

38

THE CHURCH AT PRAYER, THE MISSIONARY CHURCH

**Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time
16 October 1977**

Exodus 17:8-13

2 Timothy 3:14-4:2

Luke 18:1-8

[Our coming together this morning] is like a family gathering,¹ not only with those who fill the cathedral—I am delighted to see the attendance, which is very consoling to me as pastor—but also with the communities there in the parishes and the villages, united together by this broadcast of our Catholic radio station. We come together to reflect on the reality of our pilgrimage as a local church which must be salt of the earth and light of the world, as Christ commanded (Matt 5:13-14). This perspective guides our personal history, our family problems, and our social problems. We must learn how to illuminate them with the Lord's word. That is why I like to recall here each week some of the events that occur with such extreme rapidity that from one day to the next we can easily forget what is truly important.

Events in the week

Let me highlight, for example, some of the principal events of this week. All of us have witnessed the labor conflicts in factories between owners and workers. There have been strikes where even blood has flowed, where human dignity has been violated, and where there has been perhaps no effort at dialogue, which is the rational way to resolve conflicts. In this regard our office has always been honored to receive information and to ask for interventions. The church realizes that her competency is not in the area of sociology or labor relations, but she knows that there is a government ministry of labor and that there is desire to reach an agreement that should be exploited. As pastor, I can only affirm that we must resolutely uphold justice and respect for human dignity, even that of the humblest workers, because that is the will of the Lord.

In this regard I am happy to be in agreement with some denominations outside the church. Some Protestant pastors have come to express their solidarity with the church and their desire to preach justice and work together with us in these areas. The church fully accepts this joint work because we are not concerned just with something Catholic; it is a matter of humanity, of justice. In this you can rest assured that the church will always stand for justice for the poor and those who suffer, but she will also raise her voice when there are abuses. The church throws light on these realities from the perspective of God, and she calls upon people to use their common sense and

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

understanding and to refrain from resolving these situations by resorting irrationally to the «power of the strongest». Rather, we should use the power of reason, which is also the power of God.

Know also that the church fully supports the just demands of the *campesinos*. Harvest time is drawing near for sugarcane, coffee, and cotton, and we have read in the newspapers about the desires of the workers who are able to earn money only during this harvest season. Those who live close to these tremendous realities know what wages are like for coffee or cane or cotton workers. Often they already owe more money than they will earn because they have had to borrow money all year long in order to eat. In these days when the products of our land, blessed by God, are fetching high prices, it is only just that those who collaborate in producing this wealth benefit from it as well. This is simply Christian justice. Let the wealth be shared! Let us show our gratitude to God for the gifts received and for the higher prices. In this way we can all feel that we are sisters and brothers not only emotionally but in reality. Once again I state: the church is not an expert in establishing prices; that is not her competency. But we do know that there is a government ministry that must act justly and not imitate the judge in today's parable who «neither feared God nor respected any human being» (Luke 18:2). He respected only the powerful of this world and therefore paid no heed to the poor widow who was asking for justice to be done. Let there be more dialogue, then, not only between employers and workers, but also between the interests of the people and the government officials responsible for the diverse aspects of society.

I believe that all of us are witnesses to the sad and depressing spectacles that begin to be evident once again in those areas that produce coffee and the other products of our land. The poor workers have to recuperate their strength while sleeping out in the open, in the cold, sometimes on the benches of a public park. This is not a beautiful scene. If we truly want to put a beautiful face on our nation, then there must be more justice and more understanding. I make a plea, then: if people do not want to listen to the church, then there are other institutions that are proudly philanthropic, as I said at the funeral of Father Navarro. For the love of humankind I call upon those institutions to remain active and to provide support for the just demands of those who are not asking for alms but simply some benefit as a result of their work.

Life of the church

I also want to share with you some good news about our Catholic communities. As you know, October 12, the feast of Our Lady of the Pillar, is also the day when our America was discovered. According to history, since there was no priest on the first voyage of Christopher Columbus, it was lay people who planted the cross of Christ on the beach and sang a *Salve* to the Virgin. A prayer to the Virgin was the first Christian greeting that our lands heard. Without a doubt the Virgin wanted to reserve this day, solemnly celebrated in Spain, for discovering these lands of America; she wanted to present herself from the very first day as the mother of this continent.

Here in the archdiocese we celebrate this event in Zaragoza, a town that bears the name of the Spanish city of which our Lady of the Pillar is the patroness. In Zaragoza I had the opportunity to preach to the people about how our Christian faith is an apostolic faith that gathers us together here on this Sunday and enables us to hope in

God and pray with confidence. Our faith is apostolic because this devotion to the Virgin of the Pillar goes back to the apostle James; it is the same faith Christ left to us through his apostles.

