

THE CHURCH, OUR COMMUNION WITH GOD

Trinity Sunday

June 5, 1977

Proverbs 8:22-31

Romans 5:1-5

Juan 16:12-15

... We begin¹ by calling to mind all those things that separate us from God. For all of us as Catholics and as people who are present here this morning reflecting on God's Word, all of us are a Pilgrim People. Throughout the Liturgical Year, the Church, with the light of faith, marks out our itinerary. Each Sunday we take another step in our journey toward our encounter with the Lord. The mystery of Christ unfolds throughout the year --- from the expectation of Christmas that culminates with the cross and Easter. After Easter our joyful pilgrimage continues, but this joy flows from the cross. Therefore, sorrow and joy are characteristic of this Easter Church, the Pilgrim Church.

We recently solemnly concluded the Easter Season with the celebration of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Eight days later, we pause in our journey to review the steps we have taken. Today, we have before our eyes the origin and the goal of our pilgrimage. We come from God and walk toward God. This Sunday we celebrate the feast of the Blessed Trinity. It is a very important day because we discover the reason for hope and the explanation for the intimate joy that the pilgrims on earth bear within themselves. As pilgrims we know that we come from God, that we have been born in love and that we walk in the hope of an immutable, eternal God who awaits us with open arms. It is good, therefore, that we should pause this morning and reflect on the beautiful readings that we have just heard, on who is God..

The first reading gives us a philosophical, metaphysical answer that perhaps does not impress us, for we are not impressed with metaphysical explanations of God. The Council speaks about this phenomenon of modern atheism, about the fact that so many people have forgotten God. It states that atheism results from the fact that believers do not know how to present God to others and more seriously, they do not know how to live their lives in accord with their faith (a). I read this week a tremendous phrase: *the world, men and women, have washed their hands of God, because they do not believe in a God without the world and without women and men.* This is terrible. Perhaps we believe in a God who is isolated from us, a God who is not interested in our anxieties and tribulations. Thanks to God, however, Christ and all the New Testament and Old Testament literature reveal to us a God who lives with us, a God who is among us, --- we might even say an active God. A God whom the Old Testament tells us is *the God of Abraham, the God of Jacob, the God of Isaac, the God of our ancestors* (b) or as Saint Paul writes, *the God of our Lord Jesus Christ* (c).

Thus the divine persons become more interesting. We have a God who accompanies us in our history. This is a God who reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush: *I am who am* (d). This is a difficult text even for those Christian exegetes who are more learned.

Perhaps *I am who am* can be understood in a metaphysical sense that communicates the very essence of God --- a being who cannot cease to be. But it is better to present God as the God of revelation; the God who is not simply the result of my thoughts; the God who is not the culmination of my efforts to discover him, but rather a God whom I encounter and a God who is revealed. A God whom Moses says is *I am who am* ---a God who walks with us, who is with the people, who at this moment hears the cries of the people who are tormented and enslaved by Pharaoh. This God listens to these cries, values them, and wants to bring about liberation. This is a God who is concerned about humankind's enslavement and wants to free them, a God who lives with underdeveloped people and wants to develop them into the true image that he desires to place on every human face. This is a God who is concerned about us. This is how God presents himself to us this morning in our reflection: from the perspective of Church, let us feel that we are Church, a communion in God.

This is the message that I want to communicate to you and hope you will write on yours hearts: the Church is a communion of men and women with God. This is the first level of communion. From there we move to a second level: the Church is the communion of those children of God marked by baptism and united in Christ, the Son of God. Finally, the third level: the Church is in communion with the whole world, with all of creation. This is the greatness of our Christian people. At this time I repeat what I have often said, that our work in the Church is not the result of circumstances; rather it is the conviction that a pastor of the Church, priests of the Church and all Christians who believe as the Church teaches must identify themselves more and more with their reason for being. Whether or not there is persecution, let us build our Church on the conviction that the Church is a communion of people who draw near to God.

The Church is man's communion with God

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, begins with these words: *the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament (e), that is, the Church is a sign and an instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men (e)*. The Church exists for this reason, this is her reason for being.

