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THE RISEN ONE LIVES IN HIS CHURCH

Second Sunday of Easter
2 April 1978

Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

«These things have been written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and therefore, believing, you might have faith in his name» (John 20:31). We have solemnly proclaimed these words in song. It is with that aim that we should come to Mass and hear the word of God or read it in our Bibles. We do so not out of curious searching by human intelligence but in the realization that the Gospel is the power of God. At this time, then, do not regard human words, but believe that Christ is the Messiah and that he is the one who is speaking to us through his church so that we will have life in his name. That is why this people of God is so beautiful! This cathedral is full this morning, and just think of the many communities that are gathered in the name of the Lord and listening to this broadcast by radio. We can say with Saint Peter today, «Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for through his resurrection from the dead we have been born anew and live now with a lively hope» (1 Pet 1:3).

Events in San Pedro Perulapán

For that reason, sisters and brothers, meditating on God's word each Sunday is not simply a spiritual practice. We are concretely walking through history, through the lives of our people, experiencing situations like those in San Pedro Perulapán. History is the concrete context of Christianity. It is in history that Christians must be salt of the earth and light for the world (Matt 5:13-14). With a lively hope in our hearts, we do not allow our faith in the One who is life and resurrection to be weakened. That is why I customarily place here, before the homily properly speaking or as part of the homily, the concrete circumstances in which the people of this archdiocese seek to live out their faith in the word of God. If our preaching did not take this setting into consideration and if the light of the Gospel failed to illumine both the beautiful and the ugly face of our history, then this would not be the authentic Gospel of our Divine Savior.

The events of this past week have been so serious¹ that I did not want to entrust them simply to my memory. Instead, my office has published a statement that I have ordered to be

¹ During Holy Week of 1978 members of ORDEN, with the support of the National Guard, carried out a military operation in several villages of San Pedro Perulapán, causing the death of six *campesinos*, four of whom were beheaded; in the same place fourteen *campesinos* were wounded, and sixty-eight disappeared. «Report of the Commission of Solidarity of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, Press Bulletin No. 2» in *Orientación* (16 April 1978). Read or listen to the homilies of St Oscar Romero at romerotrust.org.uk

read in all the churches². The point is not just to give an example but to allow us to throw the light of the Gospel on these events. Allow me then to read this statement and to make some brief comments.

«The archbishop of San Salvador, together with his auxiliary bishop, having sounded out the clergy, the men and women religious, and the faithful laity, communicate the following». This introduction ought to express the idea, sisters and brothers, that even though I am the one speaking, nevertheless I am the mouthpiece of an organism. The mouthpiece speaks, but his words commit the whole body; it is the whole body speaking through these words. Those who want to isolate the archbishop from the rest of the clergy or the faithful are quite mistaken; it is as if they wanted to listen to a disembodied voice. That is why I am grateful to the priests and religious and laity who each day live in deeper solidarity with the teachings of the bishop. In the name of all of them I am making this statement, with the understanding that all of them are committed in faith and in this reality.

«Everyone is aware of the tragic situation that our country is now experiencing, especially in San Pedro Perulapán: the military operations, the high number of dead and wounded, the disappearances, the people who have abandoned their homes, and those who have had their homes seized from them. Most certainly this is a tragic situation, and as pastors we cannot remain silent. As we have done many times before, we must shed on these events the light that comes from our faith as Christians.

«As pastors of the people of God, this situation reminds us of the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan who found a wounded man on the roadside (Luke 10:29-37). We also find today people who lie wounded on many roads of our country. We know their wounds from the past and those they suffer now as a result of the events just described. This nation lies wounded, and we cannot just keep our distance as the priest and Levite did in the parable. We must draw close like the Good Samaritan and heal the wounds».

Sisters and brothers, this parable of Christ condemned the attitude of the priest and the Levite because it is not enough to wear clerical garb or say «I am a Catholic» to be approved by God. What is needed above all is charity, love of neighbor. And even if it is a bishop or a priest or a baptized lay person, if they do not follow the example of the good Samaritan, if like the bad priests of the old law they keep their distance in order not to get close to the wounded body—saying, «be prudent, don't touch those things, go easy, let's not offend»—then, sisters and brothers, we do not observe the commandment of God; we keep our distance. Look at how many people pass by in order to avoid the reality! But the more they pass by, the more they end up in confusion because their own conscience does not allow them to live in peace until they confront this situation! The Christian commitment is a very serious one, and our commitment above all as bishops and priests obliges us to reach out to the poor person wounded on the road.

