

43

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MEANING OF THE CHURCH

Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time
13 November 1977

Malachi 4:1-2a
2 Thessalonians 3:7-12
Luke 21:5-19

We provide a framework for our homily with events that have moved us, whether in our national life or in some family or personal affairs. We do this because the homily is simply the word of God applied to those of us who are reflecting together today.

Events that have moved us

In the first place, I want to unite myself to the sorrow of the family of Don Raúl Molina who as you all know was assassinated yesterday in an attempted abduction. Once again we repudiate this violence, and the church unites herself to the suffering of all victims of violence. This is our clear position, and that is why your pastor's heart is pained when his intentions are misrepresented and he is smeared to the point of saying that he is instigating murders.¹ You will remember that we also extended our condolences to the families of the policemen who were killed, and we denounced the crime that brought their lives to an end. We pray, then, this morning for Don Raúl, that he be given eternal rest by the mercy of the Lord. And we desire for the entire nation that these scenes of violence might disappear.

The other significant event that filled our week was the demonstration of farm workers outside the Ministry of Labor. The mediation of the church was requested, and we gladly offered to mediate in a spirit of service and in a search for justice for our people. At first our offer was rejected. The president informed us that he would not negotiate with illegal organizations. In light of this we communicated our good will by radio, and despite the rejection of our offer, we invited the parties to enter into reasonable dialogue so that there would be no violence in this situation. Thanks be to God, our mediation was later accepted, and with the help of our esteemed vicar general, Monsignor Urioste, an agreement was reached, as everyone knows. We hope that the promises made yesterday are honestly kept, that the strikes come to an end, and that the voices of the *campesinos* are also heard.

After commenting on these matters, sisters and brothers, we also want to lament other painful events of the week. For example, we were visited by two mothers looking for their sons, José Julio Ayala Mejía and Victor Manuel Rivas Guerra, who were

¹ The headline of the review *La Opinión* for November 1977 read: «Archbishop Romero Blamed for Death

captured by five treasury police officers on April 24. More recently, on November 9, José Justo Mejía, from La Ceiba in Las Vueltas, Chalatenango, also disappeared after being captured by the treasury police. His wife, together with their nine small children, is suffering as a result of this loss, just as these men's mothers are suffering the disappearance of their sons. I repeat, therefore, the call for justice: let justice be done! If these men are criminals, let them be judged and punished, but do not punish their families with this situation of uncertainty—a situation that was endured by the Chiurato family right up to the end. These assaults and acts of violence, regardless of where they come from, offend God and tear apart the life of the nation. They bring about no good but only cause evil.

In this week's *Orientación* I present in my column, «The Archbishop's Word», the theme of the next World Day of Peace. The pope asks us to celebrate January 1 of each year as a day of peace, and he suggests a theme for the day. The theme for 1978 is «No to violence! Yes to peace!» In the bulletin from Rome that presents the pope's wishes there is an analysis that I would like you to read and to reflect on; it states, «Violence may come from persons or groups seized by a frenzy of domination (power) or by a frenzy of consuming (possessions)». The pope is talking about envy, avarice, the desire to possess. This frenzy, he says, «tends to limit unduly or to suppress the lives of other people or whole societies through racism, genocide, and even the forceful imposition and maintenance of unjust and discriminatory political or economic structures». ² These are the words of the Holy See. They are not the demagogic words of the bishop of San Salvador. They are not the subversive words of the Latin American bishops who met in Medellín. What the bishops did in Medellín was to give a name to the situation that the Holy See has just described. The bishops in Medellín said that there exists an injustice called «institutionalized violence» (M 2,16); it is the same desire or frenzy for power that the Vatican communiqué describes. Some people, in their frenzy to maintain power and control the economy, are capable of trampling upon the lives of others and on the whole of society. This is violence, institutionalized violence. It is not surprising that new violence arises as a reaction against this institutionalized violence.

The Vatican statement continues along the same line: «Violence can also characterize the manner of acting of those who are or who consider themselves oppressed. Their desire for life and justice finally explodes in violence: this is the violence of the weak, those who are deprived of certain fundamental rights». ³ There exist, then, two forms of violence: the violence which oppresses from above politically and economically and the violence that reacts against that violence.

