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# WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

**Pentecost Sunday**

**29 May 1977**

*Acts 2:1-11*

*1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13*

*John 20:19-23*

My dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience.

Today we celebrate the great feast of Pentecost, a name that comes to us from Jewish history. The number fifty in the Bible represents fullness, and Pentecost was always celebrated fifty days after the Passover. It therefore expressed the fullness of Passover, and today for us Pentecost is the celebration of the fullness of the resurrection of Christ. We have spent the last fifty days rejoicing in the life of the church, but without forgetting that this Easter joy flows from the martyrdom of the cross. Today the church presents to us the Spirit that Christ breathed into the church with his resurrection and his eternal life. For this reason the church may be harshly persecuted, but her foes will never be able to do away with her. «The gates of the nether world shall not prevail against it» (Matt 16:18), said the eternal risen One, the one who Luke<sup>1</sup> tells us overcame death and sin and «breathed on his disciples». What a precious gesture! The Bible speaks of a similar action when «God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life» (Gen 2:7). God breathed the breath of life that created the human nature that we all share here today; we all have intelligence, freedom, incredible abilities because of the breath of God. That creation is renewed and redeemed from sin through the redemption of Christ. And the newly risen Christ, like a new Creator, breathes upon the fishermen: «Receive the Holy Spirit» (John 20:22).

Fifty days later that gentle breath of the risen One becomes a hurricane that invites humanity to attend to the meaning of this breath that comes from God. This is new life, the life of redemption. Here the fullness of Easter is revealed. Many of you participated in the Easter Vigil and remember the paschal candle that illuminated the dark night of Holy Saturday; it then spread its light through the candles of all who were there. Now on Pentecost it takes the form of tongues of fire that descend from heaven (Acts 2:3), and these paschal flames are symbols of God who takes on flesh in human beings, symbols of the Spirit of God that no one can extinguish. This is the fullness of Easter.

Through a happy initiative of our former bishops, this day when we celebrate the fullness of Easter is also the day of the seminary. It is the day when the new cenacle, the seminary, is filled with new apostles. These new apostles, joined in prayer with Mary,

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<sup>1</sup> The reference should be to Saint John.

the Mother of Jesus, are preparing themselves to the best of their ability to go forth like the apostles, illumined with the Spirit of God, to proclaim this new life, this light that Christ has brought with his redemption.

This is the day, then, when the church was inaugurated. This is important, sisters and brothers. If people want to know something about any institution, then they have to examine its constitutions, its rules, and the reason why it came into being. Today is therefore an opportunity to know what the church is, so that we can all know and understand our own identity—not only we priests and bishops who preach about the church, but also the seminarians who are being prepared in their seminaries, the men and women religious who work and reveal the face of the church in the world, and all of you, dear lay folk, who are the life and the mission of the church. This has been my desire ever since my arrival as archbishop. Since my arrival the church has had to deal with very difficult situations, but at no time have I wanted to confront force with force. That is calumny! What I have tried to do is define what the church is, because the more defined and known the church is and the more truly she lives what she is, the stronger the church will be. The church has no enemies, except those who voluntarily want to declare themselves her enemies.

Today is a magnificent day to come to an understanding of the origins of our church and to know what we are. Let us not confront anyone, sisters and brothers. We are not a political, sociological, or economic power. In a recent statement we bishops declared that we are perhaps the little David who goes out to confront Goliath, the giant who trusts in his arms, his power, and his wealth (1 Sam 17:45). We trust in the name of the Lord. Our smallness will become great and powerful to the extent that we are humble, loving, and trusting in the name of the Lord. This is Pentecost!

The story of our church's origins tells us about twelve fishermen, rustic folk who, together with the humble Virgin of Nazareth, receive a baptism of fire and wind. Those fearful men, barricaded in the cenacle, suddenly feel that they are church, and they go forth into the world to preach. When their opponents warn them, «We instructed you not to go around saying false things about a risen man» (Acts 4:19), they respond, «We have seen him! We are witnesses. We cannot be silent. We must obey God rather than men» (Acts 5:28-29). Even though they died as martyrs, they left behind a long succession which continues down to our own time in the bishops, in the priests, in the whole Christian people, who continue to be the same church of twenty centuries ago, the church of Pentecost. What is the church? What is Pentecost? They are one and the same thing. Of all the doctrinal wealth this feast offers us, sisters and brothers, I simply want to highlight three thoughts. There are three messages that I ask you to keep in your heart and try to live in your lives.