On this first level of the Church's communion we encounter a God who becomes present in this Church. I recommend that you read the first chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church where the Church is presented to us as a communion of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is not isolated and alone. Christ has revealed to us that God is communion, three persons, with a capacity that ought to be part of all who have been created in his image, namely, an openness to receive another and to give oneself to another. The Father can be seen as the "I", and the Son as the "you". The Father and the Son have such an intense love for one another that a "we" is brought forth, a community of indestructible love, the Spirit of love, the Holy Spirit. This "we" is revealed in the Blessed Trinity and has the capacity to mutually give and receive one another and is constituted on earth as the community that we call the Church.

In the first place, then, this is a God who gives himself to the community that has found him in Christ. Christ is the man through whom God becomes visible. Christ is like the bush that Moses saw illuminated by God. The apthe glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and tostles said: we saw his glory. They continued: we reveal to you this life that he gave us so that you also might be in communion with us and with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (f).

The life of the Church is derived from God. The Church's preaching on earth is derived from the divine truth. The forgiveness of repentant sinners and the holiness of souls who grow to the heights of contemplation are derived from God's eternal life and all of the Church's strength and reason for existing is derived from God. This then explains the Church's magnificent and intimate relationship, namely, her relationship with God. From this relationship she derives her mission and her reason for being. For this reason the Church sings of the day when the wise man came and adored the Child Jesus (g), and Herod, governor of the earth, receives evidence that a new king has been born. The Church tells him: *do not be afraid, Herod! The One who is coming to establish the Kingdom of Heaven has no desire to deny you your earthly power*². It would be well to remember this idea during these days when the mission of the Church is often distorted and made to appear as though the Church has competency in political matters or desires political power. It is Herod who sees Jesus as a rival. It is Herod who sends his followers out to slaughter others so that he might preserve his power. The Church, however, does not come to take political power away from anyone. The Church does not come with competency in the area of political power; rather the Church comes from God and offers the world love, grace, truth and forgiveness.

I would hope that the Church's mission might be understood as deriving from this communion with God. My dear Catholic sisters and brothers, let us understand that this is our primary obligation: our relationship with God. There are times when the Spirit of God asks us to make a greater effort in order that God's presence might become more visible in the world. This presence will be made visible to the degree that all of us, bishops, priests, men and women religious, laity, married couples, students, professionals, all who call themselves Catholic, attempt to intensify this communion with God and thus intensify their efforts to attain renewal, conversion and holiness. Sin, in all its forms, is the haze that clouds this communion with God. Let us distance ourselves from every kind of sin so that the People of God, the Church of God, and all Catholics united together in communion with God might make the sacred image of God present in the world! God is communion and the Church participates in this communion of God.

1. The Church, the communion of the baptized

My sisters and brothers, the second level is the following: the communion of the baptized. Christ, who brought us the truth and the life of God, established a Church. I want to read you a paragraph of the Constitution on the Church --- it is paragraph 14 ---- so that you can see who is truly a member of this Church that is in communion with God. Those who fulfill these conditions are in communion with the Church established by Christ. Those who lack even one of these conditions cannot be called Catholic if they willingly reject these conditions. They have excommunicated themselves.

The text reads as follows: *fully incorporated into the Church are those who possess the Spirit of Christ* (h). This is primary, to possess the Spirit of Christ, that is to say, we are not Christian just because we say we are, but because of the pleasure of God who established the Church and sent the Holy Spirit. Second, they are members of the Church *who accept her entire organization*. The Church, because she is human, is a hierarchical organization: a Pontiff who is the center of the Church, bishops in each diocese, and priests in each parish. Those who accept this organization are also asked to *accept all the means of salvation established in her [the Church] and in the visible body of those who are united with Christ*. All the means of salvation established in her are *the sacraments and the laws of the Church*.