«Putting aside all partisan interests, we first of all want the truth of this situation to be clarified. We ask for a credible clarification of the facts because the versions presented so far are confusing, biased, and even contradictory. There is an official version, another version that

² On 31 March 1978 Archbishop Romero wrote the denunciation of these events that he reads in full in this homily. See «Communiqué of the Archbishop of San Salvador» in *Orientación* (9 April 1978). The passages in quotation marks in the first part of this homily are taken from this statement.

appears in press commentaries, and still another version from many witnesses of these events³, people who arrive constantly at the archbishop's office. We have spoken about this previously in our Bulletins 39 and 40⁴.

«The newspapers themselves bear witness to the confusion in this information. That is why we ask that some mechanisms be sought that will lead to an investigation that will guarantee an impartial and accurate presentation of the events. In this clarification of the truth, the voice of those who were directly involved and officially accused must be heard. This clarification of the truth is a right that the church requires of everyone. It is one of the pillars of our social order, all the more so when what is at stake is not only the truth but life itself».

It is a shame, sisters and brothers, that in such serious matters there are those who want to deceive the people. It is a shame that the mass media sell themselves to particular interests. It is a shame that we cannot trust the news in the newspapers or on television or radio because everything is bought and contrived, and the truth is not spoken. We are not saying that the truth is wholly on the other side, but our office—even though at certain times it has been surrounded by police—has had the great satisfaction of receiving witnesses who wanted to make statements about the events they experienced. We have told these people, «We do not want stories or interpretations of third persons. Tell us what you have seen personally; tell us your experience». And what occurred, sisters and brothers, is cruel. Neither the press nor the television has told the truth. Not even in our courts, where untainted truth should be told, have those who should be taken into account, such as the accused, had full liberty to speak. I demand of the Supreme Court of Justice more authentic justice so that our justice is not biased like that of the mass media.

«We also want to make clear that the church and the archbishop's office have never defended violence nor incited others to violence. Rather, as we stated in our recent message of January⁵, the church declares: "Yes to peace! No to violence!" Therefore the statement that the church is instigating violence is false and slanderous. We repeat this even though we know that certain sectors will never be convinced of this and will seek to find in the church the cause of evils that in reality proceed from the unjust structures of society. Our venerable predecessor, Archbishop Luis Chávez y González, had to defend himself from these slanders in a statement issued on December 9, 1976, and we have repeated his words abundantly in our homilies, messages, and pastoral letters. It should be very clear, then, that the church does not seek to promote violence».

It's also a shame, sisters and brothers, that even in official statements, such as those of the Ministry of Defense, the blame is being placed on «subversive preaching». People with evil intentions are saying that «religious associations» are provoking the disorder in our society. You can see the tendency to blame the church. That is why we have for quite some time been trying to define the church as a defender of human rights and of the just demands of the *campesinos*, but we also distinguish the church from groups that are not the church even though many of her children have a right to join them.

³ «The Events of San Pedro Perulapán», *ECA* 354 (1978) 223-247. This article gives a comparative analysis of the different versions of what happened in San Pedro Perulapán.

⁴ «Office of the Archbishop of San Salvador. Office of Social Communication. Information Bulletin No. 39» in *Orientación* (2 April 1978).

⁵ «Pastoral Message for the New Year» in *Orientación* (8 January 1978).

Read or listen to the homilies of St Oscar Romero at romerotrue.org.uk

Let us be very clear here: these groups, specifically FECCAS and UTC⁶, are not the church, and they are not religious associations. If there are Catholics there, they have the right as citizens to join any organization they want; they are responsible for their conscience and their deeds. But don't say that the church is sowing violence and discord. The church is not to blame either when baptized people join ORDEN or the army and then attack other sisters and brothers. These people may be baptized, but they are not living up to their baptism so the church is not responsible. Even when government officials proclaim that they are baptized Catholics, they are not the church. I am going to speak about what the church is later, but for now I simply say that the church inspires the words and thoughts of Christians who are in agreement with the demands of social justice, which calls upon the church, in the name of the Gospel, to help create a society that is more fraternal. We are going to speak now about what that means.

