

**104**

## **THE CHURCH: A COMMUNITY OF LOVE**

**Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time  
17 September 1978**

Sirach 27:30–28:7

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

My dear sisters and brothers, esteemed radio audience, we have heard three passages from Sacred Scripture. One was from the book of Ecclesiasticus, written by an expert who had great knowledge of the wisdom of the Israelites. Another came from the very lips of Christ, a beautiful parable of forgiveness. And the third is a commentary of Saint Paul for the Christian community.

We are still in chapter 18 of Saint Matthew, the part of the gospel where Christ is offering us images of Christian community. We find there that one of the things that especially characterizes those who come together in the church as followers of Christ is forgiveness. But forgiveness is not a weakness; it is strength. Saint Paul tells us about a conflict in his community, a conflict that he says is between «the strong and the weak». In modern times that might be translated as conflict between «progressives and conservatives». The Bible tells us today that over these two conflicts—forgiveness vs. hateful violence, and progress vs. tradition—one thing should reign supreme: love. Let us, then, title our thoughts this morning in a way similar to last Sunday: «The Church: a Community of Love». Our three thoughts will be: first, the problem of violence and forgiveness; second, the conflict between traditionalists and progressives; and third, the key to the solution, the transcendence of love.

In order to better understand, or perhaps I should say, in order to frame our thoughts within our present reality, I remind you that as a Christian community of 1978 we are the same community that Christ created twenty centuries ago, a community that is journeying through history amid the conflict-ridden reality of this world. I have absolutely no desire to neglect the Gospel, but I do see the need to relate the Gospel to our present reality. As is my custom, then, sisters and brothers, I would like us all to pay close attention to two things about the present week. First we must consider the church in herself, the living realities of our church, our communities here in the archdiocese, and those in the universal church. And then we must see how this church, being built up in modesty and love and the sincerity of concrete deeds, relates to the profane setting in which she lives, that is, to the realities that surround us. This has always been the case with the church. She is the leaven in the dough. She must always be concerned with remaining the leaven that raises up the dough. She has been placed by Christ as a light to shine through the shadows of the world. That's why her two great concerns should be, first, to maintain herself as a brilliant light and, second, to shine her light into the shadows.

A church cannot be solely concerned with taking care of herself in the manner of those people who are worried only about their health and never have time for anything else because

they're always looking after their own wellbeing. The church takes care of her health but not in a selfish way; she does so in order to be healthy and strong and to be able to serve. The aim of the church is to serve: «As my Father has sent me to the world, so I send you to the world. Go to all nations to serve them and help them with their problems, to enlighten them in their difficulties, to strengthen them in their weaknesses, and to help them resolve their problems by the light of the Gospel» (John 20:21). And so it is, sisters and brothers, that our church has indeed been building herself up this week, but I'm not saying that that's all she's been doing. I want to draw from our church's rich spirituality a few simple demonstrations to show that this church is not a cadaver and neither is she a museum; rather, she is life, and she is moving through the world.

### **Life of the church**

Accordingly, I can inform you that this week the presidents of the bishops' conferences of all Central America met in Costa Rica. I still don't have news about the results of this meeting, but certainly they shared the concerns of the Archbishop of Managua because of the serious problems in Nicaragua. The bishops' responsibility is to examine matters within the competency of the hierarchy; they don't deal with political or diplomatic matters. Rather, they try to bring the pastoral enlightenment of faith to what is actually happening in society. There also in Nicaragua the church must be leaven and light for the country.

This week in Santiago de María we celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of priesthood of Arturo Rivera Damas, bishop of Santiago de María. Next week they'll celebrate it in San Esteban Catarina. Yesterday I had the good fortune of taking part in the affection, the prayers, and the gratitude of that diocesan community toward their shepherd. In proclaiming the word, I sounded the priestly note by saying that if today the church lives and preaches in the world the same doctrine of Christ and can call herself a faithful follower of Christ, it is thanks to the priesthood. The priesthood created by Christ is like a bond between the person of the risen, living Christ and the concrete church that preaches about the needs of the peoples. Thanks to the priesthood, that eternal doctrine becomes visible light in each concrete circumstance, and the priest is like an official document certifying that Christ is present in the church community.