It is true that *Christ rules [the Church] through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops*. Here then the document speaks concretely about those who are members of the Church. Those who are not in agreement with their bishop cannot be called Catholic, just as the bishop who is not in agreement with the Pope is not a minister of the Church. You have heard of the famous case of Bishop Lefebvre, an archbishop in France who declared himself in open opposition to the Pope. He cannot be called Catholic and he is not in communion with the Church. If we were to see him as a “model Catholic” then we would be saying that we want a schism. If I myself were not in communion with the Pope, I would not be worthy of this honorable dignity of being the pastor of this Archdiocese; but the Pope is the one who must tell me this, not others. The Pope has just confessed his communion with me, and I, my communion with him³. My sisters and brothers, we are in communion with one another. Let no one doubt that this person who is preaching to you today is a true pastor of the Church and is in communion with the Pope. We can also say that those who are not in communion with their bishops should not approach the altar to take Communion. Communion is a sign of communion with the Church. I know that there are persons who take Communion and then destroy the unity of the Church by murmuring against the priests and the bishop. All those who are destroying the unity of the Church by murmuring against the priests, defaming them in the media, blaming them for things that they have not done, have excommunicated themselves. An excommunication by the bishop would simply be an official sanction of the people’s repudiation that has already been given. The organization of the Church knows what this is. It is like the body that is invaded by a foreign organism that must be expelled. In the case of excommunication, the mystical body of the Church feels herself invaded by a foreign body and must expel that body like a dead cell.

The text of the Council continues: *by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion (i)*. These are the characteristics of our unity in faith. ⁴Those who do not profess the Creed that the bishop professes with the Church are not in union with the faith of the Church. Those who do not believe in one of the seven sacraments, who reject one of these signs of unity, are not Catholic. Those who do not accept the government of the Church, her jurisdiction and power, are not Catholic. Those who disturb the government of the Church and do not allow her to exercise her functions among the people are not Catholic. For example, at this time we are unable to go to Aguilares to celebrate Mass or to care for the people of this martyred town⁴ --- we are prevented from carrying out our mission and the people who are doing this are not Catholic. Ecclesiastical communion is this full communion that God, through Christ, has transmitted to this People of God and made visible in her ministers and in her pastors who have been given the power to govern, a unity in faith, sacraments, and an organizational structure. Those who want to belong to this People of God, organized by Christ and called the Catholic Church, must accept these conditions. If they do not accept them, if they willingly reject them, then they are schismatics, destroyers of the Church and have morally excommunicated themselves.

Naturally, my sisters and brothers, communion on this level of the baptized is also a condition for salvation. Then note well this question: Are those who are not in the Church, not saved? I have not said this. I said that those who know the conditions for belonging to this People of God and willingly reject these conditions, then they also reject the power of salvation (j). But if there are people who are not Catholic, who are convinced in their conscience and believe that they are right, be they Protestant or Jewish or Muslim or pagan, if

they try to fulfill the laws of God as they understand them, then these individuals are in the heart of Christ and in the heart of the Church even though they are not in the body of the Church. The opposite is also true. There are many people who have been baptized into the body of the Church, but because of their attitude and because they reject certain realities, they are not in the heart of the Church (k). They are called Catholic but they are not Catholic and are outside salvation. Those who are outside the Church, but in good faith live their religion, these individuals are on the road to salvation and they are in the heart of the Church. They are not outside the Church: Christ is wider than the Catholic Church and his salvation is made present to Protestants, Muslims and Jews who believe and live their religion in good faith. Christ also saves them.

In this same line of thought, I was greatly pleased this week when a Protestant woman came to me and spoke at length. This woman expressed her adhesion to the Church. She told me that she could not swallow the bait of those who are persecuting the Church and yet want to present themselves as good Christians who are simply against the Church because she has gone astray from her mission. Yes, Protestants have come to the Church to let us know that we have not strayed from our mission. They want to adhere to this Church and do not want to be accomplices to the persecution of their Catholic sisters and brothers. I want to thank them publicly. One of these women who spoke with me said: *I listened to the call that you made during the burial of Father Navarro*. At that time we said that Father Navarro represented the Church and because of the slander and persecution of men, he had lost credibility and therefore people no longer believed in the Church. He, however, is like the Bedouin who continues to cry out: follow the right road. We called upon all the moral forces of the country and we called upon all Protestants who hold the Bible in their hands to preach the reality that this Kingdom of God is in the world (cf. Archbishop Romero, homily of May 12, 1977). Once again we renew our call and instead of sowing seeds of disunity and slander, let us sow good seeds and do good in the world. Yes, I renew my call to all of you.

I want to add my voice to the Voice of the United States which yesterday reported that Amnesty International had examined 75 cases of torture and discovered prolonged consequences in the victims. Even though the physical scars of their bodies had been treated, yet, deep psychological scars remain. Yes, I second this voice and hope that our doctors, with their technology and science, will also give witness to the fact that torture is not only an abuse of human dignity but also destroys the health of people and humankind.

