

20

THE VIRGIN MARY OFFERS US A PROMISE OF SALVATION

**Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel
Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Santa Tecla
16 July 1977**

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

... today, July 16, the church of Mount Carmel of Santa Tecla is graced by God¹ because this place, like so many other popular Mount Carmels of our republic, is a gift from God that enables us, the pastors of the Salvadoran people, to find direct support and confirmation of our work and our preaching, which are blessed by nothing less than the gentle hands of the Virgin Mary. There is no preacher in the midst of our people more attractive than the Virgin of Mount Carmel as we see here in this church of Mount Carmel overflowing with the faithful. I am also imagining other parishes and towns where today the priests are hardly able to satisfy the spiritual yearning of the souls that search for God. As Pope Paul VI told the administrators of the Marian shrines, these places make visible the invisible power that guides this church of God. At this hour when the Salvadoran church is renewing herself precisely through persecution, how wonderful it is to find ourselves under the gaze of the Virgin—her approving, encouraging, and consoling gaze! Our presence here in this Carmelite shrine should awaken in us what the Virgin desires for her church in 1977.

I imagine, sisters and brothers, that the devotion of all of you who have come to honor the Virgin of Mount Carmel bears some of the same yearning 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 when he saw his order being persecuted. Through Simon Stock and the scapular we go back to the almost legendary origins of this devotion. Tradition reminds us of those pious persons who placed their trust in the promises of the Bible. It was still the time of the Old Testament, before Mary lived, before Christ existed, but still they intuited the tenderness and power of that woman so closely linked to the promised Redeemer. Without knowing her they loved her and were her first devotees. There on Mount Carmel was the beginning of this congregation known as the Order of Carmel, which flourished but was also persecuted. One day Simon Stock, seeing the order under attack, asked the Virgin for protection. Tradition tells us that the heavenly Mother came down with the scapular in her hands and told Simon, «This is the sign of protection I bring you. All those who die wearing this holy scapular will not see the flames of hell». This protection of the Virgin was felt so powerfully that even now, centuries later, and even in places where there are no Carmelites, this holy scapular is

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

still seen as a sign of the Virgin's protection. It continues to call people and make them feel that they are the beloved children of the Virgin Mary.

Let me tell you then, sisters and brothers, that we all know that this year 1977 is a time of persecution for the church. Priests are assassinated and expelled and tortured; terror is spread among the working ranks of the church. Yes, it is painful to remember these sad events, but I want to tell you that this is the time when the Carmelites, along with all Catholics who truly are part of the church, lift up their eyes to the Virgin and ask her for a sign of her protection. In this church of Mount Carmel, led with great fervor by the Jesuit fathers, the prayer of supplication and protection becomes concrete.

I would ask that we pray in this eucharistic celebration in honor of the Virgin of Mount Carmel for protection for the church of El Salvador and for peace throughout the country. May we also pray specifically for the Jesuit fathers at this critical time when they have been criminally threatened with death. We are deeply moved by the serenity of these men of God. We now understand the meaning of the Jesuit formation in the school of the Spiritual Exercises, where they ask Christ for opprobrium, humiliation, the cross, and sacrifice. When they see them come, they are not frightened; they have asked for them and desired them. Indeed, the Jesuit is an «other Christ» who must expect ingratitude in return for the goodness he brings to the world. Still, sisters and brothers, we should understand that the Jesuits are a living part of the church and that at this time of trial for their ministry they are giving us a marvelous example with their serenity and their commitment to the church's cause. Even if some of us must die like Christ, still with all our hearts we ask the Virgin of Mount Carmel for a sign of protection for these soldiers of Christ and his church. And the Virgin responds to us with her scapular, her permanent promise, which I would like to interpret 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, among temporal realities. This salvation also demands interior renewal, for the kingdom of God is already beginning on this earth, in our own hearts.

The Virgin offers us the promise of salvation

First of all I say that the scapular of the Virgin of Mount Carmel is a sign of the hope for salvation that all persons have in their souls, in their hearts, in their lives. Those who die wearing this scapular will not see the flames of hell. This is a promise of salvation. But I want to tell many people frankly that it is not a false promise; it is not a promise that is unrelated to the reality of each one of us. The Virgin's promise is intended to awaken in each person's heart an eschatological sense, that is, hope in what lies beyond. We should work on this earth with our whole soul and with our heart set on heaven, knowing that no one is permanently installed in this world; we are on a voyage toward eternity. The realities of earth will pass, but what is eternal remains. This is the meaning of transcendence! The Virgin, like Christ and like the church, offers us a transcendental message which means that the church offers something unique, something which no other promise of liberation can offer.

