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CONFIRMATION

Citalá, Chalatenango
5 December 1977

Isaiah 35:1-10
Luke 5:17-26

My dear faithful in Citalá.

To come to you as pastor is a very great pleasure, and therefore I want to thank once again the Oblate Sisters of Divine Love who truly do honor to their name here, offering their lives to the Lord in service of this people. I also want to thank those who have collaborated in preparing this celebration of confirmation since this is the main reason for my coming. As a successor of the apostles, the bishop is the ordinary minister of confirmation, that is, the bishop properly has the obligation of administering this sacrament. I want to express my thanks to those who have prepared these children, and I call upon all the families of this diocese to second the will of the church by having your children confirmed, not when they are small and don't understand what is happening, but when they are young people who need the strength of confirmation, which consists of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The newborn child should of course be baptized early so that this child of the flesh becomes as soon as possible a child of God. This is the meaning of baptism. Jesus told Nicodemus that the flesh is not enough: «What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit» (John 3:6). That is what baptism is all about. The child born in the flesh is nothing more than flesh, a natural child, stained with the original sin that we all bear. Children should be cleansed of this sin as soon as possible so that Christ can apply his redemption through baptism to make them children of God. This should be done with urgency. Families should be careful to baptize their children as soon as possible. There are some very Christian families who baptize their children on the same day the child is born. I am not going to ask you to do this, but please do not allow months and even years to pass by without baptizing your children. Baptize them as soon as possible.

But with regard to confirmation, the word means just that: it confirms the faith that was received in baptism. This should be done when the young person is aware of what is happening and wants personally to ratify his or her rebirth in baptism by means of this new sacrament which is properly a sacrament of growth. It is not enough to be born. From the moment of birth the child is nourished and begins to grow, and a mother is proud when she sees the child who has come forth from her womb grow into a youth who faces life and thinks about the duties of adulthood. Therefore, confirmation corresponds to this time of growth in the young person's life. That is why I am pleased to be here in this city among the people of Citalá where these youngsters are going to be confirmed. They are fully aware that they are going to receive a

sacrament different from baptism, a sacrament that prepares them to enter their youth with a new power from God.

The sacraments, God's life in the desert of humankind

The Advent readings we have just heard are most opportune. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah compares God's coming into the world to a small stream of water that springs forth in the desert and begins to make fertile the arid lands of the desert (Isa 35:1). In the desert there is no vegetation; the desert is the image of death; the desert is aridity; there is no life in the desert. But when a spring bubbles up in the midst of the desert, it begins to make the land fertile. The spring becomes a river and changes the desert into a garden producing flowers and fruits, providing shade and giving life. This is a marvelous image of what the sacraments are, sisters and brothers. Baptism, confirmation, penance, Communion—these are the signs that God has come to the world. Even though we humans by nature are desert lands incapable of producing the flowers of eternity, the sacraments produce in us vegetation, fertility, fecundity. As we said before citing Christ's words, «What is born of flesh is flesh» (John 3:6). To gain an eternity of happiness with God it is not enough just to be born with many abilities, to be a beautiful woman, to be a strong man, to be an intelligent professional. These qualities have some value, but compared to eternity and the life of God, they are worth little for they all remain behind on earth. No matter what qualities we may have as human beings, we are still nothing more than a desert. If God wants to gather from our lives works that are valuable for eternal life, then God must inject us with his own life. Only when children of the flesh become children of God do they begin to produce works that give them eternal life. That is why Christ instituted the sacraments.

Baptism makes newborn children into children of God. If they die, they will enjoy the very happiness of God. Confirmation bestows upon those who are baptized the gifts of the Holy Spirit and strengthens them with the power of God so that they produce fruits for eternal life. Confirmation is the sacrament of the martyrs. If it were not for the power of the Holy Spirit that the first Christians received in the sacrament of confirmation from their bishops and from the pope, then those first Christians would not have endured the trials of persecution—they would not have died for Christ.

At this time especially, sisters and brothers, the church needs this power of the Holy Spirit, and that is why we want young people and children to be aware of what they are receiving in this sacrament. What value is there in receiving confirmation, as was our custom, when a child is very young and not aware of what is happening? If we did not have parents and godparents who would teach us about this, then why were we confirmed? I believe that many times neither the parents nor the godparents have understood well why confirmation was being conferred upon the child they carried in their arms. And if they as adults did not understand this, how were they going to instruct the children when they really needed the grace of the sacrament in their adolescence? If we had parents and godparents who by their word and example taught young people about the meaning of confirmation, then there would be no problem in confirming small children. But it is better not to wait to see if perhaps the parents will teach them this; it is better simply to wait until the youngsters grow so that they themselves understand the commitment that they are going to make.

