

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time
June 19, 1977

Zechariah 12:10-11
Galatians 3:26-29
Luke 9:18-24

My dear sisters and brothers.

After having celebrated these feast days that reached their culmination with the celebration of Easter, after having then celebrated the feasts of the Blessed Trinity, the Body and the Blood of Christ, and on Friday, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and yesterday, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, after all these celebrations that can be seen as Easter flowers that have allowed us to gather in the fruit of the Liturgical Year, now we begin that period of time that is referred to as Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time is divided into two parts: the first period begins after the celebrations of the Christmas season, after the feast of the Epiphany and continues until the celebration of Ash Wednesday. Ordinary Time is then interrupted to commemorate the important celebrations of our redemption: Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost. When the Easter season is concluded, the second part of Ordinary Time begins and will continue until we begin the Advent season, that is, those weeks that prepare us anew for the celebration of Christmas. Perhaps it is better to say that Ordinary Time continues until Advent, which marks the beginning of another Liturgical Year.

Therefore, it would seem that each year the Church sets before us a course of intense spirituality. Throughout the year, the mystery of Christ is developed and we are asked to grow in this mystery. The cycle of the Liturgical Year, 1977, should signify that we are moving to a new height, like the student who moves on to a higher grade. Such is the mystery of Christ --- an upward moving spiral. This should mean that each year we move to a new level in our following of Jesus and in our knowledge of the divine teacher and redeemer, Jesus Christ. It is interesting to look at the message of the reading of each Sunday. Some people say that they do not go to Mass because they are bored --- it is always the same. They have not penetrated the depths of the Liturgical Year. Each Sunday is distinct. Therefore, those students who are interested in taking advantage of a course will not absent themselves from any class because they always learn something new. So too, each Sunday a good Christian also has the opportunity to grow in the contemplation of and reflection on the saving mystery. Let us focus on the reading we have just listened to and I believe we will be able to leave with a precious message. I am going to present three ideas: first, the central figure of Christ, the Lord; second, his liberating work; and third, his call to conversion.

Christ, our Lord

When we reflect on today's message, the first point that stands out is the interesting dialogue of Jesus with his disciples: *Who do the crowds say I am?* (a). This question is

made real to those who have gathered here in the Cathedral and to those who by radio, are reflecting on these words. If Christ were to ask us, if Christ were to stand before me and ask: *who do you say I am? What do you say about me? You who are Christian, what do you think about Christ? What do you think about this person whose name you bear?* How many of us would tremble like the disciples and respond: *According to popular rumor, some say that you are one of the prophets.* But Jesus asks again: *But you --- you who have lived with me --- who do you say I am?* Peter is then inspired by the eternal Father because no one knows the Son except the Father and those to whom the Father has revealed him (b). To know Christ is indeed a grace. Through this unique grace, Peter defines Jesus with a few brief words: *You are the Messiah of God (c). You are the long awaited, the one promised to Abraham, and the one promised by the prophets. You are the center of the Bible. You are the heart of God's promises. In you all people have placed their longing and without understanding you, all people desire you. You are the Messiah. You are the name that God has given to save all people. Apart from you there is no salvation.*

This is the essence of Christianity. For this, the Church lives and for this same reason the Church is persecuted. When Christ proclaimed himself as the Son of God, he was accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death (d). The Church continues to profess that Christ is the Lord, and that there is no other God. When humankind kneels before other gods, the Church disturbs these people with her preaching of this one God. Thus the Church clashes with the idolaters of power and money, with all those who would create whatever idol, with those who make the flesh an idol, with those who think God is unnecessary, with those who believe they have no need for Christ, and with those who believe that the things of this world are sufficient. All of these are idols and the Church has the right and the duty to tear down these idols and proclaim that only Christ is the Lord. How much bloodshed has this cost the Church! How much persecution and humiliation has resulted from this faithfulness to the one Lord! Imagine what it must have meant to proclaim one's faith in Christ the Lord during the time of the Roman Empire, when the Caesar was proclaimed as god. The Church encounters the same difficulty when she confronts the idols and the caesars that are made into gods. We have only one God: Christ, our Lord. This is the first message. I beg you to take this message to heart so that you might communicate this message to the world after this celebration. Indeed may you communicate with a sincere conviction the truth that Christ is the only Lord, Christ alone is worthy of our adoration and only Christ is worthy of our whole heart.

