

17

RESPONSIBILITY FOR GOD'S KINGDOM

Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

26 June 1977

1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21

Galatians 4:31b, 5:1, 13-18

Luke 9:51-62

... this sweetest of names,¹ which is a constant theme in the whole Gospel message. Christ wanted to build this church in order to gather together over the centuries all those who believe in him and to make them the agents of his redemptive work. All of you—dear lay folk, men and women religious, brother priests—we are all the people of God, and on our shoulders rests the responsibility for this kingdom of God. No one should be just a spectator. All of us, according to our particular vocation, have to be in the arena, struggling to implant this kingdom of God in the world.

The Christian vocation means detachment

So I begin our reflection today with Elisha, who is called through the prophet Elijah. As a symbolic gesture, Elijah throws his cloak over Elisha and invites him to collaborate in his difficult prophetic mission. Elisha leaves everything, asking permission only to say farewell to his family. He kills his plowing oxen, burns the yoke and the plow, and offers a holocaust to God (1Kgs 19:19-21). What a noble response of a prophet who knows that God does not want a divided heart! All or nothing!

The gospel then presents us with three vocations: one man wants to bid farewell to his family, and another asks permission to bury his father and is told by Christ, «Let the dead bury their dead» (Luke 9:60). In the Eastern languages this expression does not sound as harsh as it does to us. Certainly if this man's father had died, Jesus would have allowed him to bury his father. Here, however, the man seems to be saying, «I will follow you, but only when I no longer have any family commitments». It is this type of mediocrity that is repugnant to Jesus. If you are not able to detach yourself now, you will not be able to do so later. To the other person Jesus says, «No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks to what has been left behind is fit for the kingdom of God» (Luke 9:62). This saying means that if people are satisfied with their past and contented with what they have accomplished, then they are comfortable and unwilling to detach themselves in order to walk with Christ toward a difficult future; they are not worthy of the kingdom of heaven.

At this time, sisters and brothers, when there are so many needs in the church, it is wonderful to hear from men and women who, like Elisha, express themselves in

¹ The greeting and initial words were not recorded on the homily tape.

simple language through the letters they send us. It is clear that they have been converted and have felt the presence of the church that calls them and expects them to take up their own ministry. I give thanks to the Lord because at this time there are many hearts that are awakening from a state of lethargy. But there are also many people who are mediocre, like those whom Jesus rejected. They want to be comfortable with their families and their possessions. They are not capable of detachment, and the Christian vocation demands detachment.

To the one who told Jesus, «I will follow you, Lord, wherever you go», he gives a mysterious response: «Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of God has nowhere to rest his head» (Luke 9:57-58). This expression reveals what God requires of those who want to follow Jesus: «I offer you no comforts, not even the nest that the birds have or the cave that the foxes have. The Son of Man lives detached from things. The church that I have founded has no need to be supported by others». As the bishops said at Medellín, the church must be detached from all power, whether economic or political, and from any social class. The church should be self-reliant (Matt 14:18). We will always keep repeating this, sisters and brothers, but this does not mean hatred toward any social class. On the contrary, it means love for all classes. May people truly realize that this church is necessary and that she helps people by saving them; it is not the people who do the church the favor of supporting her. The church does not need earthly supports, because she is of God; she makes herself present to all social classes so that all who want to be saved can enter the church without conditions and thus give themselves over to God. This is the church we want. And I am truly pleased that this church is detaching herself from those ties that perhaps were making her dependent. The church wants to be free.

A free church, trusting in God

Here we reflect on the other reading we are offered today. No one who speaks of freedom has expressed this idea with as much depth and eloquence as Saint Paul does in his letter to the Galatians. This letter of Saint Paul deals with justification—how people are not justified by earthly works but by their faith in Christ. When they fulfill their tasks and their duties for Christ our Lord, it is Christ who gives value to these earthly tasks. Those Jewish Christians were deceived who believed that the church founded by Christ had to support herself on the works of Moses and on earthly things. Christ came to proclaim a church totally free of the things of earth, a church that trusted only in the power that justifies, in God, in grace. This is a church that transcends; a church that does not offer paradise here on earth; a church that, like Christ, does not offer her followers even the nest of a bird or the cave of a fox; a church that finds all her joy and her efficacy in her own freedom.