This week I also had the enjoyable experience of visiting several religious communities. On September 14, the liturgical feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, I visited the Passionist Sisters who run the Colegio de la Divina Providencia. There I thanked them for the pastoral work that the Congregation of the Passion is doing in the Colegio Santa Gema in Santiago de María and at the pastoral center in San José Villanueva. I encouraged them to continue to be faithful to their charism of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ because even though the cross is painful, it is the secret of success, the secret of Easter and resurrection.

That same day also the Sisters of the Holy Cross were celebrating new religious consecrations—they are part of the Good Shepherd Congregation. So you can see, there is a strong force of prayer, sacrifice, and penance that is giving life to our local church. I thanked them in the name of all of you, and I encouraged them to continue to fortify our church life. I felt one thing forcibly in that visit, and I want to communicate to you as a testimony of what is true penance and true love of God. It is this: their life is not sad. In few places have I found so much joy, such an effusion of joy, as there among the Sisters of the Holy Cross. I know they're listening to me, and so I say to them again, «I congratulate you because that joy of yours is a

sign of the true God. You also told me something that gave me much encouragement: you said that you saw the mark of God in my serenity». Let us thank God that such joy, such serenity, and such peace accompany your conscience when you know that you're doing your duty. For all of you here I desire the joy of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.

This week I also visited some parish communities, such as the one in Panchimalco, which also on that same day, September 14, celebrated the feast of the Holy Cross, which there is called the Holy Cross of Rome. I told them that I felt great delight to be celebrating the vigil of our national holiday in that small colonial church where the three great sources of our national identity seem to converge: the indigenous people; the colonial church by which the faith of Spain brought us Christianity; and the fifteenth of September, which reminds us that our life as a nation, though we dare not call it independent, is still by its history moving toward true independence. We ended by singing the national hymn, and I confess to you that very seldom has there been such a profound spirit of true patriotism as when all those people, crowded into the very historical setting of that church, were singing, «Let us hail the homeland, proud to be called her children». And I earnestly begged the Lord to give us a holy pride in being Salvadorans, and I prayed for the day when we truly have a homeland that brings joy and happiness to all of us who have had the good fortune to be born here.

We also celebrated in the Colonia Dolores, whose patron is Our Lady of Sorrows—her feast day is September 15. There, kneeling beside the Virgin and the cross, we prayed for our nation and for that devout parish of Dolores. Dolores is also the name of another parish in Apulo, which will have its celebration today. We send them our greetings, and within a short while we will also take part in the fervor of their popular devotion.

We also participated last Sunday in the joyful community life of Cuscatancingo, where Father Julio Orellana is preparing a very fervent community. In the parish of El Calvario of Santa Tecla there has been a change of pastors. Since Thursday the new pastor is Father Francisco Javier Aguilar, a Jesuit; he has taken the place of Father Eduardo Orellana.

Within this context of the parish communities I want to denounce the abuse that has been committed in the village of San José Primero, part of the parish of San Martín. Members of ORDEN entered the sanctuary and took charge of the chapel. They then celebrated there with a dissident priest without regard for church authority. I want to remind all Christian communities that the church is hierarchical and only those celebrations authorized and presided over by legitimate priests are true worship of God. Other forms of worship, such as that clandestine celebration, may suit the devotion of persons who don't realize how they're being manipulated, but the individuals who are manipulating religion in that way for political ends are certainly sinning gravely before God and giving the community bad guidance. That was not, then, a true celebration.

This week also, our lay people have celebrated two very important events. There in Ayagualo the Serra Club held their Central American convention. Men and women from different countries of Central America came together to study the themes that are the focus of their work: vocations and priesthood. I thank them and commend them. Also, a community of young people belonging to the Latin American Union of Ecumenical Youth met in Planes de Renderos to reflect on topics of great concern to young people. I had the pleasure of participating in both meetings and of communicating to them the message of the church and the hopes that we have for you, the laity.

