

# MARY'S PROMISE OF SALVATION

**Our Lady of Carmen**  
**Santa Tecla**  
**July 16, 1977**

*Zachariah 2:14-17*  
*Luke 2:15b-19*

...today, July 16<sup>th</sup>, the Church of Santa Tecla is a grace of God;<sup>1</sup> for this place, like so many other popular places of the Republic that have the name Carmel, are gifts from God that enable us, the pastors of El Salvador, to find a direct support and a confirmation of our work and our preaching. Indeed, all of this is blessed by nothing less than the good hands of the Virgin Mary. There is no more attractive preacher in our midst than the Virgin of Carmel. Here we see that the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is filled with laity. Yet as I reflect on this I can also see that there are other parishes and towns where the priests are unable to satisfy the spiritual anxiety of the souls searching for God. It is good to remember the words of Pope Paul VI, who spoke to the administrators of the Marian Shrines. He said that these shrines make visible the invisible power that guides this Church of God. Therefore, at this hour, when the Church renews herself through persecution, how wonderful it is to find herself under the gaze of the Virgin --- the approving gaze, the encouraging and consoling gaze. Our presence here in this Carmelite Shrine ought to awaken in us what the Virgin desires for her Church in 1977.

My sisters and brothers, I imagine that the devotion that has brought each one of you here to honor the Virgin of Mount Carmel bears some of the same anxiety and hope that led Simon Stock, the superior of the Carmelites, to raise his eyes toward heaven and ask the Virgin for a sign of protection for his Congregation that was being persecuted at the time. Through Simon Stock and the scapular we go back to the almost legendary origins of this devotion. The tradition reminds us that some pious men --- men of the Old Testament who had no knowledge of Mary or Christ --- placed their trust in the promises of the Old Testament and intuited the tenderness and power of that woman who was related to the Redeemer. They loved her without knowing her and were her first devotees. Thus the origin of the Congregation known as the Order of Carmel is rooted in this ancient experience on Mount Carmel. This congregation flourished but was persecuted. So one day, Simon Stock, as he watched his Congregation being persecuted, asked the Virgin for protection. Tradition tells us that the Virgin came down from heaven with the scapular in her hands and told Simon: *This is the sign of protection that I bring you. All those who die carrying this scapular will not see the flames of hell.* This protection of the Virgin made people feel so powerful that even now, centuries removed from that original experience and even in places where there are no Carmelites, this holy scapular is still seen as a sign of Mary's protection and a sign that continues to call people and make them feel that they are the beloved children of the Virgin Mary.

Therefore my sisters and brothers, at this time in 1977, let us all recognize that this is also a time when the Church is being persecuted --- priests assassinated and expelled and tortured; soldiers coming through the aisles of the church's where these priests are working. Yes, let us remember these sad events. But I also want to tell you that it is a time when the Carmelites, together with all Catholics who think with the Church, lift up their eyes to the Virgin and ask her for a sign of her protection. Therefore in this church, led with such fervour by the Jesuit fathers, the prayer of supplication and protection becomes most concrete.

During this Eucharistic celebration in honor of the Virgin of Mount Carmel, I ask for protection for the Church of El Salvador and for peace throughout the country. I make this prayer more concrete and I pray in a special way for the Jesuit community that at this time has been threatened with death. The serenity of these men of God moves us. We now understand the meaning of the Jesuit formation in the School of the Spiritual Exercises where they ask Christ for humiliations, the cross and sacrifice. When these realities become present in their lives they are not surprised; they have asked for them and desired them. Indeed, the Jesuit is an "other" Christ who awaits ingratitude rather than goodness and approval from the world. My sisters and brothers, let us understand that the Jesuits are a living part of the Church and that at this time, when their ministry is being tested and tried, they [the Jesuits] are giving us a marvelous example of serenity and commitment to the Church's mission. They do this even at the cost of death. Therefore with all our hearts, we ask the Virgin of Carmel for a sign of protection for these soldiers of Christ and his Church. Then, the Virgin responds, offering her scapular and renewing her promise. I wish to interpret this promise in my message this morning. The Virgin offers us a promise of salvation. But this is not a salvation that occurs only after death. It is a salvation that demands work here in history and among the worldly realities. This salvation also demands interior renewal, for the Kingdom of God begins on this earth, in our own hearts.