The Church is communion with the world

My sisters and brothers, the third level of the Church's communion is communion with the world. You know that the Council promulgated a document titled: *The Church in the Modern World*. (l) The Church does not identify itself with the world. As Jesus said: *you are not of the world, but you are in the world* (m) and the Church is composed of men and women who are in the world, men and women like you and I who are present here this morning. The Church wants to learn the language and the culture of the peoples of the world in order to translate her divine message into their language and their way of being. The Church does not identify herself with any particular culture, or political party or social system but rather her message is a light that illuminates social systems, political systems and the whole life of humankind. The Church is light in the world and wants to give human reality its true meaning. The Church is most competent in this area of humanity for she has been taught by the Creator that men and women are created in the image and likeness of God (n) and taught by Christ that whatever men and women become, they become in this same Christ.

The Church's competency in this area allows her to draw near to the world and to feel with men and women all their aspirations and all their noble desires. In this way the Church is able provide the hope and comfort of a mother who suffers, of a wife who remains a widow, and as one of those who suffers in so many different situations.

The Church is in continual dialogue with the world. The Church suffers with those who suffer. The Church feels the tortures and the horror of towns and individuals who are riddled with bullets. The Church longs for the true progress of people and lives the reality of humankind. The Church is not competent in the area of politics or sociology, because this is not her area of competence. The Church, however, from the perspective of human science, and from the perspective of God's revelation, wants to make the light of God present in the world. Therefore, the Church is also in an intimate dialogue with the world. Nothing human is foreign to the Church.

My dear sisters and brothers, our reflection on the Blessed Trinity has brought us to this point. The Blessed Trinity is nothing more than God in communion with humankind, an expression of love and truth, an expression of light and happiness. This communion of persons wants to associate itself with all of humankind and actualizes itself in this circle of life, that is the Church. In this way the Blessed Trinity calls upon all Catholics to intensify their holiness, unity and relationship with God and to illuminate the world with the light of God.

Here I want to call upon the laity in a special way. It is with great joy that this pastor gives thanks to God because laymen and laywomen are becoming more aware of living out their role in the world. If the ministers of the altar, we priests, serve the Church with a specific vocation, if women and men religious do the same, then you, mothers and fathers, teachers in our schools, professionals, workers, people of the marketplace, the laity in general, you also have a specific vocation. Your vocation is to transform the world and bring to this world the presence of God that you carry like a torch that illuminates every area of human activity. Yes I call upon you to be aware of the fact that the Church is not just the bishop and the priests and the religious men and women. The Church is all those who have been baptized into this communion with the bishop, thus strengthening (as we have just said) the unity of faith, and truth and sacrament and government. Reject all that might divide us. Give no credence to this campaign of slander. Draw near to the priest and the bishop in order to clarify any doubt that you might have. From your place in the world, live more intensely this hierarchical communion with the bishop. In this way you will make present the light of God that is reflected from the Church to the world. Then we will have given to God our testimony of life, our personal and professional service that God has a right to ask of us. For God has made us, redeemed us and awaits us in the Kingdom. God does not want us to come to the Kingdom alone, but asks each one of us to bring other souls who have been won over because we have been God's light in the midst of humankind.

¹ The greeting and opening words were not recorded on the tape of the homily.

² Hymn for Vespers on the Feast of the Epiphany

³ Archbishop Romero refers to his audience with Paul VI in Rome on 30 March 1977.

⁴ After the military operation in Aguilares, Archbishop Romero wanted to go there to support the people and recover the Blessed Sacrament, but the authorities prevented him. He sent Fr Antonio Vides who was also prevented from recovering the Sacrament and was arrested for an hour in the barracks of the National Guard whose chaplain he was. See "Archdiocese Information Bulletin n°16, ECA 342-343 (1977), pp. 339-340.

Margin References (a) GS 19: (b) Ex 3,6,15: (c) Ac 3,13 & Ep 1,17: (d) Ex 3,14: (e) LG 1: (f) Ac 2,32-33: (g) Mt 2,1-16: (h) LG 14: (i) LG 14: (j) LG 15&16: (k) LG 14: (l) GS 2: (m) Jn 17,14-16: (n) Mt 25,40.