I also told the people that our faith is a missionary faith, and that was how the Spaniards came to discover America. There was a missionary sense in the hearts of the Catholic king and queen, who wanted to place these new lands under the feet of Christ. Later, however, as usually happens, the subjects of those laws were abusive and committed terrible assaults against our poor Indians. The central idea, however, was a missionary one with the result that we as Christians of this continent were born in the light of this great message and this mission venture. This is what I want to speak to you about now.

But first I want to remind you that this apostolic and missionary faith is a Marian faith. As Pope Pius XII said, it is Marian faith that has made this land of Latin America like a heaven adorned with stars: every shrine dedicated to Mary is a star, and these stars form a constellation of sanctuaries. The Virgin is patroness not only in all the Latin American countries but also in humble chapels and in magnificent churches. The name of Mary has given such a palpable, tender character to our faith that it is worthwhile renewing our faith in Mary during this month of the rosary. Let us continue to give thanks to the Lord for having given us this caring mother. From the hill of Tepeyac she spoke to Juan Diego, the representative of all our races: «Am I not here as your mother?» How beautiful it is to feel that we are sisters and brothers not only because we are children of God but because we bear in our hearts the love and tenderness of the Mother of Christ who is also the mother of our church.

The pastor of San José Las Flores sent me a very sad telegram. They have killed his best catechist. «I am extremely sad», says Father Poprawa, «because he was my right hand in the work of catechesis in the parish». ² We want to express our condolences to our beloved pastor, and at this time of petitions I ask your prayers for the eternal rest of this new victim of our criminal violence. Pray also for the conversion of the sinners.

Yesterday we traveled to San Martín to install Father Rutilio Sánchez as pastor. This decision was the result of serious deliberations, and I was very pleased to see how the people of this area ratified the decision of the bishop—yesterday was like another Palm Sunday! Some people want to interpret this as a provocation, but I tell you that this is simply a pastoral decision. Father Sánchez has done great work in this area, and he is known for a certain maturity in the faith. Since this work is not finished and is moving along fairly well, we wanted to support it with our own presence and with the presence of many priests, religious, and faithful of other parishes. As Father Sánchez said, «This is a new commitment to my people», and certainly it will redound in much glory. I ask you to pray for him so that this new era in the life of the parish of San Martín might render great glory to God and provide many benefits for souls and for the church. Indeed, the only thing we seek to achieve in our pastoral ministry is the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

² On 7 October 1977 Simón Córdova, leader and Caritas representative in his community, was assassinated in Nueva Trinidad (Chalatenango). See «A Word from the Archbishop: A Message and Condolences» in *Orientación* (23 October 1977).

On the last Sunday in October at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, Cojutepeque will convoke all the Knights of Christ the King in the archdiocese. Thus, a call now goes out to all the men who are members of this organization to come and celebrate a kind of review of this army of Christ the King there in Cojutepeque in two weeks' time.

This morning at 10:00 o'clock we will install Father Samuel Orellana as the new pastor in Ayutuxtepeque, and also tonight at 7:00 o'clock we will present Father Díaz as the new pastor of the church of Candelaria.

My sisters and brothers, we want to illuminate these events of our history and our church with two thoughts taken from today's readings. This homily could be titled, «The Church at Prayer» and secondly «The Missionary Church».

The church at prayer

Today's first reading features a person that I would like us to interpret as a figure of the church at prayer. There on the battlefield we find Joshua, the leader of the people of Israel, warring with the Amalekites, who were opposing Israel in its journey to the Promised Land. The Amalekites dominated the region toward the south, and they had to be defeated so that the people of God could pass through. This, then, was one of those just wars where all human, natural means had been exhausted. Like a workers' strike, war is a last resort. When attempts have been made to dialogue and no understanding is achieved, then a just war is permitted to claim a right that is not granted reasonably. The people of Israel had been commanded by God to travel to the Promised Land, but the Amalekites presented an obstacle. Despite the great holiness of Moses and Joshua, war was declared. But there was something beautiful in that moment: while Joshua led the army in battle, Moses was on the mountain in prayer, holding in his hand the staff that God had given him as a sign of his divine power, the staff with which he had worked so many wonders. Moses raised his hands on high, and as long as he kept his hands raised up, the army of Israel had the better of the fight. When his arms grew tired and his hands fell to his side, the army of Israel retreated. So two of Moses' aides, Aaron and Hur, supported his arms so that they would not be lowered. (Exod 17:11-12)