«These two aspects», the Vatican goes on to say, «may be hard to disentangle, and the injustice may be reciprocal». There may be injustice in both forms of violence. «It is quite evident in the first case», says the Vatican. The initial, institutionalized violence is obviously unjust. That is to say, the Vatican document labels unjust those situations of oppression and repression in which people grasp for wealth and seek greater power, even by repressing the weak. Violence, says the statement, «is quite evident in the first case, but also frequently in the second case». ⁴ I will never defend and no Catholic can ever defend unjust violence, even when it proceeds from those most

² «No to violence! Yes to peace!» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (30 October 1977).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

oppressed. Violence will always be unjust if it transgresses the limits of God's law. The Vatican statement concludes: «Sin creeps in and tends to introduce its diabolical note into the relations between the parties in conflict: hatred, deceit, cruelty, torture, neglect of the innocent, reprisals».⁵ In both forms of violence the devil injects sin. So if the church speaks out against both forms of violence, it is not because she favors the rich or the poor, the powerful or the weak; it is because she favors Christ who struggles against sin wherever it is found, whether in power and wealth or among the poor and the oppressed. Sin is against God, and violence that is stained by sin is violence the church cannot tolerate. It is in this sense, then, that we celebrate crying out: «No to violence! Yes to peace!» All those who say that I have incited acts of violence and have even urged that people be killed are committing calumny. I have the right to take them to court for calumny, and if necessary I will do so. The position of the church is clear.

Also, sisters and brothers, considering the reasons given for opposing dialogue, I want to remind you of a perhaps very humorous but effective saying of Pope Pius XI; he is a man who cannot be criticized as weak, for during his pontificate he had to confront Hitler and Mussolini. Pius XI once said, «Dialogue is the path to many solutions. If it were for the good of the church, I would dialogue even with the devil himself!» Let us not invoke legalistic reasons—whether a particular institution or organization is legal or not. As we read in the *Imitation of Christ*: «Do not focus on who is speaking but rather focus on what is being said».⁶ Let us dialogue with anyone. That does not mean that we enter into solidarity with these groups or become accomplices in their sins. We simply listen. There may be much justice in their demands. Even the most illegal group may say things that prove the interlocutor to be illegal as well. Our Catholic radio station already asked the question: why has it not been pointed out that the institutions of FARO⁷ are illegal, as are the many false signatures that have appeared in publications against the church? If the signers are legal Christians who are authentically religious, why has no one sought to discover the many illegal voices that have insulted and offended the church?

My sisters and brothers, the need for dialogue in which the church plays a part is not a form of opportunism. Seventy-five years ago Pope Leo XIII wrote his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, in which he stated that it was necessary for the church to speak out in labor matters and to intervene in conflicts between workers and employers. I have copied these words from the encyclical so that we may all reflect on them. As we do so, let us consider the presence of Monsignor Urioste yesterday in the Ministry of Labor. He was there with the government, represented by the minister, and the parties in conflict. These included the strikers of the León factory and the INCA factory,⁸ but present also were the *campesinos* who want better wages during the harvest season. In the presence of the church with these three elements—management, government, labor—I see a sign of hope because this presence coincides with these thoughts of Leo XIII.

In *Rerum Novarum* the pope asks why the church speaks of these temporal affairs, why she concerns herself with these matters, and he answers, «The truth is that

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, Chapter 5.

⁷ FARO is the acronym of the Frente de Agricultores de la Región Oriental, an organization of land owners which published statements against the church and the archbishop.

⁸ Industria Centroamericana de Nylon (INCA).

the situation is so serious that it demands the cooperation and the efforts of the heads of state, of employers, of the wealthy, and even of the very workers whose destiny is at stake. Yet we affirm without any hesitation that these efforts will be in vain if the church is disregarded». The pope gives four reasons, mind you, for saying this. He says it is because «the church draws from the Gospel teachings whereby the conflict can be brought to an end or at least rendered far less bitter» (RN 12). This is the first reason why the church ought to be present in these situations of conflict: she is the bearer of the Gospel and can draw from the Gospel the teachings that can resolve conflicts or ease them so that they don't end up in violence and hatred.