### **The church is an experience of human openness to divine power**

The first message is this: the church is an experience of human openness to divine power. I am addressing here the many people who believe that prayer no longer has any place in today's world. There are many people who do not pray, and there are many who think that they will find a solution to the problems of the world without lifting their minds and hearts to God. The Council tells us, «The church has a primary mission: to be open to God and to unite people with God» (GS 42). As we will see, all the great human

achievements are derived from this mission. But first I want to stress this idea, sisters and brothers. There is much materialism today. In our last message<sup>2</sup> we bishops denounced two frightful forms of materialism: the atheistic materialism of Marxism and the selfish materialism of liberal capitalism. Both are materialistic, and that is why the church cannot identify herself with either of them. The church is spiritualist and elevates humankind toward God. The church is transcendence and says to people, «You have great ability. The most beautiful dimension of your human vocation is speaking with God, entering into dialogue with your Creator». This is something magnificent, sisters and brothers, and Pentecost makes it manifest: God makes his way among humans to give them his life, his truth, his essence.

Saint Paul has just told us, «No one can say, "Jesus is Lord", except by the Holy Spirit» (1 Cor 12:3b). Reflect on this phrase. With our lips we can say, «Jesus is Lord», but we can feel and understand the depth of meaning only if God allows us to speak with him, only if we feel we have the ability to pray. Those who do not pray have not developed their full human potential. Those who do not pray because they do not believe in God are mutilated. Those who do not pray because they kneel down before the god of materialism—be it money or politics or anything else—have not understood the true greatness of being a human person.

To pray is to understand that this mystery of my existence as a man or a woman has limits, but precisely at those limits begins the infinite essence of the One with whom I am able to dialogue. If it were in my hands to make a friend to my liking, a friend to whom I could transmit all my thoughts, all my freedom, all that I am, in order to establish a dialogue with this friend, then from my hands would spring forth a creature whom I would at once make my interlocutor. But that is impossible; for human persons that is impossible. But God who has created heaven and earth has the ability to create an interlocutor. God can make beings who are rulers of creation, who appreciate the beauty of the sun and the stars, who interpret the joy of life, who feel the anguish of their own smallness, and who speak with the One who is able to help them, the Author of all things. This is prayer, the ability of human beings to understand that they have been made by someone powerful, but that they have been elevated to be interlocutors with their Creator.

This is Pentecost; this is the church: bringing this message to humankind. That is why the church above all proclaims her religious mission and teaches people to pray. She is distressed when her children do not pray as we have so often urged. This is the soul of our church, sisters and brothers. The Holy Spirit is nothing more than that God who enters into communication with us and invites us to use our freedom and our intelligence in order to open ourselves to the Absolute and enter into dialogue with the One who created us, who made us capable of becoming his children, who awaits us in heaven, who consoles us on earth, and who leads us along paths that are worthy of the children of God.

From this religious mission, sisters and brothers, flows a tremendous obligation, a terrible duty: the church must defend her signs, which are signs of transcendence.

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<sup>2</sup> «Message of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador to the Salvadoran People on the Wave of Violence Sweeping the Country» in *Orientación* (22 May 1977).

How can the church not be pained when the most beautiful sign of God's presence on earth, the Eucharist, has been trampled underfoot in Aguilares? How can the church not be pained when they have used an axe to break open the tabernacle?<sup>3</sup> The same has occurred in Ciudad Arce, where the Blessed Sacrament was profaned by vile thieves. There was no need to smash the sacred symbol of our faith, the Eucharist! The priests are signs of the church's divine presence in the world. How can the church not be pained to see that people distrust her priests and seek to divide them into categories of good and bad? If priests are in communion with their bishop, then they are preaching the Gospel being proclaimed in the world as a sign of the divine. If they do not fulfill their obligation, then the bishop should hold them accountable. The faithful and the civil authorities, instead of placing sacrilegious hands on them, should go directly to those who have responsibility in this area, the bishops, and tell them, «Father so and so is lacking in faith». But no one apart from the teaching hierarchy has the right to say whether that priest is preaching or is not preaching the Gospel.