This is the image I would like all of us to engrave on our hearts, sisters and brothers. We who are pastors of the church and leaders of this people of God need to keep our hands continually raised up in prayer. And there is a need for all the people to become like Aaron and Hur, those aides of Moses, so that we all join together in prayer. There is nothing more beautiful than a church at prayer, and I think that never has our diocese been such a prayerful church as it is now. My heart is filled with joy when so many people tell me, «We are commending you to God. We are praying for you». Even yesterday, when a sick rumor was spread about my being kidnapped, many phone calls arrived assuring us of prayers. I don't know what people hope to achieve with these threats or with broadcasting such news. I want to denounce in timely manner, sisters and brothers, that the church is exposed to danger, the danger of a battle against the forces of evil and the powers of hell. The devil is not an illusion, and he has many ministers on earth, many who serve him and collaborate with him. That is why God also has to have the power of the people of God who cry out in prayer.

In a short while, during Mass, I will speak words to the Lord that fill me with emotion: «Do not look on our sins but on the faith of your church». I think especially of this church which is all of you, souls at prayer. I think also of how the prayers of so many priests and religious become present on the altar at that very moment together with Christ, the divine Moses. It is wonderful to know that in certain novitiates and religious communities there are explicit times of prayer when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed and religious women kneel like angels before God. It is beautiful to know that in a chapel such as that of the Divine Providence Hospital, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed all day and is visited by the sick, the sisters, and benefactors, all praying for the church and her needs. It is marvelous to think that thousands of souls are praying even without the mystique of a church building. Such are all of you, my beloved sick, you who could not come to Mass but who are beside your radios, joined in prayer with this celebration of the cathedral. At this time, also, communities and families in the countryside put aside their daily chores and gather around the radio in order to be in prayerful communion with this cathedral, the mother of all the churches of the diocese. Our children also pray in their catechism classes as they prepare for First Communion. As they lift up their pure and innocent hands, how can God not welcome their prayers? This is the church at prayer. The church is also at prayer when the father of a family does not have time to kneel down and pray but is working in order to provide food honestly for his family. The church is at prayer in those looking for work and trusting in God. This is the people of God at prayer. It would be an endless task trying to describe this spectacle, for it can be appreciated only with the power of God's vision, with the power of faith.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I invite you all to be souls at prayer. Prayer must become part of this movement of human development that the church is promoting. Prayer must be the principal force of development and give it transcendent meaning. If people want their society to develop economically, socially, and politically but do not pray, then they are simply looking for earthly things. This is immanent development or worldly development that will last only as long as things go well. Afterwards, though, exhaustion sets in because people have not placed their trust in the transcendence which is within the power of Christians. Transcendence means that even though we do everything possible here on earth, we will achieve nothing unless God establishes a new order of things. It is God who has offered himself as Savior, and God is the only one who can redeem our situation. Yes, he asks for our collaboration, and we have to collaborate as best we can, as Joshua did in the valley when engaged in bloody battle and confronting danger. But remember: at the same time Moses was praying earnestly to God. There is only one cause we fight for; it is immanent insofar as we struggle on this earth, and it is transcendent insofar as we pray to God with lifted hands: «Only you, Lord, can bring the victory of justice and peace and love to this world that is so needy».

This is the way that we should build: with prayer and work. *Ora et labora*, this is the beautiful motto of the Benedictines, who spend the whole day working and make of their work a continual prayer to the Father. This is the church at prayer. We have to incorporate this value of prayer into human development because if we do not pray, then we view reality myopically, with resentments, with hatred, with violence. Only by sinking into the heart of God can we understand God's plans for history. Only by sinking into moments of intimate prayer with the Lord can we learn to see the image of God in

the face of men and women—especially those who suffer most, the poorest, the most ragged—and thus carry on God’s work. Only by prayerful contemplation can we perceive the power of the Spirit weaving itself into history; it is a power that can be abused by those whom God makes his scourges but only until God says «Enough!» This is the hour that we are impatiently awaiting. At times it appears as though that hour will never come, but it will.

Through prayer we understand that perseverance is necessary, as in the case of the widow in the gospel (Luke 18:1-8). Like her, we must confront the iniquitous judges and others who should be governing this world with justice but who fear only the power of money and arms and politics; they forget that those forces are only relative since everything comes from God. Like the widow in today’s gospel, let us not fear the iniquity of judges nor the partiality of those who make laws only to favor certain influential classes but do not enter into dialogue with the poor who, like the widow, ask for a better salary in order to have food and a home where they can sleep in stormy weather. Today’s gospel tells us that this perseverance will bring victory not through violence but through prayer and confidence in God. I invite you, sisters and brothers, to make our church a church at prayer. This is the greatest power of the archdiocese.

