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THE STRENGTH OF THE WORD

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

Apopa

25 November 1977

... on this morning of November 25, 1977, this rich yearly tradition of Apopa brings together this community full of faith in Christ to honor your patroness, Saint Catherine of Alexandria.

¹ This is an event that invites us to reflect on a life that will not end, a life that lasts until the consummation of the centuries: the church. We are the church. Even though we are not always here in this church building—each one of us there in our homes, on our farms, doing our daily tasks, in our villages—we carry the faith in our hearts. So when a moment like this or some other moment in the spiritual life of the church arises, we come together and we celebrate as we're doing this morning. This event invites us to reflect, and we are going to reflect together, sisters and brothers, having heard the word of the Lord that speaks to us about survival after death, about values that rise above persecutions, and about a triumph that becomes greater to the degree that others desire to tear us apart. No one can prevail against God, and God's life animates this holy church that is the beautiful spouse of our Divine Redeemer.

Saint Catherine of Alexandria and the persecuted church

Who could have told that young woman of the third century, Catherine of Alexandria, that her name would become known far beyond the circle of her family and friends, beyond the boundaries of that city of wisdom where great philosophers and theologians conversed? The School of Alexandria is famous in history. There the most profound philosophies of Greece were taught. Meanwhile, the greatest Christian theologians sought to combine this human philosophical science with God's revealed wisdom as found in the divine word that is read in the church. As a result, Alexandria produced many beautiful catechisms, theological treatises, and biblical works and commentaries, works that centuries later continue to be admired by scholars. In that city of Alexandria, famous for its knowledge and for its philosophy baptized by theology, this young woman Catherine was born. In her youth she was a pagan but very thoughtful, like all those souls who think deep thoughts. She came to realize that Jesus and his simple parables, his life, his Gospel, and his Beatitudes were far more beautiful than the thought of the great philosophers of earth. She discovered the precious pearl of the Gospel and clung to it. She became a Christian, and one day persecution came.

My sisters and brothers, we should not be surprised when people speak about a persecuted church. Many are scandalized and say that we are exaggerating, that the church is not persecuted. But persecution is the historical mark of the church! There must always be persecution of any doctrine that condemns immorality, that preaches against all forms of abuse, that always teaches what is good and attacks what is evil. This doctrine was given by Christ to sanctify hearts and to renew societies. Naturally, when in any heart or any society there is sin or selfishness or corruption or envy or avarice, then sin rises up like a snake that is squeezed, and it pursues whoever tries to fight against evil and sin. Therefore, when the church is persecuted, this is a sign that she is fulfilling her mission. She is banishing sin from the world, and naturally the world rises up against the church's goodness; it rejects her, maligns her, defames her, and discredits her, just as is happening in these days. You read in the newspapers the paid advertisements that insinuate that the church is to blame for people's discontent. As for radio and television, what diabolical campaigns they promote against our church! It is sin that rises up against the kingdom of God that is trying to establish itself.

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

So it was in the time of Catherine of Alexandria when she preached the simplicity of the Gospel and the parables. She appealed to the goodness of people's hearts and cried out, «Be converted from your sin». Naturally, it was during the Roman Empire, when the emperor Maximinus was reigning. According to imperial theory, the emperors were gods and demanded to be adored as rulers and gods. Christians cannot adore any god but the one true God. Thus when a government, whatever it is called, wants to divinize its rulers—in this case it was the Roman emperor Maximinus—the Catholic church says, «No! We have only one Lord, one God: Christ our Lord!» These false gods then persecuted those who would not adore them, and the persecution spread. Thus there arose that glorious multitude of men and women who are called martyrs.

One of those martyred women, dear sisters and brothers of Apopa, is your patroness. Saint Catherine was a Christian, wise in the wisdom of her times but so profoundly Christian that she could not escape persecution. She was brought before the courts, and at first the prosecution tried to flatter her and win her over. When one gives way to such flattery, then there is no need for persecution—the game is won. That is why you must be very careful, sisters and brothers; do not yield to flattery. When flattery comes from sin and seeks to avoid trouble and sacrifice, when it aims at being well off and comfortable on earth, then it is bad because that is how people become persecutors.

Catherine did not allow herself to be seduced by flattery, and so they began the second phase of the persecution: threats, tremendous threats in the refined form of scientific discussion. Take note of the different ways that God enters the human heart: he enters into the wise by the path of wisdom and into simple folk by the path of simplicity. God used the path of wisdom to enter into the heart of Catherine, who was wise and very intelligent. That is how she came to know God. On the other hand, the devil and persecutors enter people's hearts by the path of flattery, but they also attempted to enter Catherine's heart by the path of wisdom. The story of her martyrdom, the study of her life, tells us that the emperor told her to talk with the wise men of the empire. They therefore brought to her philosophers who were court counselors, the wise men of Alexandria. We see Catherine there in the midst of these sages who sought to bring objections against her beliefs. They attempted to remove the idea of God from her mind; they tried to show her it was ridiculous to believe in a Christ who is God and man at the same time; they tried to uproot from her heart her faith in a church that would continue in existence until the end of time. They told her, «Don't you see how ridiculous all this is? There is no greater wisdom than human knowledge, especially since the empire offers you great benefits if you renounce this ridiculous creed of Christians».