The pope is a sign of the divine presence of Christ. Therefore at this time, my sisters and brothers, as pastor I invite you to celebrate the day of the pope on June 30. There will be beautiful events in all the parish churches to make us aware that the pope, who personifies the priesthood, is a divine sign, being a man who with all his human weaknesses, has been chosen by God to be the instrument of his grace and his truth. Therefore, this seminary day that we celebrate on Pentecost makes all the people of God realize that these young men chosen from our families are truly privileged. We should cherish them, we should help them, we should love them, especially at this time when they find no other incentive than that of a persecuted, maligned, and murdered priesthood. It is good to see how these young men rejoice in their vocation because they understand its meaning. The priesthood is not for loafers or freeloaders or guerilla fighters; rather, it is for heroes who will proclaim a difficult message which the world cannot grasp. It is necessary, then, that on June 30, the anniversary of the pope's coronation, we render him special homage as a way of honoring, in him, all our priests and bishops and as a way of making amends for the sacrileges that have been committed by the assassinations, tortures, and expulsions of the ministers of Christ. By showing love for the pope and respect for his person, we show our love for the priesthood, and we understand and help our priests. Since I've already mentioned the Eucharist, I remind you that we also have in these days the great celebration of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ, when we pay homage to the consecrated host. From this moment I declare it a feast to make amends to the Blessed Sacrament that has been shamefully profaned during this time of persecution. In our parishes let us make Corpus Christi a splendid homage of the sacred sign of the church in the world. Let us make Corpus Christi an act of expiation, praying as the angel taught the children of Fatima to pray, «I want to make amends for those who offend you. I want to love on behalf of those who do not love you. I want to have faith in you on behalf of those who have lost their faith. May the Blessed Sacrament become again the visible soul of our church and our faith».

## **The church is assurance of the truth**

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<sup>3</sup> Archbishop Romero refers again to the military operation of 19 May in Aguilares when soldiers of the Armed Forces and the National Guard, after repressing the people, occupied the church and profaned the tabernacle. See «Information Bulletin of the Archdiocese, No. 16», ECA 342-343 (1977) 339-340.

The second thought I offer you, sisters and brothers, on this day of Pentecost is the assurance of the truth. It would be arrogant for me to tell you that I was sure of the truth if Christ had not told me this when he said to the apostles, «I will send you the Spirit of truth and he will teach you everything» (John 14:26). This Spirit of truth encourages the church to preach, to write, and to speak out on the radio. The Spirit of truth moves us to speak out against the lies and to clarify ambiguities. The church is inspired by the Spirit of truth. Why should she not speak when she is the victim of slander and misunderstanding? Those paid ads which speak half-truths are worse than lies! The dark pages of the church are her human side, and they must be viewed in the historical context in which they occurred. The church is not so criminal! The persecution of the Jesuits is historical. Their founder, Saint Ignatius Loyola, prayed that his order be marked by persecution, so this should not surprise us.<sup>4</sup>

Persecution is something necessary in the church. You know why? Because the truth is always persecuted. Jesus said so: «If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you» (John 15:20). For this reason, when Pope Leo XIII, a brilliant man who lived at the beginning of this century, was asked one day about the marks that distinguish the true Catholic church, he mentioned the four that are well known: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. But the pope said, «Let us add one more: persecuted». The church cannot live and fulfill its obligations without being persecuted. The church preaches the truth in the same way that God commanded the prophets to proclaim the truth in the face of the lies, injustices, and abuses of the time. And how hard that was for the prophets! They even wanted to flee from God because they knew that speaking the truth was a death sentence.

When John the Baptist went to the palace of Herod to tell him, «It is not lawful to live in adultery» (Mark 6:18), naturally the adulteress, like a serpent, got the king to decapitate the prophet. That is what happens whenever the truth is preached against injustices, against abuses, against outrages. Yes, the truth must cause pain. I told you once before how a *campesino* related to me this comparison: «Bishop, when you place your hand in a bowl of salt water, if the hand is well, nothing happens. But if the hand is cut or wounded... ah! It hurts!» The church is the salt of the world (Matt 5:13), and naturally where there are wounds, the salt stings. That is why persecution is an essential mark of the church, and there are times when this persecution becomes fierce. We don't claim that it comes only from the government; it comes from other powerful sources also. Persecution comes from sinners. Persecution comes from all those who have something against the Decalogue (Exod 20:1-17). Those who promote abortion feel pained that the church is against abortion. Those who use artificial contraceptives feel pained that the church in her encyclical *Humanae Vitae* states that it is not lawful to mutilate the sources of life (HV14). Those who kill are pained when they are reminded of the fifth commandment: «You shall not kill» (Exod 20:13-16). Those who steal and lie are disturbed by the commandments that reproach them for those actions.