So I repeat this, dear sisters and brothers: to be Christian is very difficult. People are showing how difficult it is today in our country. How few Christians remain when being Christian means being persecuted! When our people gather together to listen to the word of God and reflect on the true Bible and the commitments of being a Christian, they are spied on and considered suspect because others think they're involved in politics and practicing communism! They are wrong. We meet together as community to become aware of the serious responsibility that is involved in being Christians. We gather together to learn to be Christians so that tomorrow we do not become traitors of our religion.

At the present time there are many cowards and many people who prefer to be well off on this earth. They don't care about the judgment of God that will ask them to give an account of their lives. Being Christian means being courageous. Before obeying those who persecute the church, we must be brave enough to obey God. It does not matter if they persecute or torture or defame us. You realize, sisters and brothers, how they are slandering your bishop. They call him the number one subversive, and they claim he is preaching subversion.

I am grateful to the good Christians of La Palma for what our beloved Father Vito has just said: «In this parish we are praying in solidarity with the church». Being Christian in these days, sisters and brothers, means having the courage to teach the true doctrine of Christ. We must not keep quiet out of fear and preach an easy doctrine that will not cause any problems. Being Christian at this time means having the courage that the Holy Spirit gives with confirmation. For we are confirmed in order to be brave soldiers of Christ the King, to make his doctrine prevail in people's hearts, and to proclaim the courage that is needed to defend the law of God.

This is the meaning of confirmation, sisters and brothers. This is what the prophet Isaiah means when he tells us that we are only dry desert land if we lack divine life. There are no flowers, no fruits, no shade. How arid we humans are when the Spirit of God is not in us! How cruel people become when they are animated not by the Spirit of God but by the spirit of being comfortable on earth!

My soul is pained when I hear how our people are tortured and how the rights of those created in God's image are trampled upon! This must not be. Without God people are beasts; without God they become desert. There are no flowers of love in their hearts, so that they become perverse persecutors of their sisters and brothers. This explains why there are hearts that are capable of betraying their sisters and brothers and reporting them to the authorities. They don't care when their fellow citizens are led away to be tortured and murdered. How cruel the heart is when God does not inspire it to true love of neighbor! These persons have lost the sense of their baptism and their confirmation; they have become deserts, dry tree trunks, and barren steppes.

The sacraments call for conversion

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ tells us the same thing. Today's gospel recounts the beautiful moment when our Lord tells a sinner, «Your sins are forgiven» (Luke 5:20). The unbelievers cry blasphemy because those without faith have no esteem for Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ were the archbishop of San Salvador at this time, they would rain down on him many more insults and calumnies than they do on me. When Jesus the Redeemer of humankind says

here, «Your sins are forgiven», they refuse to believe in Christ's power of forgiveness, and so they say, «This man blasphemes. Who is he to forgive sins?» (Luke 5:21). Christ works a miracle so that they can see that he is able to forgive sins. He shows them that for God restoring health to a sick person is the same as restoring grace to a sinful person. He tells the paralytic to stand up (Luke 5:24). «See? I could cure him; therefore I am God. Why do you accuse me of blasphemy?» Even though it is beyond our ken, God is also able to say to sinners that their sins are forgiven as long as they repent.

What a wonderful thing the forgiveness of sins is, sisters and brothers! It changes the desert into a garden. The fierce soul becomes a gentle lamb for the glory of God. The one who preferred sin and vice and disorder has repented and asked God for forgiveness.

When I preach against assaults and abuses, sisters and brothers, when I preach against those who commit injustices and denounce their neighbors, I do so with love. When I preach against all these crimes committed by one person against another, I do not do it with hatred or resentment. I do it with the love of Christ, who also spoke to sinners with the words of John the Baptist as we heard last Sunday: «You brood of vipers! Be converted! Do not be hypocrites, for if you are not converted you will perish. Even now the ax lies at the root of the tree, and God is about to strike down the tree of life» (Matt 3:7-10). Woe to the tree that falls on the side of hell because it did not repent in time. Just yesterday John the Baptist was saying, «Christ is already winnowing his harvest» (Matt 3:12). Just as with our coffee crop, when the beans and the pulp are mixed together, the workers winnow them with air so that the pulp is blown away and just the beans are left. That is what Christ is doing, says John the Baptist; he is winnowing the wheat that he has threshed so the chaff is blown away and only the grain remains. So will be the final judgment when a great tempestuous wind will sweep away the chaff, the trash, all those who have not wanted to be converted into wheat. What remains will be the grain, the good works, the harvest of God.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, when the church preaches today against injustice and the abuse of power and other crimes, she is telling those responsible, «Be converted! Do penance before it is too late! Become the wheat that God is looking for! Form communities of love; form communities of the church!» For the church is not communist or subversive. The church is the kingdom of God reflecting on the word of God. She receives in her heart this word that brings divine life and grace through the sacraments and helps us experience the beauty of being gardens instead of deserts.