This week I heard a phrase that filled my heart with consolation. A person from another country asked me, «Do you want me to give a name to your diocese? I have named it “the church of our dreams”». I asked, «Why the church of our dreams?» She replied, «Because I have found here in the archdiocese a church that has placed its trust in the power of God, in the desire to be an authentic church, in the value of foregoing all those things that perhaps gave her power in earlier times but were not the power of God».

What she said has led me to reflect at length. I do not tell you this out of vanity, dear sisters and brothers, but to communicate to all of you in this shared meditation that we should continue to make our diocese the church of our dreams. Let us make it the church that Christ dreamed of when he established her; with all her weakness she is still protected by the power of God that comes from prayer. Saint Augustine had a very nice saying that I would like you all to remember: «Prayer is the power of humans because it is the weakness of God».³ It is like when a father experiences the weakness of his child; feeling weak also, he approaches the child and helps the child in its weakness. This is our church: we are weak with the power of God. Let us pray much because that way we will bring near to us the God who becomes weak when the weak ask for his protection: «In you, Lord, I trust, do not let me be disgraced» (Ps 31:2).

The missionary church

My other reflection, sisters and brothers, concerns the missionary church, which I want to present briefly as an announcement concerning next Sunday. On the penultimate Sunday in October, which will be the twenty-third, we celebrate World Mission Sunday. But this does not mean that we must be missionaries on just that Sunday. Next Sunday should be like a knock on the heart of every Christian to say, «What is your missionary spirit like? Your whole life has to be one of mission».

³ This phrase is attributed to St Augustine but does not appear in his writings and meditations on prayer.

The basis of all of this is found in Saint Paul's letter to Timothy, which was read today: «Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you have learned it and that from your infancy you have known the Sacred Scriptures» (2 Tim 3:14-15a). Belonging to a family of converts, Timothy had learned from his grandmother and his mother the religion that he professed and that Paul helped him deepen. His family was a missionary family. Indeed, every family that catechizes its children is fulfilling the mission of transmitting the great message of salvation.

Speaking about this revelation, Saint Paul tells him, «The Sacred Scriptures are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus» (2 Tim 3:15b). This is a great aspect of our faith. It is not a philosophy that promises happiness on earth. It is not one of those popular courses that produce successful salespersons. It is not a psychology for making people happy and taking away their worldly worries. It is wisdom that comes from God. Again we are in the presence of transcendence. Only that which comes from God can bring salvation because salvation comes from the Lord. That is why Saint Paul tells Timothy, «All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness» (2 Tim 3:16).

My sisters and brothers, if the church is concerned about spreading her Gospel to the ends of the earth, it is not because she desires to meddle in affairs of state like some foreign country meddling in the affairs of our country. Those who speak of the church as a foreign power do not understand anything about the church. It is like the words of that hymn that is sung on the day when the three magi come to adore the Child Jesus. King Herod is jealous because another king has been born, but the church sings, «Do not be afraid, Herod. The One who will establish the kingdom of heaven is not coming to take away earthly powers».⁴ What the church gives the kingdoms and the powers of earth is the spirit of heaven. That is what Saint Paul states today: «Scripture is useful for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness» (2 Tim 3:16). As the church preaches her Gospel, she respects the history, the nature, and the way of being of every people. But the church corrects and elevates people, filling them with virtue so that Salvadorans become better Salvadorans, so that Africans become better Africans. The kingdom of God is injected into or grafted onto all races and all cultures, not taking away from any culture or any person their own originality but rather making them more true to themselves. Thus if you or I or any of us are faithful to our religion, our defects gradually disappear, and we become decidedly more Christian. A Christian is nothing more than a perfect person. Human virtues are necessary because Christianity does not destroy the human virtues of anyone but rather respects them. This is our mission.

