Lord, and see how quickly violence and hatred and class struggle would disappear! Never, sisters and brothers, in my position as pastor, as one who is enlightened by theology (which thank God I continue to study), will I preach class struggle. I find these calumnies all the more offensive because they make me out to be one who is ignorant of my sublime mission of preaching love and never subversion.

This is what the church preaches: God has given these goods to everyone so that together we can make this world, which was created by God for the happiness of all, a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. I state in my pastoral letter:³ «The church knows that in this world we will not have a perfect paradise, but we do have the obligation to reflect in this imperfect world something of the loving beauty of eternity. As Christians who live with a hope for an afterlife in this heaven, let us gain that life by acting with justice and love in this world». As I have already repeated here many times, the Vatican Council spoke out against the Marxist calumnies which claim that the church is the opium of the people because she preaches eternity and makes people forget earth. That is a lie! The church in preaching eternity says, as does the Council, that those who

³ *The Church, the Body of Christ in History*, second pastoral letter of Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador (6 August 1977).

neglect their temporal duties and fail to administer them according to God's desires do not collaborate with God and do not love their neighbors; they therefore endanger their own salvation (GS 43). Thus, there is a very direct relationship between the salvation we hope for after death and our present work here in this world. No one who is unjust here in this world will have a share in the kingdom of heaven where love and justice reign supreme.

This prophecy of Amos and the parable of Jesus show us how the voice of the prophets, which is the voice of God, comes among us to announce this hope and to make people more just, more human, and more considerate. A still more serious matter, sisters and brothers, is insensitivity to God, which is even more tragic and horrendous. Such insensitivity to God results from our extravagance, our abuse of private property, and our desire to possess things and live comfortably without regard for our neighbor.

You heard the conclusion of the parable, when the rich man in hell asks Abraham to send a prophet with a message for his five brothers who are still alive and enjoying their wealth. He wants them to be converted so as not to fall into the same place into which he has sadly fallen. The response of Abraham is frightening: «They have Moses and the prophets» (Luke 16:29). They have the Catholic church that preaches. They have those who preach about social justice and the kingdom of God. «Let them listen to them» (Luke 16:30). But from hell the man insists, «Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent». Then comes a tremendous response at the end of the parable: «If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if some should rise from the dead» (Luke 16:31). What a terrible sentence!

I do not know if you have ever meditated, sisters and brothers, on the encounter of the bound Christ with Herod, the sensual, lustful adulterer who wanted to hear Christ speak so that he could laugh at him. How does Christ react? With silence. Not a word! (Luke 23:8-11). Woe to those hearts before which Christ remains silent! Woe to those homes where Christ's presence is not felt! Woe to those criminals and sinners who feel no remorse of conscience! Even if someone should arise from the dead, they would pay no mind. They are already petrified. What a terrible sentence, sisters and brothers! I would like us to engrave this on our hearts so that we never become insensitive to charity and love and thus gradually become insensitive to sorrow before God who calls us through our conscience.

How I wish that my humble words, instead of being distorted by selfish interests and by those who use flattery to gain favor, were taken seriously and listened to as the word of God. The flyers I referred to before do not simply express rejection of my priests and me, for Jesus tells us, «Whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the Father who sent me» (Luke 10:16). The truth is that I, who am speaking to you at this moment, am the voice of God. If instead of me there should be speaking here one of those recently killed, for example, or one of those who has died from torture and about whom nothing is known—if such a person were to stand here in this pulpit and speak, I don't think that even then the situation would change because those hardened hearts do not want to hear anything, not even when a dead person comes to tell them, «We are bad off in El Salvador».

This ugly face of our nation does not need to be made beautiful for those who live abroad; it needs to be made beautiful here within our borders so that it will appear beautiful elsewhere as well. But as long as there are mothers weeping over the disappearance of their children, as long as there is torture in our security centers, as long as there is lavish misuse of private property, as long as there is frightful disorder, my sisters and brothers, there cannot be peace. Acts of violence and bloodshed will continue. Repression accomplishes nothing. We must be reasonable and listen to the voice of God and organize a more just society that conforms to the heart of God. Everything else is simply patchwork. Everything else is repression. The names of those murdered will keep changing, but there will always be murder victims. The instances of violence will keep changing, but there will always be violence as long as we do not change the roots which are producing such an abundance of horrible things in our midst.

The good use of wealth

What then is the good use of wealth and material goods? Ah, my friends, if we only paid attention to the word of God that enlightens societies, nations, and families, we would create a paradise on earth! In today's second reading we are given some precious norms. If these norms were to inspire structural change in El Salvador, they would result in the disappearance of those awful realities we wish did not exist. First, Paul addresses his disciple Timothy as a «servant of God» (1 Tim 6:11). We have to see ourselves in the same way. God is the Lord, and all things, says Saint Paul, have been created by that God who gives life to the world through Jesus Christ. This Jesus will return to see how people have managed this world created by God. For he «alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, and no human being has seen or can see him. To him be honor and eternal power» (1 Tim 6:16).

When we live lives centered on God, then God is the center of our life, and our relations with others derive from God. When my use of the things God has created derives from God as the center that inspires my ethics, then I will be moral, honorable, and honest; I will tell the truth, I will not distort the news; I will not spread calumny because I know that God will hold me accountable. When God is the center of our lives, as Saint Paul says, then we will «pursue righteousness, devotion, love, faith, patience, and gentleness; we will struggle hard for the faith» (1 Tim 6:11-12). My sisters and brothers, this struggle of faith in which we are engaged is not a struggle of arms or of violence but of ideas and convictions. We do violence first to ourselves by the inspiration of faith according to what Saint Paul says so beautifully: «I insist that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach» (1 Tim 6:14). The commandment is the whole body of things that God has revealed and commanded, and we as servants of God have an obligation to obey. But when we shake off God's yoke and no longer hear God speaking in our conscience, then we have the situation where each person wants to be a god. The result of this is a cataclysm, as if the sun and the planets revolving around it were to lose their center of gravity and crash into one another. The sun is God, and as long as we revolve around God with an ethic that looks to God, then we will live together as sisters and brothers.