The second reason is that the church «works not only to instruct people's understanding but also by her precepts to guide the life and customs of one and all» (RN 12). The minister, the workers, the *campesinos*—all of us know, if we are truly Catholic or at least believe in Christ, that there is an ideology and a morality that we must obey individually and collectively and that the church is the trustee of that doctrine and that morality.

Third, «the church improves and betters the condition of the working man by means of numerous institutions» (RN 12). If there were time, we could compile here a long list of the works that the church carries out in the marginalized districts among the poor, the workers, and the *campesinos*. It is a glory of the church to be present in this way. And it is precisely because the church promotes such work that she is criticized and maligned by the spread of false information. Nevertheless, sisters and brothers, I am glad to belong to this church that is raising the awareness of *campesinos* and workers. We do this not to make them subversive—we have already said that sinful violence is not good—but so that they learn to be masters of their own destiny and not just a somnolent mass. We want them to know how to think and how to stand up for their rights. This is the glory of the church, and she is in no way ashamed when people seek to confuse her with other ideologies, because that is clearly calumny. People try to create smoke in order to confuse and discredit this promotional role of the church.

The fourth reason why the church is present in these matters is that «she does her best to enlist the services of all classes in discussing and endeavoring to further in the most practical way the interests of the working classes; and she considers that for this purpose recourse should be had, in due measure and degree, to the intervention of the law and of state authority» (RN 12). That is, there must be justice, and the laws should not favor only the members of the dominant class so that workers are not heard; the law must listen to both sides. The church says that just laws come from God. Therefore let workers and employers obey them. But they must be laws as defined by Saint Thomas Aquinas: «Law», he says, «is an ordinance of reason, made by him who has power, for the common good».⁹ As long as these conditions are not fulfilled, there is no real law but only partiality.

Therefore, dear sisters and brothers, we hope that the promises made yesterday in the offices of the Ministry of Labor will not remain simply a ploy for putting an end to the present crisis. The presence of the church in the meetings this week of employers and workers, as well as the presence of the church in the meetings with *campesinos*,

⁹THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2, q. 90, art. 4.

should not be seen as demagoguery on the part of the church. Rather, as we said earlier today, it is the presence of the Gospel, the presence of peace, the presence of a call to justice. Even though such a call is difficult, let it be accepted. Hopefully, as yesterday's statement said, these sessions will bring to an end the conflicts that have arisen.

The life of the church

My sisters and brothers, we have had some wonderful events in the life of the church, but my time is almost up. I want to greet the communities that I had the good fortune to visit this week: the Carmelite community in El Plan de Pino, the celebration of First Communion and confirmation in Colón, the visit to the Eucharistic Sisters in San Martín, where together with the pastor we drew up a pastoral plan for that area. We also celebrated the patronal feast of San Martín on November 11. Yesterday we celebrated the silver jubilee of Father Teodoro Alvarenga and blessed the new church there in Ojos de Agua. That is why I was not able to be present personally at the Ministry of Labor, but I was well represented by our vicar general.

I also want to greet the seminarians who are about to leave for their vacation—the minor seminarians have already left. I want to commend the vocational promotion, which has exceeded our expectations. This has been one of the signs of the times, and it encourages me greatly to see the large numbers of young men filling the ranks of the seminary, many of them already with high school degrees. Still, we have not been able to accept all who applied.