The Marxists and other liberation movements of the earth do not think of God or hope for heaven. That is why they are tremendously different. 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 she knows that perfection will never be achieved here in history but only in what is beyond history. Salvation lies in the place from which the Virgin came, a heavenly destination where our Mother awaits us, the place in paradise where the scapular had its origins, the bond that ties us to eternity. People wear this scapular thinking not just about an earthly paradise but about eternal salvation, about being saved when they die. This is very good. Let us cultivate this devotion and not lose sight of it. This is the first part of the Virgin's message: spirituality.

After the Holy Father heard the opinions of all the world's bishops as expressed in the 1974 synod, he wrote his famous exhortation on evangelization in the modern world. The pope stated that in the bishops' words he had heard the cries of those suffering tremendous misery in the world and that both he and the bishops wanted to free the world from that misery (EN 30). But the pope joined the bishops in insisting that the primary aim of Christian salvation is the spiritual, the heavenly, and the eternal (EN 32) and that those who work for earthly liberation must never forget this hope of heaven. My sisters and brothers, let us reaffirm this Carmelite morning our hope in this heaven of which the Virgin's holy scapular speaks to us so eloquently. Let us wear it always reflecting on that eternity where we will be asked to render an account of our work on this earth.

A salvation that demands work here on earth

In the second place, I mention something that is often not understood by many people, and yet it needs to be understood because it is also part of the Virgin's message. From our youngest days I think that all of you, like me, gratefully embraced the Saturday privilege of the Virgin of Mount Carmel; that is, we believed that all those who die wearing the scapular will be removed by the Virgin from purgatory (if they have gone there) the Saturday after their death. This is not a dogma of faith, so that there is no obligation to believe this; one does not sin if one denies it. But those who love the Virgin know that this is very possible for her since she has great power before God. Even 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 that she grants so often? A plenary indulgence is the full pardon of sin and the debt attached to sin. Thus people who die after gaining a plenary indulgence will not experience purgatory, nor will they have to wait for the following Saturday. The moment they die, their sins and the debt of sin are forgiven, and they enter straight into the heavenly kingdom. Purgatory exists to purify us of the debts that are not paid here on earth. But if the church, as administrator of Christ's redemption, applies an indulgence to a soul as it migrates to eternity, then heaven is certainly the immediate reward. A plenary indulgence supposes the forgiveness of sins and the repentance of those who have freed themselves from all desire to sin.

A plenary indulgence cannot be obtained by those who still bear within their hearts a sinful desire, nor are such persons worthy of heaven, because they still offend God and nothing stained can enter the heavenly kingdom. Those who gain a plenary indulgence have their hearts detached from all sin and removed from everything that

ties them to sinful realities. A repentant soul that is free of all disordered passion and desirous of gaining that heavenly indulgence will certainly have something more than a Saturday privilege, and the Virgin will know how to oblige that heart by detaching it from all that is evil.

But from childhood we also learned something else, and I wish to highlight this especially this morning: there is no question of the Virgin trying to save us without our making an effort here on earth. Speaking of the Saturday privilege, it was said that every one had to observe chastity according to their state of life, and by chastity I understand all our temporal duties, all morality, everything that God commands and counsels us to do. Thus, if the scapular is a message about eternity and the hereafter, an eschatological message, it is also a message about the here and now. The scapular is a message about the demands of this earth, about the fulfillment of our duties in this world, and that is what the church is stressing at this time. 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 manage the things of earth with the heart of God.

There are many sinful situations because there are many unjust people at the present time and many abuses of human dignity; there are many injustices committed against the poor, and the poor also commit injustices against the rich. That was the message of the bishops gathered in Medellin under the authority of the pope: in Latin America there is a «situation of sin», injustice is pervasive, and Christians must work to transform this situation of sin (M 2,1). Christians cannot allow sin, the enemy of God, to reign in the world. Christians must work to banish sin and establish the kingdom of God. To struggle for this kingdom is not communism; to struggle for this kingdom is not meddling in politics. It is simply what the Gospel demands: that Christians today commit themselves more fully to history. If a person with Carmelite devotion wears the scapular thinking, «Since the Virgin promised to save me, I don't have to make an effort here on earth», that person will not be saved. Who can guarantee that that person will die with the scapular on? How many sinners rashly trusted in this promise, and then at the hour of death the holy scapular was ripped away, and they died without it.

The Council tells us that those persons offend God who do not work in faithful fulfillment of the law of God and in managing temporal affairs. They are also offending against love of neighbor. Those who are lax and do nothing for their neighbors are jeopardizing their own salvation (GS 43). Not only purgatory but hell is there for those who could have done good but did not do it. The Bible blesses those who could have done evil and did not do it and says they are holy and will be saved. Conversely, it says that those who could have done good but did not do it will be 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, but they did not do it. All those who had ability and responsibility in their hands and did not make good use of them will be held accountable at the time of the final judgment and at the time when their own lives are judged. The scapular of the Virgin, therefore, cannot separate us from the Gospel of Christ, and the Virgin cannot say anything

different from the church's doctrine because she is a member of the church and will not allow anything to be preached or done against the church.