### **The Virgin offers us the promise of salvation**

Yes, in the first place I say that the scapular of the Virgin of Mount Carmel is a sign of our hoped for salvation, a hope that everyone has in the depths of their soul and heart and life. Those who die bearing this scapular will be freed from and will not experience the fires of hell. This is a promise of salvation. I do not want to deceive people and tell you something that is not true, that is, something that is not supported within each one of us. The Virgin's promise is intended to awaken in us an eschatological sense, namely, a hope in the "here-after." Thus we work on this earth with our whole soul and heart set on heaven, knowing that no one can feel permanently at home on earth. Rather we are a Pilgrim People walking toward eternity. The realities of this earth will pass, but the eternal realities remain. Is this not transcendence! The Virgin, like Christ, offers us a transcendental message. This gives a mark of uniqueness to the Church, a mark that no other liberation movement can lay claim to.

Marxists and other liberation movements of the earth do not think of God or hope for heaven. Thus they are quite different from the Church. Though the Church also speaks of liberation and demands a more just social order, she does not place her hope in an earthly paradise. The Church wants a better world but knows that perfection will not be achieved here in history but only in the "here-after," in that place where the Virgin came from. We are destined for heaven where our Mother awaits us, destined for that place where the scapular had its origins --- a bond that ties us to eternity. No one places this scapular on themselves

thinking about just an earthly paradise. Rather this scapular is worn precisely because we are thinking of eternal salvation, thinking that when we die, we will be saved. This is good. Let us continue to cultivate this idea and not lose sight of it. This, then, is the first message of the Virgin --- a message about spirituality.

When the Holy Father gathered together the opinions of the bishops that were expressed in the 1974 Synod of Bishops, he wrote his famous exhortation on evangelization in the actual world. The Pope stated that as he listened to the bishops' voices he heard the cries of those immersed in misery throughout the world (a). Thus the Pope and the bishops speak of freeing the world from this misery. But the Pope joined the bishops in insisting on the fact that the primary orientation of Christian liberation is spiritual, heavenly and eternal. Thus those who work for earthly liberation must never forget this hope for the eternal. My sisters and brothers, this morning we reaffirm our hope in this heaven that the Virgin's scapular speaks about so eloquently. Let us carry this scapular and reflect on that eternity where we will be asked to render an account of our work on earth.

### **A salvation that demands work here on earth**

In the second place, and this is often not understood by many people and yet it is most necessary to understand because it is also part of the Virgin's message, namely, the Virgin offers us a salvation that demands work here on earth. I believe that from our youngest days, all of you, like me, embraced and were thankful for the Virgin's promised privilege, that Saturday privilege that states that those who die carrying the scapular will experience the Virgin releasing them from Purgatory (if by chance they have gone here) on the Saturday following their death. This is not a dogma of faith and so there is no obligation to believe this and one does not sin if one denies this. Those, however, who love the Virgin know that she, in communion with God, is able to do anything and theologically, that is, according to the Church's principles and criteria, this is certainly possible.

Furthermore, what is the meaning of a plenary indulgence that the Church is able to grant and grants so often? A plenary indulgence is the full pardon of sin and debt attached to sin. Thus people who die after gaining a plenary indulgence will not experience Purgatory. They will not have to wait for the following Saturday. The moment they die, their sins and the debt of sin forgiven and they enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Purgatory exists to purify us of the debt of sin that we have not paid here on earth. But if an indulgence is applied by the Church, who is the administrator of Christ's redemption, to a soul on its journey to eternity, then those people have gained heaven immediately. A plenary indulgence supposes the forgiveness of sins and the repentance of those who have detached themselves from all the effects of sin.

A plenary indulgence cannot be obtained by those who still bear within their hearts the effects of sin nor are they worthy of heaven because this is an offense to God and nothing stained can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who gain a plenary indulgence have their hearts detached from sin and separated from all those bonds that tie them to sinful realities. They have repented of their sins and separated themselves from all disordered passions. If one has a desire to gain this indulgence then one will obtain a reality that is greater than the Saturday privilege. The Virgin will fulfill the desire of these people and they will be separated from all evil.