The eschatological aspect of the church

The word of God, sisters and brothers, sheds light on all this and fills us with great consolation. This is the Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time. Next Sunday will be the feast of Christ the King, bringing to an end the liturgical year. As this season of the church year draws to a close, I am going to highlight the idea that we spoke about last Sunday, the eschatological aspect of the church. I already explained that word to you. It means what is ultimate, the final objective of history and humanity, the goal toward which our society is moving, this church. Any person or any organization that does not have a final goal is irrational. How can people live without faith? How can people organize their lives just to attain earthly goods while neglecting the eschatological goal? That is why the church speaks out in the midst of conflicts and why she can utter an effective word in the difficult situations of life. It is because she always keeps her eternal perspective. Why have we been created? Why do nations get formed? Why do groups organize? When Paul VI spoke about liberation and the contribution that the church is making to human liberation, he called upon liberators to keep before their eyes this eschatological perspective because it is what gives strength and uniqueness to the church's participation in the liberation forces. (EN 38)

The church defines herself in this eschatological perspective and should not be confused with secular liberation movements. That is why it is ridiculous to call the priests communists. It is ridiculous to say that a catechist who proclaims the doctrine of the church has become a Marxist. It is impossible for the church to accept an ideology which teaches atheism, materialism, class struggle, and concern only about earthly things. Naturally, from the perspective of earth, where sin and injustice abound, it is

possible to confuse the demands of communism with the demands of organizations of workers and *campesinos* and also with the demands of the church. But the church always keeps her gaze raised on high in order to see the objective toward which this liberation is moving. What good is it for the field workers to obtain more money if it is then spent in bars and bordellos, as sadly occurs? What good is it to preach about human development if people develop themselves only to obtain more money? What good is it to go the university, obtain a degree, and become a professional if your only goal is to obtain more and be caught up in the frenzy of possessing, as the document I read earlier says? Many people study and work simply to obtain money. They have lost sight of the eschatological vision.

The first reading today from the prophet Malachi mentions a classical theme of the prophets, the Day of the Lord (Mal 3:19). Before the exile in Babylon the Day of the Lord was seen as a time of punishment. When the people became abusive and ignored their covenant with the Lord, when rulers unjustly abused their power and the rich exploited the poor, then the Day of the Lord would come. Indeed, the Day of the Lord came when the Israelites were exiled to Babylon; both the powerful princes and the people were taken away. But then the prophets began to understand the Day of the Lord in another way; they saw it as a time of hope. During the exile the prophets told the people that a day of hope would come. Let us live with hope, they told them, for the day of return will come! God visited the oppressed, suffering people in Egypt and Babylon through his prophets and his preachers, always nourishing their hope. Finally, the people returned to Jerusalem. The temple was a symbol of the God who helped his people in their time of need. Thus, the Day of the Lord became a time of hope and justice, a day when justice was done.

When the Bible says that the Day of the Lord will come, it is speaking of the day of judgment, the day on which God will judge history, the day on which every person must render an account of his or her life at the hour of death. That is the Day of the Lord. We do not need to fear the day of our death; we should await it as did Francis of Assisi, who referred to death as his «sister».¹⁰ Death is the great liberator if we have lived like Francis of Assisi, if we have lived with a sense of eschatology, awaiting the day of liberation, awaiting the return from Babylon, awaiting the liberation from Egypt, awaiting the eternal redemption of the risen Christ who cannot die. This is the Day of the Lord proclaimed in today's readings. My sisters and brothers, the Day of the Lord is coming upon all of us. For me it is a great honor to repeat here the words of the prophets who announced chastisement for those who refused to change their ways and proclaimed reward for those who live in the hope of more justice, more love, and more peace, as they did in Egypt and Babylon. Let us be hopeful, the day will come! Let us not become discouraged, it will come!

Jesus also speaks about this expectation in today's gospel when he refers to a seeming impossibility. Imagine if someone were to tell you: «This magnificent cathedral will be destroyed, and not one stone will be left on top of another». That was how the apostles felt when Christ spoke to them about the temple of Jerusalem, which was far more beautiful than our cathedral. The temple was the center of the theocracy of the whole nation. It was the symbol not only of their religion but of their country. But Christ

¹⁰ FRANCIS OF ASSISI, *Canticle to Brother Sun*.