Need for catechesis to prepare for the sacraments

Therefore, sisters and brothers, on this occasion of the confirmation of these children in Citalá, I also want to speak to the adults. Let us renew our baptism and become fully aware of our confirmation! This is what I told the sisters when they informed me that they were preparing a group of young people for confirmation. When I confirm those who are prepared for this sacrament, I also want to address all of us who are already confirmed, beginning with myself as bishop and then the priests, the religious, the catechists, the parents. All of us are now adults; we received confirmation many years ago, but perhaps we have not fully realized that we are confirmed. The Holy Spirit was given to us in confirmation by the imposition of the hands of the bishop as successor of the apostles, but often that Holy Spirit has remained hidden in our lives, perhaps even dead. The fruits of the Spirit of God have not been produced in us because

we have remained people of the flesh, children of the flesh. The sacraments we've received—baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance—have produced nothing.

This is the great deficiency of our Christian people, sisters and brothers, but thanks be to God this deficiency is being remedied since Vatican II. Before, we were administering many sacraments to the people. We baptized many children; we confirmed all those who presented themselves; we heard confessions, perhaps without requiring penance; we gave Communion to all who approached. We sacramentalized, but we hardly evangelized.

We don't reject sacramentalization, because the sacraments are necessary; they are the channels by which God shares divine life with us. But now, thanks be to God, they are sacraments received with better catechetical preparation, with more profound reflection on the Bible. We know that we go to confession now with greater awareness.

Preparatory talks are required before children are baptized so that you'll understand the meaning of the baptism you request for your children. It is not simply a social event; it is not just so that your children will have godparents who give them gifts; it is not just so that you'll have *compadres* with whom to share the responsibility for your child. Baptism does not mean simply getting a *compadre* or a godparent; it means above all being aware that this child of the flesh is becoming a child of God; it means that the child is assuming a responsibility for which the family will answer at the start but which the child will gradually appropriate with age.

The bishop no longer wants to administer confirmation to the multitude of children who are brought to him whenever he visits. It used to be said not that «the bishop is coming» but that «confirmation is coming, confirmation is coming!», as if the only thing that the bishop did was confirm children who had no idea of what was happening. The church would be full of crying children who would leave the ceremony without even being aware of the great sacrament of the Holy Spirit they had just received. We ourselves were such children; we received confirmation at an early age, and often we did not understand the greatness of that moment.

Now we are experiencing a time of church renewal, sisters and brothers, so I ask you not to feel offended if the priest or the religious sister makes demands of you beforehand. They have to do so or else they won't be fulfilling their duty. Before baptism and before First Communion there has to be catechesis and evangelization so that the youngsters are aware of what is happening.

Thus, this morning this is a great joy for me. I repeat that I am going to administer confirmation to these children whom the sisters and catechists have prepared well not just for Communion but also for confirmation. They are well aware that they are going to receive the Holy Spirit in this church of Citalá. This church will become an upper room where the tongues of fire will rain down on them as they did on the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Those apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, went forth courageously to proclaim Christ. They no longer feared the authorities who wanted to silence them. No longer cowards but emboldened by the Holy Spirit, they declared, «If you want us to keep quiet about Christ, then excuse us, but we can't obey you because we have to obey God who commanded us to preach about those things

that we have seen—the salvation of Christ» (Acts 5:29). No one can restrain this word because it is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Those of us who are already confirmed are now going to renew our grace of confirmation, dear sisters and brothers and parents, beginning with myself. May this morning be for us a time of renewal in the Holy Spirit; may it revive the courage we must have as Christians. And if necessary, may confirmation become for us a sacrament of martyrdom. Let us also be willing to give our lives for Christ and never betray the Lord out of cowardice as today's false Christians do.

We are therefore going to proceed to bestow this sacrament of life in which Christ the Redeemer tells us, «I am the life, I am the fountain, I am the living water that changes the desert into a garden. I bring God's life into human life. I bring the Spirit of God to strengthen human hearts. By means of my minister, the bishop of San Salvador, I am going to give you the grace and the strength of the Holy Spirit».

Let us all be renewed at this time, sisters and brothers, so that we become what we must be: men and women who have received strength from on high to bear witness courageously to the fact that God exists, that Christ is a reality, and that his church on earth is doing good and not evil. May we have the courage to defend her as we do all good things.