«As we analyze the real roots of violence, we want to recall that if social and political possibilities are not created that enable the *campesinos* and poorest members of our society to present their urgent needs and their just demands, then outbreaks of violence will unfortunately increase. If the *campesinos* find all the doors for dialogue closed so that they cannot organize in defense of their legitimate interests or demonstrate in a peaceful manner, then—as we said in our January statement on the Law of Public Order⁷—violent incidents will increase in number. It is therefore most urgent that a social and political climate be created that will allow the *campesinos* to express their needs clearly and freely».

My sisters and brothers, the right to organize is a human right. No one can restrict this right. The Constitution lays out the fundamental principles that protect morality and public order⁸. But rights also have to do with providing food for one's family, obtaining land for sowing crops, lowering the price of fertilizers and insecticides, dealing with the vital necessities of life, and organizing to avoid dying of hunger. It is not right and just when farmers arrive for a scheduled appointment at a bank and find the bank closed—they are taken to be fools. And then, while returning home on March 17, they were attacked—that is not just! It is not the church that is sowing violence in such cases. The violence is being sown by the unjust situations and by institutions and unjust laws that favor one sector of society and do not take into consideration the common good of the people, the majority above all. And here the church cannot remain silent because she has an evangelical right backing her and a duty to the Father of all people to demand a more fraternal order in our society.

«But not even this dialogue will serve to reestablish the peace we desire if there is not a strong resolve to transform the unjust structures of society. Only this transformation can eliminate the concrete, oppressive, repressive, or spontaneous types of violence. Otherwise, as the bishops of Latin American have said, violence becomes institutionalized, and its bitter fruits are not long in coming (M 2:16). The church believes in peace, but she knows well that peace is not simply the absence of violence and that peace is not achieved through repressive violence. True peace is achieved only as the fruit of justice. We want to believe that no person and no Salvadoran of good will wants violence or military operations or conflicts among fellow

⁶ Christian Federation of Salvadoran *Campesinos* (FECCAS) and the Union of Rural Workers (UTC).

⁷ «Pastoral Message for the New Year», *ibid.*

⁸ *Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador*, 1962, Art. 160.

campesinos. But combating violence effectively means working earnestly at the long, hard, and demanding task of sharing among all Salvadorans the wealth of our nation and our people».

This is not communism; this is Christian justice. And pointing out the roots of violence is not sowing violence; rather, it is indicating its sources and demanding change of those who *can* change this situation so that positive steps are taken toward the construction of a true homeland, the true common good. By simply repressing with military operations, we do nothing more than sow more violence. Yesterday it was Aguilares; yesterday it was San Pedro Perulapán; last night news came from Perulapía or San José Guayabal. Other situations will keep arising if the roots are still there! When the root is deeply sunk, should we be surprised that violence breaks out wherever the root reaches?

«We therefore call upon all Salvadorans of good will to cooperate in true peace and to promote justice. Once again we condemn both the violence of structures and those concrete forms of violence that inevitably provoke violent self-defense. We want neither institutionalized violence nor defensive violence that avenges on its own. Otherwise we will never escape from this spiral of violence.

«We call upon people to reflect and be reasonable. Our country cannot continue this way. We must overcome the indifference that exists among many people who simply become spectators in the face of this terrible situation, especially in the rural areas. We must combat the selfishness of those persons who do not want to cede what is theirs so that there will be enough for others. We must rediscover the profound Gospel truth that we must serve the majority who are poor.

«We also call upon the government to put in place effective means to pacify the country. We believe that one of these means should be a reasonable and generous amnesty as evidence that the government really wants peace among Salvadorans. This would be the first step toward a common dialogue, which would lead to other steps in the common construction of a better social order».

This week, sisters and brothers, has been for me very revealing in this regard. You know that I organized a committee of solidarity to help deal with this situation. Through the generous initiative of a woman, we called upon all the organizations we could think of. Many came, but others just sent a message: «We cannot take part because we cannot take sides». Others said, «We do not want to get involved in politics». What a shame, sisters and brothers, that we are so indifferent! With the excuse of not getting involved in politics, these people stand with their arms crossed and do good only when it is easy or when doing good brings them glory and prestige. Serving means sacrificing yourself.