stands there and tells them, «Look at the beautiful stones and the wonderful construction. Nevertheless I say to you that there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down» (Luke 21:6). People would say that he was a madman. And they did, because the gospel says that they did not understand his words until after he rose from the dead and until after the events of the year 70 (John 2:22). It is believed that Saint Luke wrote his Gospel after 70, the year when the Romans besieged Jerusalem, took possession of it, and destroyed the temple. No stone remained upon another. The apostles, who could not imagine what Christ was telling them, were surprised and asked him, «Teacher, when will this happen? And what sign will there be when all these things are about to happen?» (Luke 21:7). Then Christ, like the prophets, used a historical event, the people's breach of faith and the exile in Babylon, to prophesy the definitive end of time. Christ then announced the judgment, the day when he will come to judge the living and the dead, as our creed states. Notice the double perspective of the gospel and the biblical prophecies: historical events that are part of our experience ought to make us aware of the goal of history, the death of each of us, and the final end of our existence. This is what we call eschatology. Theology also talks about the Day of the Lord as the Parousia; it is the expectation of the second coming of Christ. Christ will return!

This is what is difficult about Christianity: living between the two comings of Christ. He came humbly, becoming a child and suffering to save the world. He rose and now lives in his church, present in an invisible manner. This church, like a spouse separated from her husband, longs for him. The church lives in this hope. That is what all you, the voice of the church, will declare when I raise up the host in which Christ is hidden and when I say, «This is the mystery of our faith». This is our hope, this Christ whom I show you but whom we do not see. Then the people cry out like a loving spouse: «We announce your death. We proclaim your resurrection»—that is, you live—«Come, Lord Jesus, come!» This is the proclamation by which the church lives: «Come, hope of our hearts!» Blessed are those who can say that they are waiting for him like the servant of Christ's parable: the servant is at home during the night, awaiting the hour when the master will come from the feast. He does not sleep but is watching (Luke 12:35-36). This is how Christians should live their lives.

This second coming of Christ was preached so intensely during the first era of Christianity that many people thought that it would happen soon. In Saint Luke's Gospel, however, Christ explains it well: «See that you are not deceived, for many will come in my name saying, "I am he", and "the time has come". Do not follow them! When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for such things must happen first» (Luke 21:8-9). Then he goes on to tell them that there will be persecution. This is difficult for Christians. When will the Lord come? When will the beloved spouse, who longs for the happiness of living together with her husband, see her ideals realized?

This hour may not come quickly, sisters and brothers, and Saint Paul denounces the false ideas in the community of Thessalonica. There are two letters of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians, and they are the two letters of the Bible that contain the best doctrine on eschatology. Saint Paul tried to correct the error of some Thessalonians who thought that the coming of the Lord was very near; due to this false belief they no longer worked. What a serious mistake! Saint Paul wrote them some harsh words, telling them to work because «if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat» (2

Thess 3:10). You see here how the church, even as she awaits heaven, does not forget about earth. She proclaims the need to work and to pay just salaries to workers; she wants to make this earth, for as long as it may last, into an antechamber of heaven. According to the Second Vatican Council, those who think only of heaven and neglect their temporal duties do harm to their neighbors and place their own salvation in danger (GS 43). Lazy persons will not enter into heaven. Those who refuse to work and develop themselves will not enter into that kingdom of love and caring because the first form of charity is to avoid being a burden to others. Saint Paul said, «Learn from me, because as an apostle I could demand your help in order to dedicate myself only to preaching. But look at how I work» (2 Thess 3:7-9). And Saint Paul did work. He was a weaver. When he wasn't preaching, he was weaving and then selling his products. In that way he was able to eat and give alms and not be a burden to anyone. That is why the church does not preach subversion. The church does not approve of any demonstration which is not for the sake of just demands but is simply intent on doing evil.

