

9

PENANCE AND PRAYER

**Our Lady of Fatima
Planes de Renderos
15 May 1977**

My dear sisters and brothers.

Today the pilgrim church of earth meets the church of heaven that descends in this magnificent vision taking place this beautiful afternoon here on the heights of Los Planes de Renderos.

The more than 400 palms, decorated in a style so typical of this area, are a sign of a church that marches with the symbol of martyrdom. In the liturgy palms symbolize martyrdom, but they also symbolize victory. Christ told us that this is the victory that overcomes the world: your faith. In the vision of the Apocalypse, Mary comes forth to meet this pilgrim church that is ready for martyrdom and suffering, for she is the sign of those courageous souls who do not betray their faith, those souls who are willing, like you who have come out today, to accept martyrdom if necessary.

Not everyone, the Second Vatican Council tells us, will have the honor of offering their blood physically or of being killed for the faith (LG 42). But God does ask all those who believe in him to have the spirit of martyrdom. In other words, all of us should be ready to die for our faith even if the Lord does not grant us this honor. If we are so disposed, then when our time comes to give an accounting of our lives, we can say: «Lord, I was willing to give my life for you. And I have given it, because giving one's life is not only being killed; it means living with the spirit of martyrdom and giving through duty, through silence, through prayer». Indeed, it is in the honest fulfillment of duty and in the silence of daily life that we give our lives to God. We give our lives as does the mother who with no fuss, with the simplicity of motherly martyrdom, gives birth and gives her breast to her children and lovingly cares for them. This is what it means to give one's life. For me this afternoon, this spirit of handing over one's life is symbolized in this procession of palms. May we all interpret for our lives what is now so necessary: surrendering our lives to holiness and being faithful to our obligations, because that is the invitation that the Virgin has come down to extend to the world.

Sixty years ago today, the Virgin appeared in Fatima in the form represented by this statue that we carry in procession: with hands folded, a rosary hanging from her arm, dressed in white—so beautiful that those little children could not even describe it. How beautiful and attractive she had to be, for she was «blessed among all women» (Luke 1:30)! She gave us only two words: penance and prayer. This is a summary of the Fatima message that we want to embrace now, as a wonderful opportunity for the moment we are now living through. Penance and prayer are what we most need at this time when the dragon wants to devour the woman, as today's Bible reading tells us (Rev 12:4). This woman is the Virgin. This woman is the church.

The church and the Virgin are like twin rays that shine forth from God's heart. This story of Mary is the story of the church, and the story of the church is the story of Mary. Mary and the church are inseparable. Mary's beauty belongs to the church's beauty. The problems of the church are part of Mary's life since a mother identifies with her daughter, and Mary is mother of the church. Together, Mary and the church move through the world with their hearts lifted to God. Today's gospel reminds us of the *Magnificat* of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) which «proclaims the greatness of the Lord», as does the church. «The mighty One has done great things for me» (Luke 1:49). Mary can say these words, and so can the church. It is the song of faith and hope placed in God.

I tell you, sisters and brothers, it is wonderful to be Catholic at this time. Let us not be distressed but happy. Let us feel joyful in our spirit of courage and in our commitment to God. As we have seen in the Apocalypse, the less we place our trust in the things of earth, the greater will be God's protection. That afflicted woman is the church; she is Mary; but her weakness, her infirmity, her humility, her smallness become the strength of a God who protects her and saves her from the dragon. God carries her to victory, as the Apocalypse intones, «Now has come the victory of the Lord» (Rev 12:10). In God is our hope.

Penance

What Mary desires, then, in order to identify more closely with us, and for us to identify more closely with her, is that we put these two words into practice. Penance was the word with which Christ began to preach the Gospel, and it is also the substance of the church's preaching: «Do penance! Be converted! Leave behind your evil ways!» (Mark 1:15). How appropriate it is at this time to go out on all the highways of our nation—to travel roads where there is so much hatred, so much calumny, so much vengeance, so many perverse hearts—and tell people, «Be converted!»