I want to thank those groups that were present and are helping us. And I want to make special and laudatory mention of a group of lawyers and law students who are going to assist not so much the church but the Salvadoran people, especially those whose voices need to be heard in the courts and in government offices, where so often the voice of the poor is overwhelmed by the unjust shouts of the powerful. I thank you, beloved lawyers and law students. I hope that this initiative will bring about constitutional laws and principles that will instill true hope and joy in all our people rather than fear, terror, and mistrust. We expect a lot from these lawyers because they are motivated by a true Christian spirit, and we are sad for

the lawyers who have not joined them because they would lose clients. They lack courage; their wallets and their comfort are more important. What a shame!

Here I call especially on those who identify as Catholics, above all those who serve as the church's instruments in her pastoral ministry. Catholic schools have to communicate the message of the Gospel and teach their students and their families the true message of the church. The communities and the parishes, in whatever part of the city they are found, must be the voice of the church and not flee from responsibility like the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Finally, sisters and brothers, «We ask everyone to pray for those who have died and for their relatives. Pray that the dead may rest in peace with the Lord and that their families may rebuild their lives» even though they may now be missing the pillar who once sustained them. I want to remember here with affection and sadness Miguelito Acosta, the poor young man who was looking for work in San Salvador. The only place he could find to sleep was an abandoned pick-up truck; the vehicle was set on fire, and he was burned to death. What a frightful scene it was when his mother and sister came here to bury this young man who was perhaps the hope of their family! Another bitter fruit of our social organization.

«We also ask for the generous cooperation of all people in providing economic assistance to the many families who are in mourning or homeless or with wounded members». The committee of solidarity is doing wonderful work. In collaboration with Caritas and other Catholic institutions, they are collecting food, clothing and money. We continue to accept donations both in the archbishop's office and the offices of Caritas. Caritas has an office here on the west side of the cathedral, and I thank you for offering whatever you can.

Along the same line, sisters and brothers, allow me to praise publicly the community of Ilopango for a letter they sent me during Easter Week announcing the fruit of their Lenten fasts. Isaiah tells us, «To fast is to share your bread with the hungry» (Isa 58:6-7), and in this community all the faithful—adults, young people, and children—deprived themselves of many things and contributed the results of their self-denial. They gave seventy *colones* to assist the people in need in San Pedro Perulapán. More than the amount, I praise here the quality of this money which is the fruit of Christian fellowship—poor people helping poor people. What a beautiful gesture! What magnificent communities we have in the archdiocese!

«We want to conclude with the same evangelical consideration with which we began. Our nation is wounded and needs a Good Samaritan. This is the only interest that motivates us as pastors of the people of God. That is why we want the truth to be made clear, why we want everyone to be free to speak, why we want the true needs of the *campesinos* to be heard, and why we want a society to be created that can satisfy these needs. Only in this way can we banish violence and establish peace».

Now, sisters and brothers, in light of this truth it is easy to understand today's three readings. My commentary today could be called, «The Risen One Lives in His Church». The story of the resurrection that we are considering in these days is the essential, fundamental testimony of the apostolic church. The resurrection of Christ is the title that the church puts forth to the public to justify her role as an instrument for saving the world. Why? Precisely for the reason that appears in today's readings: the resurrected Christ breathes forth his Spirit on

the newborn church: «As the Father has sent me, so I send you» (John 20:21). Just as God breathed the spirit of life into that creature of clay in Genesis (Gen 2:7), so Christ who is God breathes his redemptive mission to the world into this organism he has created: «As the Father has sent me, so I send you». And he explains that breath: «Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them» (John 20:22-23). The church's mission, then, is born as if in a new Paradise. As Adam awoke to life as an image of God, free and intelligent and capable of love, so the church awakens from the sleep of Pentecost as a new creation. That is what you are, sisters and brothers listening to me now and reflecting with me. That is what we are as church: the new being that received the breath of risen life that never dies.

To help you understand all this I will divide my thought into two ideas: first, Christ lives; and second, Christ lives not only in heaven but in the community of believers on earth. May my poor words succeed in unveiling this beautiful truth, and may all of us who are baptized feel in this Easter season the greatness of our lives, the loveliness of the church, and the richness of our community, poor as we may be, when we feel the breath of the risen One.

