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CATECHESIS

25 November 1979

Dear sisters and brothers, I am happy that this new evangelizing impulse of the Holy Spirit is flourishing in our countries, concretely in these two dioceses¹. I thank God for having chosen you to renew in our country an activity which is intimately linked to evangelization but which, due to the vicissitudes of history, has often been neglected. Among the various kinds of renewal encouraged by the Second Vatican Council is that of restoring to the catechumenate the place of honor that it has always had in the church's evangelization, since catechesis and the catechumenate are a vital part of our evangelizing mission.

By way of leaving you a message during my visit, I urge you to carry out your catechesis and your catechumenate in the way the church proposes. You know that two years ago the synod of bishops met in Rome to discuss precisely the theme of catechesis and that recently the pope published a document on catechesis which is a result of that synod². This, I believe, should be a document of primary importance for you, one that you will study and assimilate. The pope explains that catechesis can be understood in terms of several comparisons, which I will explain here.

Catechesis and kerygma

As you know, the kerygma is the primary proclamation about Christ, the message that moves the human heart to conversion and commitment to Christ. Kerygma is that first, though it is not enough; it must be followed by catechesis, which develops the faith that has arisen in baptism and in the following of Jesus. When the bishops met in Rome, they said that in many countries, including our Latin American nations, people have lost a sense of the connection that exists between the initial call to follow Christ and the subsequent need to know Jesus Christ and his message better. That is the task of catechesis and the catechumenate.

Since at that time there was no well-organized catechumenate that prepared people for following of Christ and since many of us were baptized and have perhaps lived our lives without hearing about the kerygma, the bishops proposed a more structured catechumenate. We have our baptism, but our lives are often pagan, so there is an urgent need to respond to the call of Christ in ways we didn't before. By means of a good catechumenate people can have a true encounter with Christ.

We are not going to deny the sad reality that many baptized people have not heard the kerygma. They were baptized only as a ritual, as a custom. That's why in our archdiocese we are insisting strongly on the need for people to prepare for this great

¹ This homily was given to members of the Neo-Catechumenal Movement of the Dioceses of San Salvador and Santiago de María, who met in the Instituto Rinaldi, Planes de Renderos, from 23 to 25 November 1979. Since the original recording is not available, this text is based on the transcription made by the archdiocesan office of San Salvador. *Archbishop Óscar A. Romero: His Thought*, Archbishop's Office of San Salvador, 1989, Vol. VIII, 7-11.

² *Catechesi Tradendae*, Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on Catechesis in Our Time, 1979.

sacrament with pre-baptismal talks. We shouldn't suppose that the catechumenate will take place only after baptism.

But, thank God, we have recovered something that got turned around. It is never too late to know the Lord and to try to make up for what wasn't done before by being more fervent now. In earlier days the kerygma was something we didn't have, we didn't know, we didn't follow, but now the catechumenate gives us the opportunity both to experience the encounter with Christ which is the kerygma and, at the same time, to follow it up with good catechesis. I believe that the catechumenal movement is doing a wonderful job of following up the proclamation of the Gospel, to which we previously had not paid sufficient attention, with the more systematic formation which is catechesis.

Catechesis and sacrament

There is something else that we must urgently attend to in our pastoral ministry and our evangelization. The practice of receiving sacraments without catechesis amounts to empty ritualism. For a great many people baptism is nothing more than a social ceremony. They seek out godparents and they prepare festivities, but very few understand baptism as the incorporation of the human child into the life of Christ, into his death and resurrection. The same goes for the other sacraments. So many people get married without knowing anything about the profound meaning of Christ's union with the church, which is made present in the union of man and woman in matrimony.

Catechesis, therefore, must lead people to the sacraments. Catechesis without sacraments results simply in speculation and rationalization. When catechesis encounters sacrament, then it prepares people to receive a sign which is actually an encounter with God. The catechumenate then turns out to be a very rich experience, a catechesis that guides us toward the efficacious signs of our encounter with God's presence and grace.