As Catherine responded one by one to the objections of her adversaries, she ended up convincing them. Tradition tells us that instead of their convincing Catherine to renounce Christianity, she convinced the sages to become Christians. See how great God's wisdom is when God illuminates our knowledge and when people listen with good will, as you now listen to me with such kindness. I hope no one is listening to me just to catch me up and then misinform later. Be very careful because those who come as spies and listen to the word of God with evil intentions are perverting their hearts, and God may punish them and exclude them from this knowledge of divine wisdom. So let us listen to the word of God as Saint Catherine listened to the Christian theologians and

sages of her time. Let us do so in order to learn God's doctrine, not to be spies and persecutors. Let us receive with love what God has revealed. Those sages of Alexandria perhaps began with evil intentions, but God prepared their hearts with his grace, and they ended up believing in the same faith that Catherine professed.

The strength of the word

This beautiful example of your patroness leads me to reflect on a passage from the Second Vatican Council and apply it to you, dear sisters and brothers, who are so kindly taking part in this Holy Mass in the parish church of Apopa dedicated to Saint Catherine. Listen to this beautiful thought the Council offers you this morning: «Christ, the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of his Father both by the testimony of his life and the power of his words, continually fulfills his prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in his name and with his authority, but also through the laity whom he made his witnesses and to whom he gave understanding of the faith and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life» (LG 35).

I want to repeat this, sisters and brothers, because we find here the explanation of the question I asked you before: why on this day, November 25, 1977, does your Apopa community assemble with faith and devotion to honor your patroness, Saint Catherine, just as your parents and grandparents did? Do you know why? It is because Christ continues preaching not only through your pastor but also through all the parents, through all the good and pious women of this community, and through all those who are Christians. We are a community of men and women who form the church, and we have been anointed by Christ in baptism to be prophets. In other words, we are called to provide good counsel to the world by the witness of our lives, by our good example, and by the power of our words. Parents are called to enlighten their children, and spouses are called to enlighten one another. Community is preserved not because Christ is speaking visibly but because Christ makes use of each one of us, each one of you, to continue to preach the kingdom of God. That is why the kingdom of God is present here in Apopa. That is why Christianity and faith are alive in the families and in the hearts of the people of this area. Christ continues his prophetic mission through his holy people and not just through his ministers, that is, the priests or the bishop with whom they are in communion. Christ continues his mission through the baptized people who are in communion with the bishop. The bishop is like the authorized teacher, the touchstone for testing whether the doctrine preached by a priest or a family is the true doctrine of God's kingdom or false doctrine.

Very close to here you have an example. In Quezaltepeque there is a priest in rebellion against the bishop. He is in confrontation with us and excommunicated; his doctrine is not God's kingdom, and his actions do not build up the church. How sad is the case of those people who follow the preaching and the activities of a rebellious priest who has broken this communion with the bishop! Hopefully this word will reach Quezaltepeque and that little political band will be converted and stop toying with the holy kingdom of God. For them Father Pineda Quinteros is not a minister in whom they seek the word but rather a silly instrument for furthering their political aim of harassing the church. Hopefully they will not be deceived into feeling they have political support. Such deception is very easy while life lasts, but when the time for the judgment of the

kingdom of God arrives, those who have built with Christ the truly authentic kingdom, even while being persecuted, will persevere forever. On the other hand, says Christ, those who seek to save their lives by taking advantage of worldly things will lose their souls forever (Mark 8:35). Consequently, sisters and brothers, this prophetic mission must enter into confrontation, and then it is easy to discern the truth or falsehood of my words, my beliefs, and my doctrines. If I am in communion with the bishop and the bishop is in communion with the pope, then there is no doubt that this is the truth, that this is the kingdom of God that Christ has brought to earth and that he handed over to the power of the church's word and to the greatness of Christian witness.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, I invite you all to become fervent workers on behalf of evangelization, just as Saint Catherine of Alexandria was. What else is the church doing in this world? The word «evangelization» says it all. It means bringing the Gospel into our homes, our towns, everywhere. How do we do this? With the power of the word and the witness of our lives—these are the two great instruments of evangelization. The power of the word—the word is power. When the word is not a lie, it carries the power of the truth. That is why there are so many words that no longer have power in our nation; they are false words, words that have lost their reason for being. If a word does not bear witness to the truth, it has no reason to exist. A word exists as a vehicle of the truth, and then the word is power.