Christ lives

Christ lives! We should note the gospel's insistence on those who were eyewitnesses, such as Thomas who touched him and ate with him. In his appearances Christ insists: «Touch me and see! It is I!» They eat together, they give him some fish, and he eats with them so that they can see that spirits do not eat. «I am a being of flesh and blood. I am the same historical Christ who passed from death to resurrection. I live incarnate on earth, and I live now not only as the son of Mary, native of Nazareth, but as a son of the resurrection, the Son of God. I live with flesh that can become the flesh of all people and of all times. I embody the Salvadorans of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I am the Salvadoran Christ». Christ lives in El Salvador. Christ lives in Guatemala. Christ lives in Africa. The historical Christ, the Christ made man, lives in every age of history and in all the people of the earth. This is what makes Christ alive and present. This Christ receives in today's gospel the most beautiful profession of faith that was ever written in the Scriptures. Today, sisters and brothers, you have had the good fortune of hearing the passage in which Saint John, the sublime evangelist, arrives at the greatest height that any inspired author can hope for. It is when Thomas, who first doubted, becomes convinced and falls to his knees, exclaiming, «My Lord and my God!» (John 20:28). This is Christ!

Notice that in biblical interpretation these two words, «Lord» and «God», are the same words the Israelites used to designate the God of Abraham, the God of Jacob, the Creator. That is why in Hebrew God was referred to as Yahweh *Elohim*, the Lord God. Thus when Thomas calls Christ «Lord» and «God», he means God the Creator, the God of the Old Testament covenant, the God who accompanies his people through history, the God who does not allow those who trust in him to perish.

It is interesting to recall that Saint John wrote these words during the days of the Roman empire when the Roman emperors were called gods. Woe to the citizen who called gods anything else than the Roman emperors! Despite this threat, Christians called Christ «Lord» and «God». They declared, «We have no other god on earth! He has come bringing a mission of redemption». How beautiful is the greeting of the risen Christ that appears three times in today's gospel: «Peace be with you» (John 20:19,21,26). That is his gift: peace. That is

why any people that riddles peace with bullets—it's sad to say it— is not a Christian people. In those zones of repression and hostility where the greeting of peace sounds sarcastic, El Salvador is the anti-Christ. My dear sisters and brothers of Perulapán, my hope is that all of you without distinction fall on your knees before Christ who alone gives peace. Peace does not come from military operations with the collaboration of ORDEN, nor does peace come from the revenge carried out by some popular organization. Peace comes only from Christ. Only by believing in Christ and in one another can we ever experience true peace.

And it is Christ who will come again. The second reading from Saint Peter is beautiful. Saint Peter says, «Even though we may have to suffer trials yet we await the Lord's return. At that time our faith, which now is being tested, will achieve its culmination with the great event of salvation» (1 Pet 1:5-6). Those who are open to salvation and who today believe that this salvation cannot prescind from the political, economic, and social liberation of this world likewise must realize that the church cannot prescind from this liberation of the world either for she hopes in the Christ who will come to put things in their place and make history an offering to our God.

How wonderful it will be then for those who are found with this faith in Christ who is to come again. If I have lived with this hope, then I will feel the embrace of a friend that I have not seen for a long time but have long awaited. Even more, the church as spouse longs with a sigh, as we soon will do also: «Come, Lord Jesus!» (Rev 22:20). Christ is the beloved who is far away and knows that another awaits him and longs for the time of encounter—that is Christ and that is the church. Therefore, sisters and brothers, Christ lives!

Christ lives not only in heaven but in the community of believers on earth

My second reflection is the following: Christ is alive in the community. Here it is good to pay attention to the first reading. I recommend, especially to the parish communities, the base communities, and all religious communities: if you really want to live your true Christian identity in this Easter season, read with special devotion the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The church uses this book for her daily scripture readings during these fifty days of Easter. The Acts of the Apostles is the most wonderful testimony about how people experienced Christ alive in the faith of believers and formed this community of followers that is the church. Today's reading from Acts tells us about this community, which we can view from three distinct perspectives: the community of life, the community of faith, and the eschatological community.