My dear sisters and brothers, on this morning the Virgin of Mount Carmel responds to our prayers for protection by giving us, the Salvadoran people, the holy scapular just as she gave it to Simon Stock. This is the sign of salvation, and the Second Vatican Council explains the meaning of salvation. Sisters and brothers, some people in certain traditional circles do not want to hear that salvation is a concept that evolves, as does everything in the Gospel tradition. The tradition remains the same; it is the tradition Christ gave to the apostles. That cannot change, but it evolves according to the times and people's needs. So when Jesus speaks of salvation, we must understand it as it is understood by the church of 1977, for this church is assisted by the Holy Spirit.

More than eight centuries ago, when the Virgin presented the scapular as a sign of salvation, she understood that word as the church understood it then, since it is necessary to explain the meaning of salvation to each age. According to the present teaching of the church, inspired as she is by the Holy Spirit, it is not enough to speak of «salvation of the soul». Notice that many people say, «As long as I save my soul, I'll live as I please». But you cannot save your soul alone, the Council tells us. It is not enough to save the soul; it is the whole person that is saved: soul, body, heart, intelligence, will (GS 3). We are saved both as individuals and as members of society. It is society that must be saved. Pope Pius XII said that the whole world must be saved from its savagery in order to make it human and then to make the human divine. In other words, all the customs that are not in accord with the Gospel must be eliminated if we want to save humankind. It is not just souls at the hour of their death that must be saved; all the people living in history must be saved. We have to provide today's children and young people with the environment and social conditions in which they can fully develop the vocation that God has given them. The poor should not be marginalized and unable to attend university just because they are poor. We must provide an environment where men and women as images of God can truly shine forth in the world as divine images, participate in the common good of the country, and share in those goods that have been created for everyone. This is the doctrine of salvation. If the Virgin were to present the scapular to Simon Stock in 1977, she would tell him, «This is the sign of protection, a sign of God's doctrine, a sign of the integral vocation of men and women, a sign for the salvation of the whole person even in this life». All who wear this scapular must 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 is renewing herself. Some people do not want to understand, and they distort this doctrine which I have tried to expound today, saying that we are meddling in politics or becoming communists. Then come the persecution and the repression against Christians, against priests. As long as they do not understand this language of salvation, we will always be misunderstood by those who do not want to understand the church.

I pray this morning that the Virgin of Mount Carmel will strengthen her faithful followers who fill this church and so many other churches of Carmelite inspiration. At this time I want to greet with great enthusiasm those communities who follow the

Virgin of Mount Carmel and who gather around the altars of the Virgin in every corner of our republic. I want to tell them to receive the scapular today as Simon Stock received it, but with an understanding of 1977 so that every devotee of Carmel becomes a true follower of the Gospel that is needed now in this church that is redeeming today's women and men. May the Virgin of Mount Carmel and her holy scapular also inspire with grace those who do not understand us so that they be converted and realize that we do not hate them but love them. We do not want them to be lost as a result of their failure to collaborate in the construction of a more just temporal order. We want the Virgin to call also those who are able to transform society, because they have the power to do so in their hands. We want her to call those who persecute the church, financed as they are by interested parties who want to maintain this present situation which cannot be maintained. May all those who are opposed to Christ's reign of justice, peace, and love recognize that God is also calling them. There is room for everyone in the kingdom, even for the persecutors who, like Saul, may be converted into true apostles of the Gospel at this time when we celebrate the Mother of all Carmelites. Our Mother has a heart so big that she embraces not only those present who have come out of devotion. She feels perhaps even greater love for those who are not with her church, those who offend the church, and those who riddle her with bullets. She knows, as all mothers know well, that her most disgraceful and perverse sons are the ones closest to her heart, and she wants them to be converted so that they feel they belong to the family of all those whom she loves. She wants them to be with her in heaven.

This is my message today, in my humble way of thinking, sisters and brothers, and I thank you all for listening to me with such attention. I want to thank the fathers of this church for the honor and immense joy of being able to share with this devout community of Santa Tecla in the homage we are rendering to our Lady. Now, together with the Virgin—for she also is a creature, a woman of our race—let us unite with the Virgin in spirit to offer to God the sacrifice that gathers together the work of all of you: the love, the devotion, the concerns, and the anxieties of all the people represented by you who are here. How many tears! How much sorrow! But when they are placed on the altar and in the hands of the Virgin, they will be changed by the eucharistic mystery into the sacrifice of Christ. We know that Mary is great because it was she who brought us Christ; from her womb, from her heart came forth the redemption of the world. And now as we celebrate this Eucharist in a somber moment of anguish and hope, we pray that the celebration in this beautiful church of Mount Carmel may bring abundant blessings of peace for our republic. So be it.