I would also like to announce to young people that next Friday the twenty-second at the San José de la Montaña Seminary there will be a three-day encounter for young men who feel some interest in a priestly vocation. If there are young men who want to find out more about this extremely important matter of a priestly calling, you can get information at the seminary. People there will be happy to help you out. Sisters and brothers, this is a little bit of what is going on in our pilgrim church here in the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

### **Events of the week**

The situation in which we live and move is marked by many events, both painful and hopeful, both sad and happy. Each of you has also much to tell about your own week. For my part, I want to stress that, during this week in which we celebrated the fifteenth of September, the superficial joy of our independence celebrations has not helped us to understand the terrible tragedy of these nations of ours which claim to be independent.

Let us look mainly at our sister nation, Nicaragua. We hear the call of Archbishop Obando. There is a real civil war being fought there, with battles being waged in Diriamba, Masaya, Jinotepe, Peñas Blancas, Chinandega, Estelí, Granada, Rivas, etc. The president has declared a state of martial law for the whole republic. The National Guard is machine-gunning and bombing people indiscriminately, even non-combatants in flight. Planes and tanks are attacking the population, including members of the Red Cross who should be respected by international agreement. They say that at least fifteen years will be needed to recover what is being destroyed. The will of the people is clear: they don't want the present president. Nevertheless, he reaffirms his capricious resolve to stay in power. It is necessary, then, to hear that cry of the people. We have said before that as bishops we are not political experts, but as pastors we feel the pain and the bloodshed of so many sisters and brothers on both sides. So as we pray to the Lord in this Mass and in our prayers during these days, I ask you especially to pray that this conflict be resolved so that peace returns to Nicaragua before more blood is shed.

Let us keep one thing in mind. On one side there are some who seek to defend a government's legitimacy, and on the other side there is an insurrection that is dubbed communist. I want to tell you that that label is one of those untruthful arguments about national security. Not everything is communism. We know that in that nation there are many decent people of impartial judgment who are supporting those who are taking part in the insurrection. I want to mention especially the death of Don Gustavo Adolfo Argüello, for whom I ask prayers today; he is related to someone who collaborates closely with our church. No one can say that he is a communist; no one can say that if the present government falls, only communists will govern. Nicaragua has many people with great ability to do what the church has always proposed: opening up democratic channels so that all those who are willing and able to seek the common good of the nation can find a way forward.

Let us not be indifferent in this matter, sisters and brothers, because tomorrow the landscape can be very different. The church must always maintain her sense of justice and defend the just order she requires in the name of God's justice. Let us pray that all the governments of Central America understand this lesson and learn in time that these situations are the product of repression, institutionalized violence, and everything the church has been denouncing for a long time now. Even though people call the church communist, she is pointing

to the wounds, and she is telling those who are still hopeful, «Let us not suffer». And to those who are already suffering, she says, «There is still time to get out of these situations and to leave behind all those horrible, bloody fingerprints».

Also during this week of independence, a demonstration in Santa Ana last Sunday was repressed, leaving many persons dead, wounded, and detained<sup>1</sup>. The same occurred in Zacatecoluca and also at the National University, where the students were demonstrating because of the partial examinations. These are hours of violence.

We have also lamented many other events that don't come to mind right now. Certainly yesterday we were shaken by the news of the murder of Doctor Rubén Alfonso Rodríguez<sup>2</sup>, the machine-gunning of the U.S. Embassy, and the murder in Soyapango of two young men, Miguel Ángel Flamenco Solís and Rubén Orlando Platero<sup>3</sup>. The news about these crimes has been very ambiguous. This week our information office will publish a bulletin with the results of our investigations into what happened; we do this for the sake of justice and the truth.