A community of life. The Christians shared a life in common, to the point that they sold their possessions and gave the proceeds to the apostles to be administered. In this community no one suffered; all were equal. This is common life: sharing. We are far from this ideal, but at least in our constitution there is a principle that could provide an opening for such community, for it says that private property ought to have a «social function»⁹. This social function does not consist just in greater production; it means that increased production should redound in justice to the common good of all. Naturally, everyone should work so that all can participate. Common life does not mean simply saying, «I love you». It means deeds. Love is shown in deeds

⁹ Ibid., art. 137.

and not just in good intentions. Today we have a wonderful opportunity to identify with those who are suffering, those who are homeless, those who have no food—and help them.

Today's reading tells us that that community of life was so attractive to others that word about it spread and people kept joining the community. Who joined? Look at the final words of today's reading: «Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved» (Acts 2:47). This was a community of salvation. Only by belonging to this church, which is now known as an instrument of Christ's life, can people be saved. But it is not enough to belong to this church community if the main thing is the Spirit of Christ who must inspire all who belong to this church. That is why there are many who call themselves Catholic, but they are not Christian because they do not have the Spirit of Christ, and they will not be saved because only the Spirit of the Redeemer that is in the church saves. Saying that a church and her bishops and priests preach violence and hatred is to ignore these origins of the church, which was established in the world to proclaim love and communion.

We have a *community of faith* above all, sisters and brothers. Be very careful with this phrase because our community must distinguish itself from all other human organizations and groups. Catholics, as members of their church community, have to live out the commitments of their faith. If some Catholics want to carry their Christian light outside the church and join some group to collaborate in the liberation of the world, then they are personally responsible. They should not tell their fellow Catholics that they have an obligation to become members of the same organization. By no means! Everyone is free! We must all decide for ourselves the concrete options outside the church we feel called in conscience to follow. But as church, we commit ourselves only to being a community of faith.

What does this mean? It means what the passage from the book of Acts has told us today: «They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles» (Acts 2:42). This was a community that prayed often and lived a sacramental life, «the breaking of the bread». This is the same church that today has filled this cathedral with people of faith to listen to a successor of the apostles. Unworthy as I may be, that is what I am in the archdiocese, a successor of the apostles around whom a community gathers to hear the words of faith. That is why, sisters and brothers, I would be foolish and would betray my mission if I were to tell you that this faith means commitment to some particular organization. I would be crazy if from this pulpit I were planting seeds of revenge and hatred and violence. I have never done this. «I have spoken in public» (John 18:19), said Christ, and people can never say that they heard in my words a call to vengeance or hatred or class struggle. Never!

The faith is what I have preached, and that is faith in Christ. I have indeed said that every person who is enlightened by that faith has to become incarnate in history, in the history of El Salvador. Every one of you must find the way in which you'll become incarnate, living always this incarnation as true Christians. Do not mutilate the faith. If the mystique of some rebel group proclaims violence, then a Christian becomes violent and is no Christian. If a Christian joins ORDEN and is ordered to beat and kill people, that person is no longer Christian. Neither the one nor the other is Christian. Christians are those who are true to their faith; they listen carefully to the word of the apostles, to the revelation of God, and they guide their lives by it. They do not betray the practice of their Christian existence. There are some Catholics who doubt the words of the bishop and tell others, «The bishop has to define himself!» I have

defined myself very clearly, sisters and brothers. Now you must define yourselves: are you with the church or outside the church?

A community of prayer. Another great force of this institution of Christ is that it is a community of faith, a community of prayer: «They devoted themselves to prayer» (Acts 2:42). This word «prayer» moves me deeply, sisters and brothers. When you read the book of Acts, you will notice how many times the community gathered together in prayer. For example, when they selected Matthias as a substitute for Judas, they prayed (Acts 1:24); when Peter was imprisoned, the community prayed (Acts 12:5); when the apostles were leaving for a mission, they prayed (Acts 13:3); and when Herod's persecutions of the early Christians made the community tremble, they prayed. In prayer the community found strength because only God can give us this force that the Spirit of Christ breathed forth upon the Christian community. I want to express publicly my thanks for the strength of prayer that I receive from so many places. Nothing is more wonderful for me than to hear, «We are praying for you. You are not alone. We are with you in our prayer». God be blessed! A thousand thanks! I tell you now, sisters and brothers: let us pray for those who are weak! Let us pray for those who betray us! Let us pray for those who are ashamed of their faith! Let us pray for our poor brothers and sisters who doubt even the bishop's sincerity. Let us pray that we have the courage to live as Christians even amid the perilous risks of this mission. We must be firm in what is to be preached, and like those first Christians, we will have to say at times, «We must obey God rather than men» (Acts 5:29). From God we will receive the power to proclaim the teaching that is one and true.

