

62

THE VIRGIN MOTHER OF GOD

**Mary, Mother of God
1 January 1978**

Numbers 6:22-27

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

... radio listeners,¹ this biblical greeting God spoke to his people. We Christians today are the spiritual Israel of God; we are the people of God, and these best wishes for the new year are meant for us: «The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!» (Num 6:24-26). No more appropriate or gracious greeting for the new year could be extended to us than these words that the Bible asks us to consider this morning. At the same time, the words of this greeting unite the good will of God to the presence of Mary, the Virgin Mother.

The church celebrates an official feast in honor of Mary, and it is today, January 1. Eight days after Mary gave birth to the Redeemer of the world, the church summons all her children to celebrate the solemnity of Holy Mary, Mother of God. The year begins, then, under the direct blessing of God and under this title that inspires us to place our trust in the power of the Virgin since this power comes from God.

This is the moment when we share the reflection of the archdiocese here in the cathedral and also by radio in all the communities. This sharing is done in a family atmosphere for we feel that the church is our home and that we have a loving Mother who is even kinder than our earthly mothers, who love us so much they want no evil to befall us. Mary radiates all this tenderness of the home so that the church, the archdiocese, and all the communities should feel her always present.

Events of the week

I feel as though we are Mary's children, gathered now around our Mother to talk a little about these days of Christmas and the new year, just as many children are doing in their homes around their parents. I ask my Mother, the Virgin Mary, to bless always the efforts we make from this cathedral as we try to serve the diocese and to give voice to those who have no voice. Surely this service is pleasing to the Blessed Mother since she sees her children suffering and often unable to manifest their sufferings. For example, I received a letter from Tres Ceibas in which the people refute the official reports concerning the disorders that occurred there on the night of December 24 and the afternoon of December 26. The letter says that it was not the

¹ The opening words are not registered on the tape.

Christians who provoked this gunfire but some drunken members of ORDEN². It would be good to investigate these matters before blaming others for such serious offenses³. In this way those who are truly responsible can be held accountable.

We have also received complaints from Aguilares that the house where the sisters live, the parish convent, was invaded by officials who gained access to this house by climbing over the wall from the neighboring lot.

We continue to receive many complaints about people who have been captured but never brought before the courts and who are now among the disappeared. Injustices have also been denounced in factories and on farms regarding bonuses, salaries, and severance pay. Sisters and brothers, I simply want to be a voice that, in the name of the God who loves us all, pleads for a sense of equity and justice in compliance with the law.

The church that meets together as a family also laments the mystery of the bomb that destroyed a well-known store⁴ and also the mystery that surrounds the abductions of Mr. Safie and Mrs. De Chiurato⁵. Hopefully this new year will bring about true freedom and give an aspect of greater tranquility and peace to all those realities that have caused us sadness during the past year.

Life of the church

In this gathering with our Virgin Mother we are also happy to be celebrating today, at the behest of the Holy Father, the World Day of Peace. But since this first day of the year is not the most opportune time for this reflection that is of interest to all people of good will, the Commission for Justice and Peace has organized three days of reflection on January 4, 5, and 6. The Archbishop of Panama, Marcos McGrath, will participate in these reflections along with Dr. Martínez Moreno on the part of El Salvador. These meetings will be held here in the cathedral at 7:00 o'clock in the evening on January 4, 5, and 6.

On January 4 at 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon, Archbishop McGrath will be here to inform all priests, religious, and lay ministers about the preparations that are being made for the third general meeting of the Latin American bishops, which will take place in Puebla, Mexico, in October of this year. All the priests have already been informed, and now I simply renew the invitation to come to the seminary at 4:00 o'clock on the afternoon of January 4. I also extend the invitation to the sisters and to lay people who are interested in knowing more about this activity of the bishops of the whole continent. Archbishop McGrath is the representative of the Central American zone.

I also want to inform you that I received a friendly greeting from the archbishop of Tegucigalpa. We had invited him to the World Day of Peace, but he could not come for reasons

² The Nationalist Democratic Organization (ORDEN), created by the Armed Forces of El Salvador in 1967, became, under the leadership of General José Alberto Medrano, a means for controlling and repressing the *campesinos*.