If the church repudiates violence, if the church condemns crimes such as those that have been committed this past week, she does not do so with hatred for those who fired the guns or kidnapped or killed. Rather, she does so with love and she says, «Be converted!» How I wish, sisters and brothers, that this Gospel word, spoken with tenderness by the lips of the Virgin who loves sinners, would reach those places where so many criminals are hidden, those dark corners of hell where so many calumnies are being plotted: «Be converted. Do not plant seeds of hatred! Do not kill more of our sisters and brothers! Do not spread more calumnies. Be converted, for these perverse roads lead to hell, and the Virgin wants you in her heaven».

How beautiful was the death of Father Navarro. When a woman raised him up from the puddle of blood, she asked him, «Where do you feel pain, Father?» He said, «What pains me is the sin they have committed against me, but I forgive those who kill me. What pains me now is my sins, and I ask pardon of God». He began to pray with those lips all disfigured by bullets until he died praying and asking for pardon. This is penance. Let us follow these examples, sisters and brothers, and if by misfortune there are some persons who doubt the church, believe the calumnies, and curse priests and make them the targets of the day, then I say to you, sisters and brothers, «Be converted!» This afternoon the Virgin begs us, «Be converted!» May we be converted

also from the sins of our own hearts. I have my own sins like every one of you. Who among us is not a sinner? Let us ask the Lord for forgiveness. Let us be converted and depart from evil ways. The Virgin calls us to do this, and she also calls us to pray.

Prayer

The Virgin knows the power of prayer. This afternoon for me is extraordinary; it is an afternoon of prayer. Here the flowers pray, and the palms pray. Those artistic hands that made these flower-laden palms were praying while they strung together the flowers and palms. Those of you who have walked in this procession around the Virgin were singing and praying even when distracted by the children running about. This also is a way of praying. Perhaps we have come here attracted by something folkloric, but as we behold this church and the seriousness of the moment, we are praying. May prayer never fail in our hearts and on our lips. May we lift up our hearts to God, seeking favors, giving thanks, and asking for mercy. At this time I have great confidence, sisters and brothers, because there are many souls deep in prayer. As long as people are praying, I am not distressed. I tell the Lord in the intimacy of my Mass, as all priests do, «Lord, look not on my sins, but on the faith of your church». The faith of your church, Lord, is the old woman praying her rosary. The faith of your church is the sick man who feels useless but offers his suffering to God. The faith of the church is the father worried about supporting his family, honest and faithful to his home. The faith of the church is the religious who becomes holy in her own vocation. It is the priest, the seminarian, the child, and all those who live their vocation as church. The church is made up of all of us, and insofar as we pray and become holy, we are the power of the world, the force that descends from God, because the power of our prayer is derived from God.

My sisters and brothers, this is the Virgin's message. I am happy to have been able to interpret it with my poor words. I hope that it finds an echo in everyone's heart. Let us become a church of penance and prayer. Let us become the church that the Virgin desires, and she will identify herself with us. We are not alone. At this moment I love to hear the words the Virgin spoke when she appeared in these American lands in Tepeyac, Mexico. The Virgin of Guadalupe asked the humble Indian who represented our whole race, «Am I not here, I who am your mother?» What beautiful, powerful affection!

These little children who are here with us this afternoon—if some misfortune or adversity should befall them, to whom would they run? Would they not look for their mothers? They know that their mothers will protect them. We are like those helpless children, facing a situation in which the future is uncertain, a situation sown with hatred coming from evil hearts, hearts that we ask the Virgin to convert. But in this hour of affliction we hear the voice of the Virgin saying, «Am I not here, I who am your mother?» And we run to take refuge in her. This afternoon, as the representative of this distraught diocese, I place the diocese as a child at the Virgin's feet so that she will protect her. And I am sure that she is protecting her; she loves her and will not abandon her. Let us have great confidence, sisters and brothers, in our Lady, and this picturesque homage we have offered her this afternoon will surely bring us ever greater protection from the Virgin.

Let us celebrate this Eucharist at the feet of the Virgin so that she will lift it up to God. God can never reject anything that is presented to him by the Virgin's hands. The angel told Mary, «You have found favor with God» (Luke 1:28), so that nothing she asks of the Lord can be refused her. She will offer to God the Body and Blood of Christ through the mediation of his priests. She who is the mother of bishops, priests, religious, and all the faithful will ask of the Lord that this Blood of Christ «that is shed for you» (Luke 22:20) may become truly a rain of peace, tranquility, harmony and reconciliation descending upon this truly needy country of the Virgin.