This community of faith lives in the sacraments. My sisters and brothers, the sacraments are part of our church. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that they «devoted themselves to the breaking of bread» (Acts 2:42). This is a precious, mysterious term for what is called the holy Mass. At that time the Christians shared a common supper, but after the supper—as Christ did after the Last Supper—the setting became sacred, and the one presiding over the gathering consecrated the bread and the wine; it was then no longer bread or wine, but the Body and Blood of the Lord.

This is why Pope Paul VI beautifully described the present church as the sacrament of salvation (LG 48). Entrance into the church community is expressed by many signs that prolong and explain the sign of the church. In the dynamism of evangelization the person who accepts the Gospel as the word that saves normally expresses it in sacramental gestures. People cannot be true children of the church unless they value the church's sacraments.

I hope the person is listening who asked me, «If there are two people who love one another and are not married by the church, but they live together faithfully and are kind to one another—why should they get married by the church?» Here is the answer. I do not say that people who cohabit are bad. There are many people living together who are more faithful to one another than those who are married in the church. That is true. But it is also true that some who are joined together by human love have not received the sacrament. The sacrament is a sign of belonging to the church of Christ. When a man and a woman who belong to this church of Christ want to proclaim that their love is so noble that they are not embarrassed to be children of God, then they present themselves to a priest who blesses their love. Cohabitation is not wrong at a human level, but it is incomplete because the sacramental sign of conjugal love is missing.

The same could be said of those who come to Mass and do not receive Communion: the sign is incomplete. I hope that some day, sisters and brothers, we all understand that the breaking of the bread is a sign of Christ inviting us to share at this table. The altar is the family table; let us not forget it. When we come to Mass, when we enter the doors of this cathedral, we should feel as though we have come home. Just as in our homes our mothers await us with the table set, so too Christ awaits us with his table set, and we snub him when at the supper hour we are not hungry or are not ready to eat. The sign of our identification with Christ is Communion. Hopefully, sisters and brothers, we will one day understand the eucharistic beauty of our church and will realize that the Mass is not only word but is also nourishment, Communion, and life.

Finally, sisters and brothers, the community of faith is also «eschatological». The other day I explained to you the meaning of this word: it refers to what is beyond the limits of this world. It means we are waiting; we are a community of hope. That is why the contribution that the church makes to the liberating forces of this world cannot prescind from her hope in another life. The church must convince the liberators of this earth that paradise does not exist on earth. Neither communism nor any other group will ever build a paradise apart from heaven. But that heaven must be built now here on earth, and the church community must be a reflection of that heaven. When I see all the people seated here on these benches, people of every kind from different walks of life, I realize how love can bind together, how love unites, and how the life of the heaven we hope for is reflected beautifully here in our human community.

We have hope, sisters and brothers, and that is why life here on earth is not perfect, and even in the church we find defects. We should not be surprised when prelates, priests, married people, religious men and women, students in Catholics schools, etc., do not fulfill their obligations. We have our faults and our defects. In all sincerity I tell you that every night I have to ask God's forgiveness for my own faults, and so do we all. The pope also confesses his sins, and we priests also confess our sins because we know that while we are pilgrims on earth, even if we plant seeds of hope in another life, our feet get covered with the dust of earth. There are always miseries that must be shaken off, even in the human life of the holiest of Christians.

My sisters and brothers, let us live this sacramental sign. I have gone on too long, forgive me, but today's readings and the concrete history of our nation present us with such a beautiful lesson that it was worthwhile spending this time reflecting. Thus encouraged by our faith in the Christ who lives in our community, let us feel him present now upon the altar so that as we adore him in the consecrated host we can say with the sincerity of Thomas, not doubting but truly believing, «My Lord and my God» (John 20:28).