You all play a very valuable role in the parishes Father has mentioned. Your job is to revitalize the catechesis so that it does not consist only of reflection and memorization but is a catechesis that guides people toward the sacraments. Help people to receive the sacraments with full awareness and respect, as a way of worshiping the Lord who is found in the sacramental signs. It shouldn't be just a case of evangelization first and then sacramentalization, as we used to call it. It has to be the two things together. True evangelization leads us to encounter Christ in the sign of the church and in his sacraments.

Catechesis and community

Another relationship I would like to impress on you is the one that exists between catechesis and community. Religion is not meant to be experienced individualistically but in community. In earlier times the catechumenate preparation was done as a community, and we thank God that this practice is now returning. As Father mentioned, we live in parishes and dioceses, and each community presents its children to the church. We have that beautiful comparison of the church with the Blessed Virgin: the church, while remaining virgin, is fertile and continually brings forth children by baptism and the other sacraments. In particular, the night of the paschal vigil is a moment when the church, as virgin and mother, gives birth and is enriched with a new generation of our children.

As community, as parish, and as diocese, the church feels an obligation to nourish the faith of these children who have been born to her, and to provide them the warmth of community so that they can live their Christian faith to the full. Catechumens and Christians should never try to live their faith in isolation. They must always be concerned about community; they should help their community deepen its faith and extend its missionary outreach. They shouldn't rest content as long as they see the many baptized persons who haven't grasped the richness of their baptism. What the apostles did was to take that treasure and extend it by creating communities and living in community.

Today in our country we urgently need that sense of community. Sometimes there is confusion between Christian community and political groups. At times no clear distinction is made because the community members don't deepen their faith and so get confused. I state in my pastoral letter that often our people, especially the youth, mature earlier in their politics than they do in their Christianity³. Not only do they give their lives a political dimension, but they make it almost the only dimension of their lives, leaving them little time for Christianity. The reverse should be the case: the Christian dimension should be primary and should determine the secular vocation that God gives each person—how one relates to the situation of the country. If God gives some people a political vocation, let them live it as Christians. Then we'll have the politicians we need, men and women who are maturing in Christian community, in the Gospel, in their faith, in their commitment to Christ, and in their following of the Lord. This maturation will not allow them to betray the Lord by corrupting the laws and the politics of the country. Let them become the great agents of the transformation that our country needs now more than ever. Let them be a light on the mountain for the people of God, as the Bible says (Matt 5:14). Nowadays, when there is so much confusion and there are so many groups and demands, the Christian community should feel like a bright beacon imparting light and guidance to everything that is happening around us.

With all my heart I bid you and I beg you as pastor to carry the catechumenate wherever you go, to the parishes where you are living and even further beyond. Take to the people your catechumenate, your biblical reflection, your understanding of sacrament, and your Christian commitment to form community—not a community closed off and pleased with itself, but a church community that leads people to Jesus Christ in order to serve the world; a community that tries to illuminate itself with the light of God and to shine that light all around; a community that is ever more committed to Christ in order to be ever more committed to Christ's redemption among the peoples in the midst of the world.

These are the three relationships I entrust to you as a worthy mission. They fully correspond to the spirit of the catechumenal movement. The first is between kerygma, which is conversion and encounter with Christ, and catechetical formation and deepening of faith—well-ordered catechesis. Second, there is the catechumenate and sacraments. Let the catechumens never be far from the sacramental life; let them find meaning in their Eucharist, in their confession, and in all the other holy sacraments. Let them also esteem the sacrament of matrimony, which many of you have permanently embraced. Let them experience the sacraments in such a way that the catechumenal formation leads them at the same time to a sacramental life. And third there is catechesis, catechumenate, and community: community as serving society, community as light and ferment, community as salt of the earth and light of the world (Matt 5:13-14).

³ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 49.

All this we will experience together with Jesus Christ, for here in the Eucharist we find the center of our lives. Here Christ makes ever more real for us the words, «Those who give their lives...», and he empowers us to give ourselves to this world that is so needy and cold because it lacks Christ. Our mission is to bring Christ back to the world.