My sisters and brothers, during this time of waiting when no one knows what will happen tomorrow or many years or centuries from now, the church calls upon Christians to be alert, because the Day of the Lord will come when they least expect it. The Gospel is full of surprises of this kind, such as the thief who comes when least expected (Matt 24:43-44) or the virgins who fall asleep and have unlighted lamps when the bridegroom arrives (Matt 25:5). «Be watchful», says Christ, «for you know not the day or the hour» (Matt 25:13). What then must we do in the meantime? In the meantime, sisters and brothers, we must work, as Saint Paul says. Each of us must do the intimate work Christ asks of us by living in fidelity to the kingdom of God. And if as a result persecution comes, then how beautiful it will be to hear Christ's words addressed to the Archdiocese of San Salvador: «Before all this happens, however, they will seize you and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name. It will lead to your giving testimony» (Luke 21:12-13). Why are we shocked when the church says she is persecuted? Christ himself announced that his life would be subject to persecution. The church cannot expect to be flattered when she preaches against abuses. Those committing the abuses must persecute her. I recently wrote about the statement of the Holy See presenting the theme of the pope: «No to violence! Yes to peace!» You were able to read my article on Friday in *La Prensa Gráfica*, which was kind enough to publish it.¹¹ I said there: when they accuse the archbishop of preaching subversive homilies, when they have the audacity to say that he is to blame for the death of two policemen in the cemetery, and when they accuse the church of being violent, we realize that there are two kinds of violence. Who are the more violent? Is it not those who attempt to maintain this institutionalized violence and who seek to discredit the voice of the church because they disagree with it? By speaking such calumnies, are they not declaring that they belong to this group of violent people?

My sisters and brothers, the church knows that she must be persecuted. But there is something very beautiful in this, for Christ now tells us, «Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute» (Luke 21:14-

¹¹ ROMERO, O.A., «A New Repudiation of Violence» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 November 1977).

15). This is why the church in El Salvador rejoices. What we have proclaimed has been broadcast on the radio. Anyone can listen to our message, and if people are just and impartial, they can never accuse me of crimes such as those wickedly attributed to me. «I have spoken publicly to the world», said Christ. «Ask those who have heard me» (John 18:20-21). There has never been a word of violence. Thanks be to God, the Spirit of the Lord helps me to say what I must say, and my conscience is at peace in speaking what I must speak.

A distinguished person from the United States visited me last week, and when I told him about our whole situation and my position, this sensible man waited a long time before he spoke. «What do you think?» I asked him. He replied, «Having listened to all of this, I now see things more clearly, and I think that you are in the right». «Thank you», I told him, «because I do not hear such affirmation even in my own country». But in fact I do hear it from the people, for they are in ever greater solidarity with this voice that proclaims the truth. As today's gospel says, the Spirit of God really does give us the words that ought to be proclaimed. Naturally, there is human interference—my defects, my errors, and my limitations can lead to erroneous thoughts or perhaps dissonant words. When that happens, sisters and brothers, do me the favor of correcting me. Tell me what you disagree with. As I have said many times, let us enter into dialogue. Hopefully I can then be more faithful to the thoughts that I must communicate, the thoughts of our Lord.

I rejoice even more because the gospel ends with these words: «You will even be handed over by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name» (Luke 21:16-17). My sisters and brothers, do you want to know if your Christianity is authentic? Here is the touchstone: Who are your friends? Who criticizes you? Who flatters you? Who excludes you? Remember that one day Christ said, «Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword, and there will even be division in one's family» (Luke 12:51-53). This is true because some want to live comfortably in accordance with the worldly principles of power and wealth. Others, in contrast, have understood the call of Christ and so reject everything that is unjust in the world.

The gospel concludes with the words: «Not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure your lives» (Luke 21:18-19). Let the Day of the Lord come when it will. What is important is perseverance in Christ, being faithful to his doctrine and not betraying him. I am saddened, sisters and brothers, because there are so many traitors, so many Christians who now act as spies and persecute us. They have drawn apart because they are ashamed of their bishop and their priests. But the confidence of those who remain faithful truly gives me courage. And so I tell you, my sisters and brothers, let us not be afraid! This word is not mine. Rather, it is the word of the gospel proclaimed on the last Sunday of the church year, a word that makes us look toward the future. We do not know when the Lord will come, but blessed are those who remain faithful as they wait, because he will welcome them with the tenderness of a husband embracing his wife who was far from him but who now lives with him and will never again be separated from him. This is the church, and this church is in the heart of each one of you. We ought to live with hope, joy, courage, and fortitude so that we do not betray our spouse and so that we will be happy in the embrace of the Lord when he comes. Let it be so.