The liberating work of Christ

The second message of today is that Christ presents himself with his great liberating work. I want to clarify this word: liberation. Many are fearful of this word. Many also abuse this word. Yet there is no reason for fear or abuse. The truth is, this word, liberation, is a Biblical word that expresses the whole saving work of the Lord, a work that has its starting point in freeing us from sin. The first liberation that Jesus proclaims is described beautifully by Saint Paul in the second reading: Christ has come to overthrow sin. Therefore, through baptism which cleanses us of sin and through repentance which leads to a new conversion, we are incorporated into Christ and become new men and new women. New people, this is the objective of the liberating work of Jesus. To make new men and new women, people who separate themselves from sin and selfishness and idolatry and pride and make themselves humble followers of the Christ the Lord. Because of faith in Jesus Christ, all are children of God (e). This is the work of Jesus, to call all people, without discrimination, to himself. Saint Paul has stated very clearly that there is no place for discrimination in

Christianity: *There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus* (f). There are no classes in Christianity. There is no racial discrimination. For this reason Christianity is seen as a conflict by those who do not want to listen to the Church's proclamation that Jesus' liberation makes all people equal. Interior renewal of the heart makes all people equal --- let us renew ourselves! As long as there are no new men and women, there will only be pride and discrimination. Rich and poor, when they are truly converted, when they are cleansed by this baptism of Christ, and when they truly believe in the Lord, no longer distinguish themselves as rich or poor, but feel themselves united together in Jesus Christ. There is no longer superior and inferior, because in the order of grace they are nothing without Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ is superior, for he alone redeems and he alone liberates.

For this reason, my sisters and brothers, it is important to distinguish here between true and false liberation. This is very important. Look at how the Church has been persecuted because her message has been misunderstood as subversive and thus disturbing the country. Yet the Church preaches this liberation in Jesus Christ. The Church promotes the dignity of the *campesino* and the worker. The Church promotes the dignity of those persons who are humiliated by the situation that confronts our country, a situation that treats individuals as though they were not human. Yes, there are truly people among us who live inhuman lives and the Church proclaims liberation to these people. She proclaims this liberation beginning with a removal of sin from the earth, a denunciation of injustice and abuse, and tells all people that they are children of God and that they have been baptized by Christ.

A liberation that places hope in the heart of humankind: the hope of a paradise that is not given on this earth. From this point of view the Church cannot be Communist. The Church does not look for a liberation that has a worldly character. The Church does not want to liberate poor people so that they can "have" more but rather wants them "to be" more. Yes the Church promotes the human person "to be" more. The Church has little interest in whether people have more or less. The Church, however, is interested in those who have and don't have, she promotes them and wants them to be truly man and truly woman --- to be children of God. Indeed, people have great value, not because of what they have, but because who they are. This is the doctrine of human dignity that the Church preaches. Liberation places hope in the heart of humankind that speaks to them: when you complete your life, you will participate in the Kingdom of God. Here on earth do not expect a perfect paradise, some degree of paradise will exist, but only if you work on earth for a more just world, and only if you treat your companions as brothers and sisters. Thus you will receive a reward in eternity. This is the difference between the communist, who does not believe in an after-life nor in God, and the Church, who promotes with hope this after-life and this God.