We received a letter from an anguished woman of Portillo del Norte, where Adrián Serrano disappeared in August. In her sad note the woman says, «On August 2 he was captured by the National Guard at eleven o'clock in the morning in the hamlet Las Cañas. He was taken toward Chalatenango, and since then nothing is known of his whereabouts. We have already searched for him in many places. The security forces of Chalatenango and San Salvador tell us that they know nothing about him». What anguish for those who have been disappeared! That's why the Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners, in an attempt to convey this suffering, will appear before the Assembly this week to request amnesty for sixty-five prisoners sentenced under the Law of Public Order. They will also request information concerning the whereabouts of another 101 disappeared persons, whose number keeps increasing<sup>4</sup>.

Also in Nicaragua, with regard to the case of the Salesian priest, Father Pacheco, we have received an authoritative clarification regarding the events, which were quite different from what the news media presented. The statement concludes by saying, «We declare that the countless official searches and the transparent conduct of Father Pacheco and the other Salesians dedicated exclusively to their Salesian pastoral mission have made it evident to the National Guard and other government authorities that these men were not involved in politics in any way or at any moment. The presence of Father Pacheco in La Magdalena was to provide extra attention to the religious needs of the faithful. There is no evidence that arms or subversive literature were found in that parish». The manifesto ends by protesting against the distortions of the truth.

I have many others items, dear sisters and brothers, but I don't want to tire you. You can read about many things in the «Solidarity» section of *Orientación*. You also have personal knowledge about many other things, and precisely for that reason you should make use of that knowledge—I say this by way of suggestion. You know how many injustices there are; you know how much distress there is, such as the illnesses we hear about and the suffering of many

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<sup>1</sup> «Asking for Amnesty, They are Massacred» in *Orientación* (17 September 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Doctor Rubén Alfonso Rodríguez was president of the Legislative Assembly from 1972 until June 1978. See *La Prensa Gráfica* (18 September 1978).

<sup>3</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 September 1978).

<sup>4</sup> «Amnesty Asked for Political Prisoners» in *Orientación* (24 September 1978).

persons. These things should inspire us and impel us to make of our church community a gathering of Christians who experience all these things as a body and try to share in the pain of them.

### **The problem of violence and forgiveness**

I would therefore like to describe this morning's biblical thought in terms of the conflict between violence and hatred, on one side, and forgiveness and love, on the other. The first reading draws on the Bible's wisdom to tell us that anger and rancor are not good, that «the vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance» (Sir 28:1). I take advantage of this message of the Sacred Scripture to invite you once again to study and reflect on our pastoral letter on the church and the people's political organizations. The third part deals directly with the church's judgment on violence, and today's sacred passages from the Bible are telling us that when the Bible counsels forgiveness, benevolence, and peace, it is presenting the Christian ideal. It is not cowardice; it is not an attempt to dodge our responsibility by fleeing and taking refuge in spinelessness.

In my pastoral letter I say, «Every person has the potential for a healthy degree of the aggressiveness with which nature has endowed us in order to overcome the obstacles of life. Courage, boldness, and fearlessness in taking risks are noteworthy virtues and values of our people, and they should be incorporated into the life of society not to destroy lives but to establish right and justice for all, especially for those who today seem most deprived of those goods»<sup>5</sup>. In the letter I also recall what the church's documents say: that Christians love peace, not because they can't fight but because peace is better. «Christians are peaceful and not ashamed of it», says the Medellín document on peace. «They are not simply pacifist, because they can fight if need be, but they prefer peace to war. They know that abrupt, violent changes in structures are fallacious, ineffective in themselves, and certainly not in accord with human dignity» (M 2,15).

But even as we defend this human value of aggressiveness and bravery, we state that, like every passion, it must be educated. The aggressiveness that all people have within themselves can make them either criminals or saints. It's not the case that the saints were not aggressive. True Christians are not cowards; when necessary, they know how to fight. But they also know how to channel that great force of aggressiveness with principles of peace, love, and forgiveness. Thus, there is a kind of violence that may be called «the violence of nonviolence». That is the violence Christ taught: «When they strike you on one cheek, turn the other one as well» (Matt 5:39). That's not cowardice. From experience I believe anyone can do this. When a man strikes or assaults another person, he expects an aggressive, violent response. If in contrast he receives a smile, forgiveness, and understanding, the person who has been struck is shown to be stronger than the one who struck him. That's why they say that the martyrs were not lacking in courage when they let themselves be killed; rather, even in their condition as victims they were stronger than their persecutors and won the victory over them. Where are the hands stained with so many crimes? They are frightened. You cannot find people more frightened than criminals. The reason is that they have not developed their human personality. That is why in the Bible the Lord teaches us the power of non-aggressiveness, of forgiveness. But I also want to tell you, sisters and brothers—out of respect for the truth and the force that