The church is persecuted. She will inevitably be persecuted if she defends the rights of God and human dignity. This prophetic mission of the church is difficult, but it is necessary because the Council tells us that the Spirit of God gave the church the truth

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<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Romero is referring to a paid advertisement of FARO in which this organization justifies the expulsion of the Jesuits but denies that this indicates persecution of the church. See «Is it True the Catholic church is Persecuted?» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (25 May 1977).

so that she might bear witness to the truth (GS 3). How can we view with indifference, sisters and brothers, the painful scenes in Aguilares, in El Paisnal, and in Guazapa? How can the church not speak her word of pain with those who suffer and her word of protest against the violence of these outrageous crimes? Let these matters be judged! Let justice be done! But who should do this? Above humankind there is a God who demands respect for people's lives and for their dignity, their liberty, and their dwellings. The church has to proclaim the word of the Lord, but in proclaiming it prophetically and rejecting the evil of sin, the church does not do so with hatred. Be aware of this. The Spirit of truth enlightens the church to tell sinners, whoever they are, «Do not be sinful; do not be cruel; do not torment or torture or treat people badly». The church does this with love. She seeks what is good for sinners; she seeks their conversion.

Today the Bible tells us that when Peter preached, three thousand people were converted (Acts 2:41). They heard the Spirit of God in the words of those men. And I know, my sisters and brothers, that all those living in these times of trial for our church are undergoing conversion if they are truly people of good will. You should see how many people are being converted as they see the church remaining firm in fulfillment of her mission. Some think that people are losing their faith because a few are leaving the church. The people leaving are those who must leave, but those who understand that the church can speak in no other way stand firm, and they are converted. With the church they also become prophets of the truth, undertaking the mission of defending God in the world.

The church, then, filled with the Spirit of Pentecost, cries out: do not be deceived. Dear readers of the newspapers, you are mature people; you do not need someone to tell you, «This is a lie; this is the truth». Discern for yourselves. Everyone understands the reasons why certain pages are written and how the teaching of the church is distorted in certain columns. The readers of our country's papers are not children; they are adults who every day grow more mature. Even the humble *campesino* is able to distinguish the lies from truth, the ambiguities from precision. We make a call to put an end to the publication of foolishness, half-truths, lies, and calumny. Would that that money were spent on efforts to reach unity and understanding. We call upon all of you who read the papers but, being poor like the church, have no money to respond with paid ads—let us at least know how to say, «This is a lie!» Or if we have doubts, let us go to someone who can enlighten us, an expert in ecclesiastical history or theology. The truth of the church is not some hidden treasure, for as Christ said before his accusers, «I have spoken openly to the world. Ask those who heard what I said to them» (John 18:20).

### **The church is the guarantee of unity**

Finally, sisters and brothers—and forgive me for going on so long, but Pentecost is a beautiful opportunity to realize what the church is, what she must do, and what we are if we are truly church. In the third place, then, the church is the guarantee of unity.

How beautiful is today's second reading! Saint Paul tells us that the Spirit gives the church a diversity of gifts, of ministries, of charisms (1 Cor 12:4-7). Present here in this cathedral, so full this morning, and listening through the radio there are thousands and thousands of Catholic hearts reflecting together, and no two of us have received the

same gifts. God is so varied in his creation that no two leaves on a tree are the same. This is all the more so in the creation of the infinite in his church. God has given us wonderful gifts so that with all these diverse gifts we might organize the kingdom of God. Healthy diversity is essential. Let us not cast everybody into the same mold; that would be uniformity, which is different from unity. Unity means diversity and respect for what others think. It means creating unity among us all, a unity which is much richer than just my individual ideas. This is the Holy Spirit, uniting all the church's children in one truth and one divine principle. The Spirit makes some persons bishops, some priests, and some religious men and women or catechists or parents or students or professionals or laborers, etc. And in all of them, Saint Paul says, is the same Spirit who makes us all converge toward unity.

This is one of the most beautiful moments of our church, sisters and brothers, precisely because of our unity. Since I am recalling concrete aspects of our church in the light of Pentecost, allow me to conclude by calling to mind some very joyful aspects. Not everything is bitter. This foolishness of persecution is shown to be folly when one reflects on the stature of those Catholics who love the true church and attempt to strengthen her. For example, this week the awakening of the laity has been notable. The laity means all of you. You who are not priests or religious are called lay people, and by your baptism you are incorporated into the Body of Christ. You share with the church the full responsibility of living in the world as truth, unity, light, salt, and vigor for the people. We have been delighted to see the laity meet together and prepare a statement that is being distributed at this very moment. In that statement they say, «We understand with dismay that we have left the priests on their own, and heroically they have had to undertake responsibilities that pertain to us, the laity». This is a beautiful confession. This statement calls all those who live in the world to understand that the priest, who does not live in the world with a family like yourselves, inspires you with his teaching, with his grace, with his word, with his ministry. But you who are in the world must be the ones who incarnate the life of Christ's kingdom in the structures of society, in politics, in the concrete life of the home, the workplace, the store, and the farm. You Catholics, without being ordained priests, are priests in your own homes, and you have to sanctify your own occupations. We rejoice that this awakening of the laity is taking place at a time when we lack fifteen priests who have been taken from us and can no longer work with us.<sup>5</sup> You are invited to take their place, dear lay people, and assume your role in the church at this time when everyone's efforts are needed in the kingdom of God.