But from childhood we also learned something else and I wish to highlight this here this morning: all of this is not a question of the Virgin saving us without ourselves having to make an effort here on earth to obtain this salvation. Speaking of the Saturday privilege it is said that every one must guard chastity according to their state of life. Here when I refer to chastity, I speak of all those earthly realities, all that is mortal, and all that God commands and counsels us to do. Thus, if the scapular is a message of eternity, an eschatological message, a message about the “here-after”, it is also a message of the “here and now.” The scapular is a message about the demands of this world and the fulfillment of our responsibilities in this world. This is precisely the focus of our Church today. When the Church demands a more just society, a better distribution of wealth and a political system that is more respectful of human rights, the Church is not meddling in politics nor is she becoming Marxist-communist. The Church is telling people the same thing as the message of the scapular: only those people will be saved who know how to use the things of earth with the heart of God.

Since there are many unjust people and many abuses of human dignity, since there are many injustices committed against the poor and the poor also commit injustices against the rich, there are also many sinful situations. Thus the bishops gathered in Medellin under the authority of the Pope, stated that in Latin America there is a situation of sin, a situation of injustice that has become a permanent reality (b). It is necessary that Christians work to transform this situation of sin. The Christian cannot tolerate the enemy of God, namely, sin -- cannot tolerate its reign in the world. The Christian must seek to marginalize sin and establish the Kingdom of God. To struggle for this reality is not communist or meddling in politics. It is simply responding to the Gospel that demands that humankind and Christians commit themselves more fully to history. A person who believes in the Virgin of Mount Carmel and carries the scapular believing: *Since the Virgin promised to save me, I do not have to work here on earth*, such a person will not be saved. Yes, a promise is made to those who carry this scapular, but how many sinners trusted in this promise, and yet at the hour of their death when they went to take out the scapular, died without having the scapular on them.

The Council tells us that those who do not work in faithful fulfillment of the Law of God in the area of guiding the use of temporal things offend God. They are also committing an offense against their neighbor (c). Such people are lazy and do nothing for their neighbor and are jeopardizing their own salvation. They open themselves to condemnation because that could have done some good and did not do it. The Bible blesses those who could have done evil and did not do it and says they will be saved. At the same time those who could have done good and did not do it are condemned. They had wealth in their hands and could have made their sisters and brothers happy but because of selfishness they did not do it. They had power in their hands and could have changed the course of the nation and made it more happy, more just, and more peaceful and did not do it. That had ability and responsibility and did not know how to take advantage of the opportunity to use these gifts and so they will be held accountable at the time of the final judgment and at the time of their own judgment. The message of the scapular that the Virgin communicates to us cannot be a message that is different from the Gospel of Christ. The Virgin cannot say something that is distinct from the Church’s doctrine, because she is a member of the Church. In fact she is the Mother of the Church and is intolerant of anyone who preaches or acts contrary to the Church.

My dear sisters and brothers, today when our Lady of Mount Carmel responds to our prayers for protection, she gives us the scapular in the same way that she presented the

scapular to Simon Stock. This scapular is sign of salvation and the Second Vatican Council explains to us the meaning of salvation. My sisters and brother, in certain traditional circles, people do not want to hear about this concept of salvation, for like all the other realities of tradition, this concept has evolved. The tradition is the same that Christ gave to his apostles. That cannot change. But the needs of the people evolve and the times evolve. So when Jesus speaks of salvation, it must be understood as the Church of 1977 understands it. For this Church is inspired and assisted by the Holy Spirit.