Christ's call to conversion

Finally, my dear sisters and brothers, today Christ, our Lord, becomes present among us and calls us to conversion. This is a hard word of Jesus. Jesus accepts Peter's divinely revealed definition: *You are the Messiah of God* (g), but then compliments this with a description of his passion and death. Immediately after Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah of God, Jesus adds: *The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised*. Then Jesus directed his words to everyone and said: *If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and*

take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, will save it (h).

What a mysterious word! What a difficult word! Everyone wants to save their life, but there is an immediate salvation and a definitive, mediate salvation that occurs at the end of all life. Those who want to save their life here and now, those who do not want to put aside their comfortable life style, those who want to live well and are not interested in others, these persons will lose their life. Those who want to save their lives will lose their lives for Christ. What does it mean to lose one's life for Christ? At this moment in our history, this is a difficult word. I received a letter that analyzed the situation of El Salvador. In the letter, a person wrote: *people will distance themselves from you who have to do so, and others will remain with you who have to remain.* It seems to me that the expression in the Gospel is like the words of that letter, for Jesus says: *Those who want to truly save their lives, come, follow me. Take up your cross. Do not attach yourself to the things of this world. In fact, reject these things. Live as one who is poor in heart and work with me for the liberation of people... but the one who wants to live well... how sad when people approach me and say, "Bishop, we are with you, but please understand our situation."* Such people might be employees, people who are attached to many valuable possessions and naturally it will cost them to commit themselves to Christ, it might even cost them losing their lives. Blessed are those who in this hour, this hour of discernment, this hour of deciding who is who, this hour of coming face to face with Christ who says: *those who are not with me are against me (i)* are able to respond: "Even though I must lose my life, I am with you." This is conversion

I want to publicly congratulate the Jesuit community. In a statement that was published in the newspapers they admitted that they were culpable of sin and repented¹. They confessed that perhaps they had served power and wealth, but now they understand that, in order to serve the crucified Christ, in order to serve as Christ wants them to serve, they must defend themselves without these advantages or honors. This does not mean that we have to cast aside the upper class. We esteem them, we love them, we want to give our life for them, we want to serve them so that they might root out all sin from themselves and commit themselves to Christ, our Lord. Yes, we truly love them and we ask everyone to pray for them so that they might be converted. Let us not make distinctions between rich and poor but between those who have been converted to Christ, even though they lose their life and all their comforts, but have the satisfaction of following in the love of the Redeemer, who being rich, became poor so that we might have the richness of heaven. (j) Let us not be deceived by the illusion of advantages in this world. Let us not take the risk of losing heaven for the things of this world. Let us embrace true liberation, that liberation that we feel in our hearts and that is not dependent on any worldly honor or money, or political or social advantage. Let our hearts be free to follow Christ and let us say to him: *Lord, I hand my life over to you, even though I must lose this life in the world.* This is the conversion that Christ demands.

Now I conclude with the beautiful prophecy of the first reading where the prophet Zechariah presents a mysterious, prophetic person. This is the same passage that Saint John will call to mind (k) as he spoke about the soldier's lance piercing Jesus' side: *they shall look on him whom they have thrust through, and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a first born (l).* What is the prophet saying here? After a catastrophe has struck the people of Israel, Jerusalem is desolate, but there is hope that God will have pity on them and raise them up. A mysterious person. It is Christ who is visualized as the price of redemption. People have been humbled, people have been tormented, but there is someone whom the people themselves have pierced

--- Christ on the cross. They behold this Christ and from his side, pierced by the ingratitude of humankind, springs forth hope. He alone is our hope and the people look to him for hope. This is the way that I would like all the people of El Salvador to see him, for we have all pierced his side and we are all sinners. At this time when the Church defends the dignity of the human person and the rights of God, it must be said that all of us offend the Lord and all of us have to look at the person whom we have pierced with our sins: Christ, the Lord. May the Lord have mercy on us so that we might cease these iniquities, this floundering about, and these abuses of human dignity.