With admiration, gratitude, and affection I want to call your attention to the meeting we had yesterday with the seminarians in María Auxiliadora. Counting the seminarians studying in our seminary, some four hundred young men gathered together, and we were all filled with great joy. What a great hope for us! Rather than feeling distressed about the problems of the priesthood to which they aspire, they feel encouraged because they see that the priesthood is worth the effort for an idealistic young man. Many priests, religious, and lay people were also present yesterday with the seminarians, all united as one people of God. What must we do so that we are not lacking priests in our communities? That is our challenge on this day of the seminary, so

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<sup>5</sup> Archbishop Romero is referring to the priests expelled from the country during the first five months of 1977. See «Why the Image of El Salvador is Being Disfigured Abroad» in *Orientación* (19 June 1977).

that today and in the coming days you will support our seminaries with your prayer and your financial assistance.

Another event worthy of mention on this Pentecost is the meeting of the religious women during which they studied the reality of our country and examined their conscience: what is our role as consecrated women? Each religious congregation has its own specific charism which it received from its founder, who took it from the Gospel. What would the founder do here and now in El Salvador? That is what religious women also need to ask now in El Salvador. They need to reinterpret their founding in terms of the present time so as to remain close to the Gospel and to the Spirit. They must renew and develop their vocation in perfect harmony with this church that is in the world in order to be «salt of the earth» and «light for the world» (Matt 5:13-14).

There is one last thing, sisters and brothers, with which I want to conclude this already long homily, but it is an example that has filled me with joy and consolation as I witness how God continues to bless us. It is the wonderful example of our dear predecessor, Bishop Luis Chávez y González, who at the age of seventy-five tells me that he is available for work and suggests that he go to Suchitoto.

I told him, «Your gesture moves me, Bishop. You may do as you wish».

«Then I will make my profession of faith».

«But Bishop, who would ever doubt your faith?»

«No, it is the law and it must be done».

Then, standing before the crucifix on my desk, he prayed with the humility of the most humble Christian: «I believe in God, the Father Almighty. . . . I believe in the church. . . . » After the Creed, he told me: «I swear obedience and fidelity to my superior». Who is superior here, sisters and brothers? I felt so small before this marvelous example. Yet there he is. At this moment he is beginning his pastoral ministry with some young priests who are going to help him. But we should not miss this as a gesture of Pentecost. That is the priest; that is the man who while he is alive, even with the infirmities of old age, is ever a sign of the divine presence on earth. Also this week, the elderly Father González died in San Miguel; he was paralyzed for three or more years—five years I believe—bedridden and unable to rise. Yet people went to him for confession because that pained hand, which he raised as he said, «I absolve you from your sins», was a sign of God on earth. As long as there is a breath of life in a priest, there is also the presence of God, the Holy Spirit who desires to make use of humans as a sign of the divine among humans.

In the face of this wave of defamation against the church, sisters and brothers, let us not forget that the church is beautiful. She is like those rocks of the ocean: when they are battered by waves, they are beautified with pearl-like streams; the waves polish the rocks and make them more gorgeous. This is the church at the present time. Let us experience her to the full! Now we have seen the origins of our church in the Spirit of Pentecost, and we have discovered these three marks: first, openness to the Absolute and teaching people to pray; second, the assurance of truth and the prophetic mission to denounce lies and ambiguities and proclaim the truth of the Lord; and third, the guarantee of unity which unites all languages in one love. This is the church. We rejoice, then, that when we compare her now with her origins, it is the same church. Those who want to experience this spiritual openness toward God, this assurance of the truth of her teaching, this unity in diversity, not hating but loving one another—those people are

the church! Those who do not want this set themselves apart; they excommunicate themselves; they are not church, even if they call themselves Catholic.

Brothers and sisters, let us experience the beauty of this hour which defines us. Let us define ourselves. We are church if we live these three characteristics: openness to the Infinite and trust in God; assurance of the truth that the church proclaims, free of doubts; and the guarantee of unity by becoming ever more integrated with the unity of the hierarchy. Even when such action is not called Catholic, this is true Catholic action. We will now proclaim our faith, and as we profess our Creed let us understand how beautiful our church is.