Saint Paul then says, «For freedom Christ has set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery» (Gal 5:1). My sisters and brothers, this is a memorable phrase: «You were called for freedom» (Gal 5:13a). How beautiful is this motto of the church: freedom! It is a word that is repeated a lot today, but a word that, when analyzed in the light of the Gospel and the word of God, has a very difficult content. Saint Paul begins by making this clear: «Do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh» (Gal 5:13b). Freedom is not license. Freedom does not allow me to do whatever I want. Freedom is the justification of those who have begun by

freeing themselves from sin, for there is the root of all evil. This voice of freedom is framed in the message of justification.

To understand justification let us look at today's gospel, the last part of Saint Luke's Gospel. It begins by narrating how Christ travels toward Jerusalem, where he will accomplish the great work of liberation. By the Father's plan he marches firmly toward the sacrifice of the cross and from there toward the freedom of the resurrection. There are many trials to pass through beforehand, but Christ will give us freedom. Only by his dying on the cross can humankind achieve true freedom, because human sin can be forgiven only with the redemption of Christ.

First of all, sisters and brothers, the freedom that we ought to desire cannot prescind from Christ. Only Christ is the liberator because liberation comes from removing sin, becoming free of sin. That is why the church, spiritual and religious in her essence, has to preach above all else penance and conversion. If people are not converted from their sin, they are not themselves free nor can they free others. Therefore the church confirms their liberation. She is not communist. Let this be quite clear because I have been accused of being a communist. The church never preaches communism, because the church, if she wants to free people, is rooted in Christ. This is what we have always preached: that the freedom that the church desires is, above all else, a freedom based on justification, on repentance of sin, on detachment from selfishness, and on abandoning everything from which derive the other consequences of sin.

Why do we have this difference of social classes, this unjust distribution of goods, this non-participation in the common good of the republic to which all Salvadorans have a right, this maltreatment in the dungeons, these tortures, and these humiliations of the people? They are all the product of sin. If our lives were justified and there were no sin in our soul, then no one would dare to take up arms against another. If we lived with a Christian conscience, if we were truly Christians, then there would be no abuse of power. Instead there would be Christian politicians who would sincerely seek justification and the true good of the kingdom of God that makes nations happy. That is why the church is caught in conflict: because she preaches this kingdom of love and freedom that begins with freedom from sin.

Otherwise, sisters and brothers—and here is another aspect of today's gospel—violence will arise. As the pope said, «Violence is neither Christian nor evangelical».² Why do we live in this environment of violence that makes us fearful even to walk the streets? What right does any organization have—true or false, it matters not, but their message is important—what right does any organization have to threaten people with death or demand that the Jesuits leave? This is the voice of violence! Christianity in no way justifies violence. And now that I am on this point, I want to tell you, sisters and brothers, that the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus,³ is not a sect separated from the church,

² PAUL VI, Allocution in the Mass for the Day of Development in Bogotá (23 August 1968).

³ On 21 June 1977, the White Warriors' Union (UGB) published a document (No. 6) which said literally: «All Jesuits without exception should leave the country for good within the period of thirty days from today. The shameful instigators of the murderous FPL have no right to continue poisoning our people. . . . If they refuse our order in the period indicated, the systematic and immediate execution of all the Jesuits

nor is it a group of men who have nothing to do with the church. Even if it were so, we have already given sufficient evidence of our universal concern for human dignity and the right to life. We have argued for the defense of those rights even for people who are not of the church. Remember the case of the kidnapping of the minister of foreign relations: the church advocated for him not because he was a man of the church but because he was a man, a man like those who are held as prisoners and who demand respect for their rights. Those prisoners who were making demands are also men, and all those who are suffering are human persons. The church has advocated for these rights and for that freedom. So even if the Jesuits were not part of the church, it would be the church's duty to reject such disgraceful violence and defend them. But much more so in this case, and what I mean is this: whoever touches a Jesuit touches the church!

The church is an institution founded by Christ, and diverse vocations arise in the following of Christ. Right here in this country we have many congregations: Jesuits, Dominicans, Salesians, etc. And we have many religious orders of women: Sisters of the Sacred Heart, Oblates of Divine Love, Salesians, and myriad other organizations that are doing much good for the church. Both men and women religious reveal the face of the church through their good work in universities, in primary and secondary schools, in catechetical programs, and in hospitals. All of this is the church, and those who touch one of these congregations touch the face of the church; with their sacrilegious hands they buffet the face of the church.

If anything unfortunate should happen to the Jesuits, the whole church would feel the offense, and the reaction could be very serious. We want to make an urgent plea for sanity! This is no joking matter, not even a joke in poor taste. This is a serious threat tinged with blood and violence. It is all the uglier when it is a brutal response to reasonable speech. I want to make it clear that the statements that the Jesuits have published in these days follow the doctrine of the church.⁴ As Catholics we are all committed to this church teaching which the Jesuits have taken very seriously and which other unworthy Catholics do not want to heed.