³ Archbishop Romero challenges the official version published by *El Diario de Hoy*, which blamed members of the Popular Revolutionary Block (BPR) for the violence that took place in Tres Ceibas, in the district of Buena Vista in Suchitoto. See *El Diario de Hoy* (27 December 1977).

⁴ Reference to the store of the Nemtex cloth factory in San Salvador. See *El Diario de Hoy* (31 December 1977).

⁵ Mrs. Elena Margarita Lima, wife of Luis Chiurato, manager of Saltex, was kidnapped on 6 September 1977; no group claimed responsibility and no demand of any kind was made.

beyond his control. He says, however, that he will be with us in spirit and will pray hard for peace between our two countries.

In this week's *Orientación*⁶ I urge you to read carefully the pope's address to the ambassador of El Salvador to the Holy See because the biased accounts in the newspapers do not give an accurate idea of what the pope desires for this country. In the address we will see that what the church is preaching here in El Salvador follows the same line that the pope, through the ambassador, suggests for our government and for our Salvadoran people.

The Holy Father cries out for the construction of a more just order here in El Salvador and for the correction of the evident injustices. He wants the church to be given complete freedom to carry out its mission and preach the word. In this context I also want to tell you some news that is already known to everyone. This week the newspapers announced the appointment of Bishop Revelo as the auxiliary bishop of San Salvador. I have already expressed my opinion about Bishop Revelo. He is a true friend even though many people seek to distort his manner of thinking. I believe that when the pope gives guidelines for the process of evangelization in El Salvador and at the same time names a bishop, that is an expression of his confidence in the preaching in this country, and the bishop designated truly echoes the authentic doctrine of the church. Therefore, I ask you all to embrace with kindness the new auxiliary bishop that the Holy Father has named to help the Archdiocese of San Salvador. Keep in mind the pope's thoughts, which all bishops and all teachers in the church must adhere to in order to be worthy ministers of the church among the people of God to whom they are sent. As I told you when they appointed Bishop Rivera to the diocese of Santiago de María, the pope is expressing his confidence in the person named, and he is therefore guaranteeing that the preaching of these bishops is truly in accord with the actual doctrine of the church. All of us, therefore, must be in tune with the thought of the church, which seeks to be ever more incarnated in the realities of the people.

This week I visited the communities of San Juan Opico, Antiguo Cuzcatlán, and the church of San Esteban in the parish of La Merced. I want to thank everyone for the warm reception I was given, and I congratulate the pastors and their communities for the church activities they are carrying out so magnificently. I also congratulate the various Christian communities that during this Christmas season have reflected at length on the Gospel. This is one of the most beautiful characteristics of our church: it is becoming more biblical and more reflective. The base communities are called such because they are small groups of the faithful who meet together under the guidance of their pastors or the sisters who have pastoral care of these people. In these communities we see many men and women reflecting on their faith and growing stronger in it as they come to understand better what it means to be a member of this church that prolongs Christ in history.

The Protestant communities that belong to the ecumenical commission have been enthusiastically preparing for the eight days of prayer that for many years have been celebrated from January 18 to 25. These days are called the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. I am truly pleased to know that the Catholic Church is not alone but is in communion with our Protestant sisters and brothers in preparing these days of prayer in which we pray as Christ did at the Last Supper: «Father, may all who believe in me be one» (John 17:11). May we

⁶ «Pope Paul VI Sheds Light on Salvadoran Reality» in *Orientación* (1 January 1978).

no longer present to the world the scandal of Christian division but rather be true followers of the authentic Gospel. May we come together in one fold led by the one Shepherd who is Christ.

Finally, as I do on the first of each month, I want to invite you today, January 1, to come to the Divina Providencia Hospital. At 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon there will be a Holy Hour in the beautiful chapel that perhaps many of you have never seen; it invites one to prayer. On the first of each month, together with the sick, we can make an act of faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and offer our prayers for the great needs of our families, our nation, and the church. At the same time we can perform an act of charity that the catechism urges as a work of mercy; we can visit the sick and help out that institution which is not simply a name but a reality: Divine Providence. This hospital depends on donations which come out of charity and love. They have no subsidies but rely completely on the providence that appears through their generous benefactors.