Saint Paul tells Timothy that our mission is to communicate this revelation that elevates, sanctifies, dignifies, and strengthens the natural ways of all peoples. That is why Paul tells Timothy, «I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead»—notice how solemn the statement is; it is a command—«proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or not; reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and instruction» (2 Tim 4:1-2). When I denounce

⁴ Hymn for Vespers on the feast of the Epiphany.

injustices and condemn abuses from this pulpit, when I disagree with certain attitudes, it is not I who am speaking. I am nothing more than a messenger of this word that is declared to all peoples to reprove, to rebuke, to exhort. Those who heed me do not heed me but heed God, the God who wants us Salvadorans to be more true, who wants us more united as family, who wants more justice, who wants more respect among us. All peoples must hear the word of God with this attitude that moves me deeply here in the cathedral. It is the word of God that is reaching into the hearts of each of you through my crude words. As you listen and as I also keep learning, we try to be better, each one in his or her vocation: I as pastor, the priests who hear me as priests, the women religious whom I also thank for your presence here in the cathedral, as well as all of you who are listening on your radios. We all have our vocation: young people, married couples, professionals. And the rich are not excluded. I love you greatly, but I want you to be converted to this saving truth because, after you've been happy here on earth, I don't want you to be condemned for not being good administrators of the things that God has given you. I feel solidarity also with the poor who live on the margins of society, but I don't sympathize with their vices and disorders. I advise them: straighten out, develop yourselves, work, and put aside vices so as to be true human persons. This is what the church preaches. That is why it hurts me when they say that I want to be the bishop of just one social class and that I despise the other class. No, sisters and brothers, I try to have a heart as open as Christ's. I try to imitate him in order to call all people to this saving word so that we will all be converted, myself first of all. Let us be converted to this word that exhorts, that encourages, that elevates. This is the church's mission.

My sisters and brothers, helping the missions means helping those men and women, those priests and laity, who minister in lands where Christ is still not known. People there may be practicing natural religions and adoring false gods, but perhaps their worship is more honest than that of our Christians. Missionaries seek to lift these beliefs to the one true God so that the people will be more faithful and happier. Talking about the missions doesn't mean that only those of us who are members of the church will be saved or that we have to bring everyone else into the church.

Mission means that there are many lights of Christ in pagan lands. There is much truth and much grace that Christ and the Spirit are bringing to peoples who do not know God but who will be saved by their fidelity to their pagan laws. But the church feels that she is the depository of an integral redemption by Christ. All those religious values that are found in Judaism, Islam, and the false religions are crying out for integral truth and for the single church that Christ wants. And this is the mission: to take advantage of those human values, to esteem them, and to raise them up to God. That is the mission. Thus, the missionary work of the church is a work of human development on a global level to carry out the grand project of God: uniting all peoples into one family with Christ as the only head so that one day Christ can place at God's feet the entirety of humankind, made up of diverse races and diverse ways of thinking but all affirming true faith in Christ.

Next Sunday the church calls us to mission, but I wanted to anticipate this subject because Saint Paul's message today demands it and also because I want to ask you, dear sisters and brothers, to reflect a lot on mission and missionaries all this week. And if it is possible, encourage your children and the young people in your homes to do so as well because God has great plans for these young people of El Salvador. So many

missionaries could arise from our families if we lived with this spirit of missionary endeavor! Can we not propose to young people the heroic work and the marvelous adventure of being a missionary even without being a priest? On the missions there are doctors, nurses, professionals, engineers, catechists—some for short periods and others for years. How many people minister in those distant lands! But even if we don't have people with that heroic mettle of being foreign missionaries, at least let us be rearguard missionaries, brothers and sisters. Let us fulfill our obligations with our family by being faithful in marriage and making our family holy. And let us offer the suffering of infirmity for the missions because when we say in the creed, «I believe in the communion of saints», we are expressing this truth. The good that you do in your home redounds to the welfare of the whole organism; it is prayer for the missionaries.

Also, sisters and brothers, remember that the missions are in need of money. Next Sunday there will be a special collection in all the parishes. This money will be sent to the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, which administers those large mission territories where so many works have to be sustained. Let us not say that we are a poor country and that we need all our money here. Even though much money from El Salvador is already unjustly going to foreign banks, the best foreign bank is this one: helping the work of our faith despite our own poverty and with a sense of solidarity. In this way we thank God for the faith we have received and make it possible for others to receive it as well. I want to remind you, sisters and brothers, that in exchange for these few coins we send, we Catholics in El Salvador receive a great deal more from other countries. For example, Germany sends us many thousands of dollars for our Catholic works. The United States and several other countries that give international aid have understood the meaning of living in solidarity with the poor. Let us, then, as poor people also express solidarity by sharing out of our poverty. We are not going to make the missions wealthy with our contributions, but we are going to demonstrate that in El Salvador we understand the meaning of mission and that we can help the missions even if only in a small way.

My sisters and brothers, we have spoken about the church at prayer and the missionary church. These are two great aspects that we cannot neglect if we want to be an authentic church. Now we are going to place ourselves in the sublime prayer of our Eucharist in which we offer ourselves to God along with Christ, the divine Moses, who raises up his hands to ask for mercy for this nation that is so much in need of it.