More than eight centuries ago, when the Virgin presented us with the scapular as a sign of salvation, the Virgin understood this word in the way that the Church at that time explained salvation. Now, however, salvation, according to the actual and authentic teaching of the Church that is inspired by the Holy Spirit, tells us that it is not enough to speak of "salvation of the soul." Notice how many people say: *I only want to save my soul and the rest I can do as I please.* But we cannot save just our souls. The Council says (d) the whole person receives salvation: soul and body and heart and intelligence and will. We are saved as individuals and as members of a society. Thus it is this society that must also be saved. Pope Pius XII said that the world must be saved from its savagery in order to make it human and then make the human, divine. In other words, all the customs that are not in accord with the Gospel have to be eliminated if we want to save the human person. Men and women must be saved, but not just their souls at the hour of their death. It is the person, living in time and history that must be saved. We have to provide young people and children with an environment and a society and those conditions where they can develop the vocation that God has given them. Yes, we must create those conditions that will not keep them marginalized because they are poor; conditions that will not keep them out of the university because they are poor. We must also create an environment and situations where men and women, created in the image of God, are able to shine forth in the world as the image of God and participate in the shaping of the common good of the country and share in those goods that have been created for the use of everyone. This is the doctrine of salvation. If the Virgin were to speak with Simon Stock in 1977 and were to present him the scapular, she would say: this scapular is the sign of protection --- a sign of the doctrine of God, a sign of the integral vocation of men and women, a sign of salvation for the whole person, a sign of salvation in this life. Those who carry this scapular have to be persons who live this salvation here on earth; they have to feel satisfied and capable of developing their human abilities for the good of others.

My sisters and brothers, I ask you to try to understand the solemnity of these times in which the Church renews herself. There are people who do not understand this renewal nor our preaching as I have tried to express it today. They distort our words and say we are meddling in politics or becoming a communist church. From this distortion comes persecution and repression of the Church and her priests. As long as this language of salvation is not understood we will always be in this position of being misunderstood by those who do not want to understand the Church.

I pray this morning that the Virgin of Carmel will give security to her faithful followers who fill this church and so many other churches of the Carmelite Congregation. At this time I want to greet with great enthusiasm those communities that follow the Virgin of Mount Carmel and who gather around the altars of the Virgin throughout the Republic. I want to tell you to receive the scapular in same way that Simon Stock accepted it, but with an understanding of 1977. In this way each Carmelite can become a true follower of the Gospel and this is most necessary for the Church that is the redeemer of women and men today. Let

us also pray together that the Virgin of Carmel and her scapular inspire with grace those who do not understand this mystery. May they be converted and know that we do not hate them but love them. May they know that we do not want to lose them just because they do not collaborate in the construction of a more just temporal order. We pray that the Virgin might call those who are able to transform society, because they have in their hands the power to make this change actual. We pray also for those who persecute the Church, paid by interests that want to maintain this situation that cannot be maintained. May all those who are opposed to the Kingdom of Christ, a kingdom of justice and peace and love, recognize that God is also calling them. May they know that there is place for everyone in the Kingdom, even those who persecute her, and like Saul, may they be converted into true apostles of the Gospel. At this time when we celebrate the feast of the patroness and Mother of all Carmelites, we are very much aware that the Virgin has such a large heart that she not only embraces those here present who have been converted, but perhaps with even greater love and forgiveness, she embraces those who are opposed to the Church, those who offend the Church, and those who riddle her with bullets. Our Mother knows, like all mothers know, that the most disgraceful and perverse sons are those closest to her heart. She wants them to be converted and become brothers with all those whom she loves. She wants them to be with her in heaven.

According to my humble way of thinking, this is the message of today's feast. I thank all of you who have listened to me with such attention. I want to thank the Carmelite Fathers who have given me the honor of sharing with this devout community in Santa Tecla, this Carmelite community in Santa Tecla. I am most pleased to render this homage to our Lady of Mount Carmel. Therefore, together with the Virgin, for she is also a creature, a woman of our race, let us unite ourselves in spirit to her [the Virgin] and offer to God the sacrifice that is the culmination of all our work: the love, devotion, concerns, and anxieties of all the people represented by you who are present here this morning. How many tears! How many sorrows! But placed on the altar and in the hands of the Virgin, through the Eucharistic mystery they will be changed into the sacrifice of Christ. We know that Mary is great because she brought Jesus into the world --- from her womb into our hearts. The redemption of the world is rooted in her and now as we celebrate this Eucharist during a time of solemn anguish and hope, we pray that the celebration in this beautiful church will bring many blessings to people throughout the country. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The greeting and opening words were not recorded on the tape of this homily.