We could continue to comment, sisters and brothers, on many aspects of the church that are drawing Catholics together in the unity Christ desires and warding off the strong temptations to draw away from our church. But these brief notes are enough, joined with the intimate histories of each of you who are present here sharing in this reflection. You and your families, how many problems you have! So much history! I want us to gather all this together in common as we reflect on the kindness and the greatness of this Blessed Mother that the church offers us today as the focus of our reflection: the Virgin Mother of God.

From today's three readings, I extract three points to help us focus on the nearly divine greatness of this «most blessed woman among all women» (Luke 1:42). In the first reading God presents his thinking about the Old Testament, the whole history of Israel. In the second reading Saint Paul places before us the moment when God was about to become human and needed the collaboration of this woman from whom was born God made man. My third thought is from the gospel: the shepherds found Jesus beside Mary who is the sign pointing the way to Christ.

God presents his thoughts about the Old Testament.

We see in the few lines of the first reading everything that God's people meant to him. The Lord spoke to Moses and told him: «This is how you shall bless the Israelites» (Num 6:23), and there followed the blessing that I already gave as a New Year's greeting. What does God think about his people, and what do the people of God think about their God? What is Israel in the Bible? What is the Old Testament? It is a history of God's love; it tells of how with holy promises God steadily prepared the people for redemption. During long centuries he sought to prepare them for the coming of the Son of God who would save humanity. In this way the people became conscious of who this saving God is.

Let us consider how God formed a people so that he could come and save the world. The meaning of the word «people» is most profound. When we say «the people», we should not debase the word. The «people» is an assembly of men and women who through history develop a sense of God-given vocation. Every people has a vocation, just as every person has a vocation.

The vocation of Israel was special. They were a people chosen from among all nations because their founder, Abraham, had received a promise from God. When he was already

elderly and sterile, God told him, «From your descendants I am going to form a people as numerous as the stars of the sky and the grains of sand by the sea» (Gen 15:5). That man could have taken these words as a joke for he was old and had no children: «How can I bring into existence a people so numerous?» (Gen 15:3). «Believe», says the Bible. Abraham believed against all hope. Israel is a people founded on faith, on the faith of Abraham (Gen 15:6). God promised him that through his descendants all peoples would be blessed.

Therefore, when the people of the Old Testament heard expressions like the one we heard today: «Call on the name of the Lord», they were reminded of the covenant made with God, the promises God made to the people. Each time an inhabitant or a foreigner blessed Israel, the people remembered: «You are a blessed people; you have a special relationship with God». This was so true that when the people experienced humiliation, they felt that God's very name was being profaned. And when the people overcame their difficulties and received glory, it was God who was glorified. The relationship that existed between God and Israel was like the relationship between husband and wife. The wife takes the last name of her husband, and the wife's fate is entrusted to the husband. If the wife is faithful, honorable, and glorious, then her husband feels glorified through her. But if the wife is unworthy and unfaithful, then her husband's name is sullied by her conduct. Thus, Israel was God's spouse, and that is why the true Israelites, the true descendants of Abraham, had so much faith in God.

The church offers to us today the most beautiful expression of this people in the woman who is «Mary, daughter of Abraham, descendant of David» (Luke 1:27). In her simple, modest, hidden life as a virgin, she brings together all the currents of history. Therefore, when she sings with gratitude her *Magnificat* to the Lord who has chosen her to be the Mother of the Promised One, she says, «He has helped Israel his servant, even as he promised to Abraham and his descendants forever» (Luke 1:54-55). She felt that all of history was becoming incarnate in her. No one has been as nationalistic as Mary was with her own nation. She sets an example, sisters and brothers. On this day of Mary, Mother of God, let us stress this characteristic: Mary was a patriot who loved her people; she was in tune with her people; she knew their traditions and did not betray the symbols of her homeland. She truly had the heart of a patriot! What a beautiful sign she is, especially at this time when our nation needs true patriotic spirits. Let us not betray the true concerns, the true history, the true redemption of our people in order to accommodate political, economic, or social interests.