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<sup>5</sup> *The Church and the People's Political Organizations* (6 August 1978) 50.

people have within themselves—that there are moments when it is just and virtuous to make use of your aggressiveness. In our pastoral letter we give two cases<sup>6</sup>.

The first case involves defense in face of unjust aggression. Persons who are unjustly assaulted have the right to defend themselves; this is the violence of just defense. But there are conditions, one of which is that the defense should not exceed the force of the unjust aggression. For example, if defense is possible by the use of one's hands, it is not allowed to shoot the aggressor. Another condition is that people should resort to proportionate violence only after having exhausted all possible pacific means. When an aggressor refuses to reason with the one being attacked and continues to commit unjust violence, and when all peaceful means have been exhausted, then the person being attacked has the right to legitimate self-defense. They say that war is the last recourse. There is another, third condition: that the defensive violence not bring as a consequence an evil that is greater than what is being defended. For example, if in order to defend myself from an unjust aggressor, I commit greater violence or give rise to greater injustice, then the greater good must prevail.

The other case is similar and is part of the church's traditional doctrine. What you are going to hear now is nothing new; you have no reason to be scandalized. The modern documents of the church have made us aware of the situations which the people of today must face. In the pastoral letter I state this principle by referring to two major endorsements, the pope and the bishops of Latin America: «The Medellín document on peace, citing a text from the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (PP 31), mentions the legitimacy of insurrection in the very exceptional circumstances of “an evident and prolonged tyranny that seriously works against fundamental human rights and dangerously damages the common good of the country, whether it proceeds from one person or from clearly unjust structures”». This is the principle, but it must take conditions into account. Therefore, the church immediately warns about the danger of occasioning through insurrection «new violence, new injustices, and new disasters which would justify a condemnation of the right of insurrection»<sup>7</sup>. Now you're going to say to me, «He says this and at the same time denies it». He says it clearly, but then he lays down the conditions of true morality. That is what makes it difficult. Take the case in Nicaragua, for example: which will be the greater evil? That is where the critical conscience of individuals and of the whole people has to make a judgment in the light of these principles of Christian morality.

Sisters and brothers, even though these forms of violence are permissible, violence cannot generally be used as an instrument for obtaining justice. That's why the pastoral letter also condemns the kinds of institutionalized violence that systematically aggravate the situation of the people. Along with that violence we find the repressive violence of the state, which provokes violence in the people, which the state then wants to contain. Violence for its own sake cannot be the instrument; it must be measured against the gravity of the situation.

That's why I want to remind you that the ideal for the church and for Christians is what the word of God has reminded us of today, but remember that nonviolence is not the recourse of weakness. In today's readings we have seen that even God uses the violence of his wrath and his justice with those who do not deserve forgiveness. Forgiveness supposes repentance in the offender. Forgiveness supposes conversion, a change in the other person's behavior. When

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 48.

someone has changed and seeks the Lord as a penitent, the Lord then uses the violence of nonviolence: mercy, forgiveness, the embrace of peace. It is also beautiful to find two enemies who have reconciled, but that reconciliation supposes firm domination of the heart: the domination of anger, aggressiveness, and rancor. That's why the ideal of forgiveness that Sacred Scripture proposes to us today must be the star that guides us in this ambience of violence. But this ideal should not be used to justify what is unjustifiable but rather to call for the conversion of those who need to be converted for there to be peace and forgiveness.