That is why we say that when religion preaches divine parenthood it is fulfilling its strictly religious mission. In this way it is orienting humankind toward God and thus

also contributing a great good to society, for there are no persons more honest, more noble, and more worthy of faith than those who fear God and place at the center of their lives an ethic of respect for the commandment without stain or reproach. Thank God, we have people like this among us, and we don't want them to become pessimistic. In one of those meetings I referred to earlier, a priest told me with sadness, «It is a shame that people do not believe in love». I told him, «But let us not tire of preaching love, for this is the force that will overcome the world. Let us never tire of preaching love. Even if we see waves of violence coming to drown out the fire of Christian love, love must win out. It is the only thing that can».

Dear sisters and brothers, let each one of us take to heart the exhortation that Saint Paul addressed to his disciple Timothy. Let us make our life a solar system where God is the sun. Let us make our lives God-centered and give our lives a profound eschatological sense. What does that mean? We have spoken before about this. Eschatology speaks about the final things, the hope that we have, the world beyond that is so beautifully illuminated in today's readings. How did that first reading from Amos end? It announces not a hell hereafter but a hell on earth. A few years after these denunciations of Amos, the Assyrian empire invaded and fulfilled the last verse of today's reading: «Now they shall be the first to go into exile and their wanton revelry shall be done away with» (Amos 6:7). If we do not voluntarily decide to put an end to these abuses, then God will do so, often by using the empires of this earth. The anti-communism that many use to defend their private property is not an anti-communism of love for God but an anti-communism of love for their riches. But God can make use of communism as he made use of the Assyrian empire to punish the disorders of the kingdom of Israel. May God not let fall on our people this frightening scourge, even more frightful than our actual situation. May God protect us from a godless, lawless empire that punishes us for not knowing how to respect our duties toward God. Jesus Christ is even more frightening when he speaks not about punishment for people on this earth but about a rich man dying and a poor man dying. One was buried in hell while the other was brought to rest in Abraham's bosom, that is, in communion with the father of faith (Luke 16:22). We have already heard the rest in today's gospel.

Truly terrible, sisters and brothers, is the outcome of a disorderly life. No one laughs at God. His law will endure forever. This God who is love for us becomes justice when we do not accept his invitation to love. That is why Dante, when describing hell in the *Divine Comedy*, expresses the following paradox: *Amor me fece que mi fa parlare*—«I was made by the love who makes me speak».⁴ Is it possible that God's love has made hell? That is what we have in today's reading: the love of a rejected lover. I believe I can appeal to the experience of many of you who have been in love and then been rejected by the object of your love. They rebuff you and no longer want to be with you. Does your heart not feel as though it has been cut into pieces? Does it not feel like hell? What would you want to do to the individual who has scorned your kindness? This is God, who loves us while we live and awaits our conversion. Even the greatest sinner, as we've said in Sundays past, is called by God to repent. God waits, but when God's loving patience ends, then his justice begins, and not even a finger dipped in water is allowed to cool the burning tongue in hell. This indicates, according to the commentators, that there is no comfort at all in hell. My sisters and brothers, we are not returning to the

⁴ DANTE ALIGHIERI, *La Divina Commedia*, Canto II.

Middle Ages when we talk about hell, but simply keeping before our eyes the infinite justice of God which no one should mock. Let us reform our nation in time! Let us organize the goods God has given us for the happiness of all Salvadorans. Let us make our nation, so rich in God's natural gifts, an antechamber of the Lord's paradise, and we will then have the good fortune of being received like the poor man, Lazarus.

And when we say poor, sisters and brothers, we are speaking about an inward attitude of the heart. Let us grasp this idea well: the poor person is not the one who is lacking material goods, just as the rich person is not the one who has plenty of them. According to the Bible, wealth and poverty refer to internal attitudes of the heart. This parable is the only one that gives a name to the main character: Lazarus, which in Hebrew means «one who trusts in God». This is the poor person: the one who trusts in God. The rich, on the other hand, are those to whom Jesus directs this parable. A few verses before today's passage Jesus told the parable of the unjust administrator. «The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all these things and sneered at him. And Jesus said to them, "You justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God"» (Luke 16:14-15). Here Christ defines who the rich are according to the Bible. The rich who are rejected by God are not those who possess wealth but rather those who love their possessions so much that they sneer at God: «God does not help me. My money is my god». The rich make an idol of money, and their hearts worship it. «The one who serves», Christ says, «cannot serve God and money» (Luke 16:13). The true attitude of poverty is that of Lazarus, who places his trust in God rather than the things of earth. There are many poor persons who have no material goods but who do not trust in God—they are not really poor. We want to encourage these persons because they are losing an opportunity that God offers them to become poor in the biblical sense. Let them change their attitude and place their trust in God. They should not be resigned to their situation but should struggle to improve it! We all must develop ourselves. God does not bless laziness or idleness; rather, God blesses the efforts of those who place their trust in him.

My dear sisters and brothers, let us chose this morning to be the poor people of Yahweh. I do not know who is listening to me here in the cathedral or beyond, but whoever you are, whether you possess much or little, I ask you to turn your heart over to God. Do not place your trust in the things of earth, and do not be resentful that you don't have what others have, but place your trust in God. No matter how many nice things you have in your house, do not think that your house is immortal. Everything comes to an end, and the only thing of value is placing your trust in God who alone is immortal and in whom we now profess our faith.