This first day of January, fellow Salvadorans, the Virgin calls us to be like her: love your country, study your history, know your identity, and be profoundly Salvadoran. Perhaps not all of us are at fault, and perhaps we are not completely to blame if we do not love our country as dearly as Mary loved her homeland. At times we see our nation as so ugly that we feel out of place in our own country. Many people prefer to go to other lands; they do not feel at home here; they don't sense our traditions; they feel no joy in their own people, in their own landscapes, in the grandeur of their land. And El Salvador is so beautiful! Mary was alive with the countryside of Israel, with the history of Abraham, Moses, David, and the great women of the Bible. The whole history of Israel pulsated in the heart of this patriotic Virgin who was in love with her land.

Let us love our country, sisters and brothers. Let us love it as Mary loved her country even though she knew her people's sins and asked God to have mercy. Still, she loved the grand vocation of the people of God. That is why, when God chose from this people of the promise a woman to bear in her womb his Son who would be a model for human history, he chose that

woman who could best incarnate the whole spirit of her country. Mary was chosen for her holiness and her patriotism. Mary is the Mother of Christ because Christ had to be the child of an entire people, and Mary is the expression of all the people. When Mary told the angel, «I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say» (Luke 1:38), it was the whole chosen people for whom she was speaking. It was precisely for this moment that God had formed a people that was so wonderfully privileged.

The miracles and all the history of the Old Testament had no other objective than to shape the history of a people specially blessed by God so that from them might be born a redeemer as the source of blessings for all other peoples in the world. In this way Mary's vocation as Mother of God and Mother of Christ fulfilled the divine plan of God for the whole nation of Israel. Many of her fellow citizens did not understand this plan. So many false Israelites went astray; they betrayed God's plan for his people by selling themselves to foreign powers or by eagerly worshiping the golden calf. They so offended God by their sins that he told them that he felt the same sorrow a husband feels when he has been betrayed by his wife. That is what the sins of his people make God feel like.

But a remnant was always found in Israel. There was always a small group of people who remained faithful to God's promises. When the fullness of time arrived, this remnant, this small group, had become very small indeed. Consider the moment when Christ was born. Israel had turned its back on God, but there was always a small group, perhaps mostly unknown, where the soul of the people was present: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds who awaited the Redeemer, the apostles who followed Christ. This small group was the nucleus that God would bless even when others made themselves unworthy of their vocation.

My dear Salvadorans, let us hope the same thing does not happen to us. God has a plan of love and salvation for our country, and he is working it out through his church. The Salvadorans who belong to this church, who love her and work with her, are the nucleus; they are the remnant, the small group of the faithful of Israel. God wants to save our people with this remnant which is the church. Let us be church. Let us be like Mary who preserved the vocation of her people so that, when better days come, God will find that we have been faithful to the vocation that he has given to our land.

Mary, God's instrument for making his Son incarnate in history

The second thought is taken from the second reading. Saint Paul, writing to the Galatians, tells them, «When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of woman» (Gal 4:4). We understand this reading in the light of today's feast, Mary the Mother of God, for Mary was God's instrument for making his Son incarnate in history. This was Mary's role.

When the time arrived for the people of Israel to offer a woman so that the Son of God would also be the son of a woman, that is, truly human, Mary was found to be the ideal woman because, as the saints have said, Mary first incarnated God in her mind and in her faith; only when God felt incarnated in Mary's holiness did he choose her. The angel tells her, «You have been found pleasing in the sight of God. Among the millions of women who have formed the people Israel, you alone are blessed among all women, and you will be the mother of the Redeemer» (Luke 1:30). Mary, wishing to save her virginity, asks for an explanation, and she begins to understand a little of the mystery: «The One whom you will conceive will be holy, a work of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). God formed this numerous people of Israel from the

sterility of Abraham and Sarah. So also, your virginity will not be impaired in any way, but you will be the Mother of the One who will become the center of Christian history in the world». In this way, then, Mary helps us to understand who Christ is.