At the end of the pastoral letter we issue a call to all the vital forces of the country<sup>8</sup>. We call upon those who have financial power and those who have political power, not to use their power for institutionalized or repressive violence. We call upon those who have intellectual power and organizing power to enter into dialogue and to use the power they have gained for the service of harmony, forgiveness, and peace. We also call on those who have little or no power not to present their demands with bloody violence but rather through righteous pressure so as to create justice where there is injustice.

This is the ideal, sisters and brothers. I hope you can see that the church's preaching of peace in a world of violence is not cowardice or evasion. Rather, the church confronts the reality of the present situation in order to address those who are tempted to use violence in response. Who is not tempted to use violence in these violent times? What family that experiences the kidnapping of a husband, a brother, or a wife does not feel rancorous hatred and the desire to do violence against those who have committed such an injustice? Poor people also feel the temptation of violence. They have been oppressed for so long; they are not understood; the channels allowing them to take part in the common good have been cruelly closed off. It is not wrong to feel passion and temptation. What is wrong is not educating those feelings.

In the pastoral letter we also condemn those who have elevated violence into a religion or a mystique; they think that nothing can be resolved except by violence. We tell them that that is not the rational way to go and that all those manifestations of irrational violence are not approved by God<sup>9</sup>.

I think, then, sisters and brothers, that the church's thinking is well understood. It invites us to reflect in the light of God's word on the great, positive values of the human aggressiveness that we all have within ourselves. But that aggressiveness is never more beautiful than when we use it to forgive or to ask for forgiveness, to become reconciled with each other, and to resolve conflicts with good will. Let us do this to avoid further bloodshed and to get rid of that ugly face our country wears, one we have not made ourselves, but is there nonetheless.

### **The conflict between traditionalists and progressives**

My second thought, then, has to do with another conflict that arose in the early Christian communities; it was between two groups that Saint Paul called the «weak» and the «strong». It's possible that this part of the letter to the Romans is referring to people who converted to Christianity from Jewish or Gentile religious traditions. These people claimed that certain kinds

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 53-55.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 50.



of meat could not be eaten and so they ate vegetables. In contrast, others understood that Saint Paul had moved beyond those ideas and taught that salvation comes through faith in Christ and does not depend on religious actions. These progressives scorned the traditionalists, and the traditionalists were scandalized by them in turn, much like our situation today.

What is wrong is to become radicalized, to put yourself at one extreme and think, «Only my way is good», while the other person counters, «No, only my way is good». That's why there exist today movements in religious life that want to take control of the church or create a monopoly on Christ and the Holy Spirit. To resolve this conflict Saint Paul speaks in the name of the Holy Spirit, as you will see in my third thought when we take the three readings and combine these two conflicts—the one between violence and forgiveness and the one between progressives and conservatives—and give them just one name.

### **The key to the solution is the transcendence of love**

The key to the solution, we are told by today's word, is in forgiveness and in the reasons for forgiveness. What are those reasons? Let us gather them as the fruit of our reflection.

The first reading tells us that we are dependent on God. If you depend on God for your health, how can you ask God for well-being and not pardon your sister or brother? It is simple logic: God tells us to love our neighbor, but «how can we expect healing from the Lord if we nourish anger against our neighbor?» (Sir 28:3).

Another reason to forgive is that we all need the merciful understanding of God. How are you going to obtain that, asks the apostle, «if you are not merciful toward others, if you do not forgive others, if with vengeance you kill and beat somebody?» (Sir 28:4)

Still another reason to forgive is the good that it does us given the fragility of our lives. We are «flesh», which means we are transient beings. When we consider our own fragility and that of other people, should we make another's offense and our own desire for vengeance into absolutes? (Sir 28:5). If we're fragile, then the logical thing is to treat our brief lives with the love with which God wants us to live and to know how to forgive.

Another very important reason is given in the first reading. «Think of your end», of death, of corruption (Sir 28:6). When a person dies, as aggressive and violent as he may have been, what is he? A cadaver enclosed in a wooden box. All the force of a man who conquered kingdoms or killed people has come to this: he is nothing, he is dust, he is ashes. Think about this, says the Bible, and you will control your rancor.