Without a doubt there is hope, hope that has been inspired by the God, the Creator of humankind. Today I heard on the radio that tomorrow in Grenada, the representatives of the Organization of American States are going to present a denunciation of the abuses of human dignity in the Latin American countries. They are going to protest the tortures. They are going to protest the long prison sentences that are imposed without any trial. They are going to protest the “disappearance” of so many people. Wives and mothers, who do not know the whereabouts of their husbands and children, come to me and it causes great pain in my heart. Where are they? What have they done with them? I pray to God that the Organization of American States might influence this situation, for this matter is a great concern of the Church and therefore we all pray that this situation of sin and abuse in our countries might be transformed. We are happy that people are concerned about this matter and hopefully this long nightmare will cease, and like people who awake to a normal life, we will once again experience peace and tranquility and be able to live as sisters and brothers, live as equals. May the people of El Salvador no longer take up arms against one another. May the people of El Salvador no longer abuse their sisters and brothers, sisters and brothers who often live together in the same town or village. May we clothe ourselves in Christian attitudes. May we see all the people whom we have pierced with these actions. May Christ the Lord give us that sanity and common sense that will allow us to be a nation where all can truly live with tranquility. Christ’s liberation orients us toward eternity.

There is more good news this morning. Today in Rome (there is a seven hour time difference between El Salvador and Rome, so now it is the afternoon in Rome), but this morning in Rome, Pope Paul VI canonized the first North American saint, John Neumann. He was a bishop who also promoted the human person. He opened many schools and planted the seeds of wisdom in many hearts. Look at how the Church works. Not for some earthly reward, but a century of her work and yet it does not appear as her work at all, for this work is inspired from on high. The young Church of the United States, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, some of whom were formed in the school of this saint, embrace this holy bishop of the last century. The Church works for eternity. The Church proclaims a liberation from sin in order to promote the new man and the new woman who, as Saint Paul says, will live forever in Christ or as Jesus says: *whoever wishes to be my follower must... take up his cross each day and follow in my steps* (m).

My dear sisters and brothers, anticipating the 22nd of June when the teachers of El Salvador will celebrate a day set aside to honor them, I want to congratulate them. Throughout my priesthood I have always had a great admiration for these collaborators in promoting our culture. So often they are misunderstood. Many times they also misunderstand the Church and do not allow the Church to enter the schools. Again, my dear teachers, I want to congratulate you and I pray that we might come to understand one another so that we can plant those seeds in the hearts of our children and young people that will enable them to clothe themselves in attitudes that ultimately allow them to build a better

future for our nation. In our classrooms and in our Church, may we plant a profound respect for God, for if we do not respect God, we will never respect one another. On this day set aside for the teachers, I ask the pastors to make every effort to approach the schools. Then, in face of so much violence and so many abuses, I propose that teachers and priests together look for ways to create new young men and women, new children who are able to grow in a saner and more Christian environment. Christ has proclaimed to us this morning that only in an environment of the school of the cross and sacrifice, where we are willing to lose our life for Christ, where there is no selfishness or pride or arrogance or vulgarity, only in this environment can we create for our country a place where all can feel that they are sisters and brothers, only in this environment can we behold our older brother whom we pierced, but who has given us true life and progress that our people so desperately need.

Let us celebrate our Eucharist this morning and let us embrace the beautiful message of the Word of God. The central figure is Christ; his message is one of liberation, liberating people from their sin so that they might become new men and women; and this Christ continually calls us to repentance and conversion.

¹ See “Los Jesuitas ante el pueblo Salvadoreño”, ECA 344 (1977), pp. 434-450.

Margin References (a) Lk 9,18: (b) Lk 10,22: (c) Lk 9,20: (d) Mk 14,61-64: (e) Ga 3,26: (f) Ga 3,28: (g) Lk 9,20: (h) Lk 9,22-24: (i) Lk 11,23: (j) 2 Cor 8,9: (k) Jn 19,37: (l) Za 12,10: (m) Lk 9,23.