In the fourth century, there arose some erroneous doctrines about Christ. It was said that Mary gave birth to an ordinary child, a child like any other, whom God later chose to be his Son—just as we are born of flesh and then through baptism become children of God. In response the church, charged with guarding the revealed truths of God, met together in councils. The most famous of these councils was that of Ephesus, where it was proclaimed that Mary had given birth to God, who had become incarnate in her womb, and that therefore she should be called the Mother of God, *Theotokos* in Greek. She was not simply the mother of a man who then became divine; she was the Mother of God who took on flesh in her womb. Christ has a divine nature because he is God, and he has a human nature because he was formed in the womb of a woman. But he is only one person, a divine person, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Thus, his divine nature as God and his human nature as man flow together in just one person: God.

We can say that what Christ does as God, God does. We can also say that what Christ does as man, since he is united with God, God does. That is why the council states that God became man, and since that time we humans feel that our nature has been elevated into Christ (AG 3). Christ thinks like a man, but it is God who thinks; he loves with a human heart⁷, but it is God who loves; he works with human hands, but it is God who works with those hands. That is why, when Christ dies on the cross, his sacrifice has infinite value; it is not just the sacrifice offered by any human, but by a man who is at the same time God. His pain and his blood are offered to save all people in the world and to pay for the sins of all people. How great is Christ!

Since the 1960s there has been a renewed interest among theologians to study Christology more in depth. There are two great currents: one is called Christology from above and the other Christology from below. Christology from above considers how God becomes man, while Christology from below considers how man in Christ becomes God.

This is wonderful, sisters and brothers. On this feast of Mary the Mother of God, I pray that she instill in us the true faith that she had when she embraced her child Jesus or when she received his body at the foot of the cross. The sorrowful mother knows that she is caressing the body of God and that this victim offered on the cross is the same child of Bethlehem, God made man and born of her womb. She will ever bear that glorious title: Mother of Christ, that is, Mother of God.

This is the true doctrine about Christ and about Mary. That is why the church desires that during this Christmas season, eight days after Jesus' birth, our reflection should be centered on Mary. We ask Christ to excuse us for this, but Mary does not separate us from Christ. To the contrary, she opens us up to Christ. There is no doubt that a Christmas that did not involve a woman, a woman holding a child in her arms, would mean the birth of a God who became man but without the tenderness of a woman. Likewise at the foot of the cross: a victim who gave his life for the sins of the world but without the arms of a mother to embrace him—yes, this would show the infinite love of God sacrificed for our sake, but it would be lacking the things that women know how to give: tenderness, love, compassion. The passion of Christ

⁷ Corrected from the Spanish text which says, «with the heart of God».

becomes sweeter and more beautiful when we contemplate the sorrowful Mother, and Christmas becomes more enchanting when we contemplate the Mother of the child Jesus.

Let us be deeply devoted to the Virgin, sisters and brothers. And since my friendship with our Protestant sisters and brothers leads me to direct messages to them about the greatness of our Catholic truth, let me tell you, dear Protestant friends, that we feel this longing within you. You need a greater love of Mary. Some of you out of fanaticism have even separated her from the worship of Christ, but Mary takes nothing away from Christ! To the contrary, Mary makes Christ more pleasing, more beautiful, more attractive, just as a jeweler sets a precious stone on a mounting of fine gold and so makes the stone more beautiful than before. Christ is the precious pearl that has no comparison. He is the only Savior between God and human beings. Christ has saved us, not Mary. But God wanted this mounting of gold to accompany Christ, the precious pearl. Mary is like that gold setting in which God presents Christ our Lord to us.

Mary, a sign of Jesus' presence

And so, sisters and brothers, my third thought is taken from the words of Saint Luke in this morning's gospel: «The shepherds went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger» (Luke 2:16). What a beautiful reality! They found Mary and through her found Jesus. This is my third thought: Mary is a sign of Jesus' presence.