The first reading also tells us, «Remember the commandments» (Sir 28:7). Remember that there is an obligation with God as well. Among all the great precepts that sum up everything, there are two about love: «You shall love your God above all things and your neighbor as yourself» (Matt 22:37-39). Hatred is the destruction of this commandment.

There is another reason that goes almost unnoticed but is of great value: «Remember the covenant» (Sir 28:7). What is that? It is the agreement God made with the people: «I will be your God, and you will be my people» (Lev 26:12). The covenant encourages all those who form part of the people to love one another rather than to destroy one another in hatred and violence. Let us remember this agreement, which I'm going to recall in a little while with the

consecrated chalice in my hands: «This is the blood of the covenant, of the agreement between God and human beings». You as the people of God come to make this offering to God by confirming your covenant of faith and also by promising to love and forgive one another. The measure of our forgiveness is shown to us in today's gospel parable of the master who forgave a debtor who owed him a great deal but who in turn would not forgive someone who owed him only a small amount (Matt 18:21-35). Before God we are debtors who can never escape from indebtedness. Whoever has offended God deserves nothing more than eternal punishment. And if God forgives me that eternal, infinite debt, how am I not going to forgive someone who has not committed an eternal offense against me, as serious as it may have been? The «Our Father» constantly reminds us of this great thought: «Forgive us as we forgive» (Matt 6:12). How often is it that, if we are truly sincere, we perhaps cannot pray the «Our Father» because we don't know how to forgive?

Finally, Saint Paul gives us the reason that is like a synthesis of all my thoughts. Saint Paul tells us today, «If we live, we live for the Lord. If we die, we die for the Lord. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this Christ died and came to life, to be Lord of living and dead» (Rom 14:8-9). Saint Paul is saying here that, if some people abstain from meat on certain days out of respect for a religion to which they still feel devoted, they do so for God, and we should respect them for it. He is also saying that the «strong ones», who have gone further and truly believe they are saved in Christ, will do what they do for Christ, just as those who eat meat also do so for Christ. And so, says Paul, the two groups should not despise one another because both of them do what they're doing for the Lord (Rom 14:13).

It's the same as when any two groups are engaged in a conflict: some defend one thing, and others defend something else. What is wrong is to forget about the third party. When people fight only out of selfishness—for what is theirs, for what suits them—then reason cannot always prevail. But if two groups in conflict do what they're doing for God, there is a great lesson in that, sisters and brothers. The differences that exist in our church would be perfectly resolved if we understood this principle. Some of you are there in your charismatic renewal, some of you are there in your Cursillos of Christianity movement, and some of you are there your catechumenal community. Some of you are there in your traditionalist thoughts, and some of you are there in your progressive thoughts. Why do you do what you do? Are you defending it because it suits you? Then there's something wrong; that's not a good reason. Do you do it to serve your God in all sincerity? Then do it, but try to understand that others also do what they do for God. This is the true pluralism of the church. In the church we can't all think the same way, but we should be the same in that we do what we do for God, for Christ. We live for Christ, and we die for Christ, for him who lived and died and keeps on living for all of us.

Peace among people is achieved in Christ Jesus. Would that we could resolve all the bloodshed, all the hatreds, all the violence, all the differences, all the divisions among people by looking on the One who on the cross crucified the differences and the hatreds and the violence of all people and allowed all our rage and all our violence to be discharged on his body like lightning bolts so that all of us, looking upon him, might know how to make our aggressiveness constructive by transforming it into goodness, forgiveness, and praise for God our Lord.

Let us celebrate the Eucharist today, dear sisters and brothers, with this great petition: «Lord, look upon our nations. Look upon our sister nation Nicaragua that is bleeding badly. Look upon the divisions within our own church. Lord, behold all the crime and violence round about us. We want to be a church community of love. Let no one extinguish this fire, Lord, that

you wanted to ignite and that you will keep burning each day that we behold you nailed to the cross. And in the compassion of your open arms, let us know how to forgive, let us know how to love, let us embrace all people!» Let it be so. [Applause]