The word has power when it communicates God's doctrine. What does the word of the kingdom of God communicate? I hope, sisters and brothers, that at this time you renew the content of this doctrine. I address this to all of you who are parents, catechists, celebrators of the word, collaborators with Christ in spreading his kingdom by the power of the word. This ministry is necessary. You know that in Rome representatives of the bishops from around the world have just met together with the pope to study the problem of catechesis, that is, how to transmit the treasure of the true doctrine to children and young people. What is this true doctrine? It is that which Christ brought us: that a God exists; that God created us; that this God sent his Son to save the world; that there is no salvation apart from Christ our Redeemer; and that this redemption of Christ is not only the redemption we hope for after death but a redemption that is already at work in this life.

The word «liberation» bothers many people, but it is the reality of Christ's redemption. Liberation does not mean only redemption after death, so that people should just conform to the system while they are alive. No, liberation is redemption that is already beginning on this earth. Liberation means that the exploitation of one human being by another no longer exists in the world. Liberation means redemption that seeks to free people from every form of slavery. Slavery is illiteracy; slavery is hunger, not having money to buy food; slavery is being homeless, not having a place to live. Slavery is misery; they go together. When the church preaches that Christ came to redeem us and that because of that redemption no form of slavery should exist on earth, the church is not preaching subversion or politics or communism. The church is preaching the true redemption of Christ. Christ does not want slaves; he wants all people to be redeemed; he wants us all, rich and poor, to love one another as sisters and brothers. He wants liberation to reach everywhere so that no slavery exists in the world, none at all. No person should be the slave of another, nor a slave of misery, nor a slave of anything that

supposes sin in the world. This is the content of this revelation, this doctrine, this evangelization.

The church continues to preach that this kingdom of God proclaiming evangelization also wants to form community. As long as evangelization does not lead to a community, sisters and brothers, it is incomplete. When evangelization ends up forming a community, it means that I—as one who believes in Christ and his revelation, as one who believes in God and my temporal and eternal salvation—share this faith with other people who believe the same thing, and it means that we who believe the same thing form a community, a community of faith and love, a community of the redeemed. This is what the church is doing on earth: creating community. Therefore, sisters and brothers, when others try to scatter the communities, when terror is sown in those who proclaim the word of God and in those who meet to reflect on it, then there is persecution of the church. We have a right to meet together to complement one another and to help one another in our community reflection. In this way our faith keeps growing, our worship of God becomes more profound, and we become more united among ourselves. To create community is a command of Christ: «Go and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Gather together all those who share the same faith» (Mark 16:15). This is the church: the coming together of all those who believe in the one true God and in Christ the Redeemer.

My sisters and brothers, this community manifests Christ as its life, and Christ performs acts in the community that make his redemption present in our midst. These acts are called sacraments. When a child is born in a Christian family, the parents bring the child to the baptistry of the parish church, and there the priest pours water over the child's head as he says, «I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit». This is a gesture of Christ present in Apopa, for Christ takes children of the flesh and makes them children of the kingdom of God. When people feel overwhelmed by sin and need forgiveness, they approach the confessional. Repentant, they tell the priest, «Father, I accuse myself of committing this sin», and the priest responds, «I pardon you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit». This is Christ present in Apopa through the ministry and the action of the priest who is offering forgiveness in this community called the parish of Apopa. At this moment I as bishop and my beloved brother priests surrounding this altar are going to take from you the bread and wine which represent your work and your lands, your concerns, your hopes and your joys, and we are going to consecrate them as the Body and Blood of the Lord: «This is my Body! This is my Blood!» This is Christ who through our human lips becomes really present in this community of Apopa in order to nourish all those who wish to partake of this Holy Communion.

Dear sisters and brothers, it is beautiful knowing that the community of the church does not journey alone. She should not be afraid, for Christ goes with her. At this moment when the bishop of the diocese is explaining the word of God, do not focus on the poverty of my words. Focus on the heavenly message that Christ the eternal teacher is communicating to you, his beloved people, through my humble ministry. Blessed are the people and the community that gather together to listen to their bishop or their priest because at that moment they are being nourished not by a human word but by a word of God. I feel this great responsibility, sisters and brothers: each time I preach I

feel I am nothing more than a humble channel, like the microphone that is transmitting and magnifying my voice.

I am nothing more than God's microphone that brings to your ears the message that God wants communicated to you. Then in the heart of each of you, as you receive this word of God with sincerity, you can turn to God, thanking him and entering into personal dialogue with him, or you can reject him. When people criticize me, when they malign me in the newspapers saying that I preach subversion, when they call me the names they do, I am saddened, not for myself but because I know that these insults do not end with me. «He who despises you», Christ says, «despises me» (Luke 10:16). Those who pay for ads to insult the church in the papers and on radio and television are not only insulting human beings; they are turning against God, and with God they will have to deal. Those offenses are so vile and senseless. How can such offenses against God's ministers not offend God our Lord, sisters and brothers, since the church is Christ present on earth? When Saint Catherine belonged to that community of Alexandria, said to have been founded by Saint Mark the evangelist, she paid attention to her bishops and her priests, as we do today on this her feast. She knew that she was being nourished by a doctrine that gave her eternal life. The memory of her will continue forever because all those who are nourished by the eternal word become immortal in their souls. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, when the community....²

² The final words were not registered on the tape of the homily.