When the dawn appears, it is a sign that the sun will also soon appear. So too, when we are aware of Mary's presence, it is a sign that Christ is near. Mary leads us to Christ. That is the reason for her existence. We now realize that the moon is nothing more than an immense mass of lifeless rock, but when the sun illuminates it and this immense rock shines bright over the earth, how beautiful the moon's light is! This is Mary: by nature a woman of our race, but when invaded by divine beauty, Mary is the precious moon who sheds her peaceful light of motherly tenderness on our days and on our nights.

In Mary we are always referred to Christ. Mary is the sign of Christ's presence. That is why, sisters and brothers, when we say that Mary is the mother of the church, we are also saying that the church and Mary are signs of Christ's presence. If the church saves, it is because she prolongs the saving mission of Christ. If Mary is the source of inspiration and love in our prayers, it is because she makes visible the power, the tenderness, the redemption of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Mary is the sign of Christ's presence, let us not forget it! When devotion to Mary begins to die in our hearts, we have reason to be fearful. It is like the disappearance of the star leading the magi to Christ: we get lost. When devotion to Mary suffers an eclipse, then the light of the divine sun, Christ the Lord, also goes into eclipse. But when there is tenderness and confidence in the hearts of the people and every Christian family, when there is love that prays to Mary, then Christ is near and those souls are not lost.

This morning on this day of the Virgin, Mother of God and the Mother of Christ, I address everyone who might have given in to modern trends and lost some of the tenderness we learned from our mothers while praying to the Virgin Mother. Let us try to recover this devotion and renew our hearts. No matter how great someone becomes in history, every person still has the heart of a child. Before their mothers, no matter how old they are, people still feel like children and are not ashamed of being childlike.

So also with Mary who is our Mother. The simplicity of our rosary, the simplicity of our pilgrimages to Mary's shrines, our visits to the images of Mary—why not fall on our knees? We don't do this with a sense of idolatry but with the same tenderness with which we often kneel before our mothers in order to speak with them more intimately. All these little things—I say «little things» because that's what our mothers call them: «little things». They are the candy treats that she gives us or that a child brings her from a party; they are insignificant little things, but they contain all the tender love of children. What I wish for, sisters and brothers, is for there to be a renewal in our archdiocese of this devotion that is so traditional and proverbial among our families. In many homes the rosary is no longer prayed, and in many families the name of Mary is no longer invoked. And forgive me for saying this, dear Christian communities, but in your communities I have often felt sad when you offer beautiful, spontaneous prayers to God and to Christ but do not mention Mary. Let us renew our awareness of her presence because her presence is a sign that Christ is near, that he is with us.

Let us be humble like the shepherds; let us be sincere like the three magi from the East who in the presence of Mary felt like children, for they also recognized her as the Mother of the Redeemer. May this feast of Mary's divine maternity renew our faith and our awareness of Mary. The Council gives us a marvelous warning: «Let us abstain from all exaggerations, but let us not minimize these realities» (LG 67). This is the balance the Council asks of us: our devotion to the Virgin should avoid fanaticism that holds up Mary as a redeeming goddess—that is not what Mary is. Mary is the Mother of the Redeemer, a creature of God the Creator. At the same time let us avoid the contrary position that says we don't need Mary and so speaks of her in disparaging or irreverent ways. Both extremes must be avoided. There is no need for exaggeration because she does not need exaggeration. She is so great! Nor should we make her seem small and insignificant because she is not. God himself recognizes her as Mother of his Son and wants her to be an intimate collaborator in the redemption of humankind, the dispenser of all his graces.

My sisters and brothers, this is the message of the church on this first day of January. My desire is that as members of this people of God we may all this year be blessed in Christ. He was the fruit Mary brought to the whole world for the people of God to which we belong. Let us attempt this year to create a true church such as God desires, a chosen people that is light and salvation, together with Mary who is a member of this people.

⁸ 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

⁸ The greeting and opening words were not registered on the tape of the homily.

Read or listen to the homilies of St Oscar Romero at romerotrust.org.uk

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.

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 baptism 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

St Oscar Romero, Mary, Mother of God, 1 January 1978

because all those who are nourished by the eternal word become immortal in their souls. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, when the community....⁹

⁹ The final words were not registered on the tape of the homily.