Three types of violence

This teaching of the church is precisely what today's gospel passage is asking us to reflect on. Take notice how Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem, and when passing through Samaria he encounters political differences, political passion, because the Samaritans know that Christ is going to the capital of Judea (Luke 9:52-53). The Samaritans were political enemies of the Jews, and since Jesus is a Jew going to Jerusalem, they don't want to give him lodging. In treating him so, they abuse their right of property. This is a form of violence, violence that arises from the abuse of rights; it is what the bishops at Medellín (M 2,16) called «institutionalized violence». In the face of such violence there arises another form of violence: the violence of the sons of thunder, the Boanerges. The apostles James and John are furious, and they tell Jesus, «They do not want to give you or us lodging. Do you want us to call down fire from heaven on this city?» (Luke 9:54). This is violence! Christ does not approve of either type of violence.

remaining in the country will be carried out until all of them have been done away with». See «El Salvador. Time is Up on Death Threat Ultimatum Against Jesuits» in *Ecclesia* (13 August 1977).

⁴ «The Jesuits Address the Salvadoran People», ECA 344 (1977) 434-450.

The gospel tells us clearly that Jesus rebuked them. In another gospel passage Christ explains his reason: «Do no violence, for the Son of Man has not come to condemn but to save» (Luke 19:10). The only violence that Jesus allows is the violence that he himself is going to suffer: giving his blood, letting himself be assaulted and killed, because only his blood can give life to the world. There is no other blood that can be legitimately shed apart from that which love poured out to save us.

Consequently, sisters and brothers, there are three types of violence. There is the institutionalized violence of the Samaritans who as proprietors refuse to give lodging to the pilgrim. Institutionalized violence is that which oppresses people by abusing their rights. I also want to clarify this idea of authority. Authority is a right, and it is true that the Bible tells us that all authority comes from God (Rom 13:1). When Jesus stood before Pilate and Pilate said to him, «Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?» Jesus responded, «You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above» (John 19:10-11). All power comes from above, but it is precisely for that reason, because it comes from God, that those who have power must use it according to God. When authority abuses the rights of God or violates the commandments of God's law, for example, not to kill, not to torture, not to do evil (Exod 20:13), then that authority has gone beyond its limits. This is exactly why Peter, who learned the doctrine from Jesus, told the authorities in Jerusalem, «We cannot obey men before obeying God» (Acts 5:29).

Authority comes from God, and therefore we obey it, but only as long as it stays within the limits of God's law. If a priest, moved by some mean spirit, proclaims that «all authority comes from God» and therefore is respectable in every instance, then he is manipulating that phrase. It is sad to see how such misconstrued phrases are transmitted through all the mass media. The media are ingenious in this regard whenever the church falls into some defect. That is why we have to be very careful, dear sisters and brothers, when we study the doctrine of the Lord. A certain phrase of the Gospel should not make us forget other parts of divine revelation.

This violence that is abusive of power or of people's rights is the violence that becomes institutionalized. In response there arises what has arisen in Latin America today: the bishops of Medellín tell us that a sign of the times is the universal desire for liberation (M Introduction 4). The church feels that this desire of the people of Latin America comes from the Holy Spirit who is inspiring in them a sense of their dignity and making them aware of the misery in which they live. Therefore, the church cannot be deaf to their cries. She must give a response, but a response that is in no way violent. Because of this situation of violence which becomes institutionalized, there arise liberation movements apart from the church; there is class struggle, hatred, and armed violence. That is not Christian either. The church must prepare her people—and I am doing this at the present time—to live in the true freedom of the children of God. They must understand that the root of the distress of our continent is in the heart of each person, in sin, and that Christians must do violence to themselves in order to live according to the Gospel.

When Jesus speaks to the man who wants to say farewell to his family, he issues a call to do violence to self: «Let the dead bury their dead» (Luke 9:60). Violence to self means being detached from everything. Likewise when he says to the other man, «No

one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is worthy of the kingdom of heaven» (Luke 9:62). This is the violence that one must do to oneself in order never to be content with the mediocrities of life, in order to excel and be better. The church does not fight for economic or political freedom so that people can «have more». This is quite secondary for the church. Yes, the church seeks people's well-being on this earth, but with a hope for heaven. That is why Jesus taught the church to say that we cannot serve two masters (Matt 6:24). All those who make the things of earth into idols which they adore have turned their backs on God. We should kneel before God and turn our backs on everything that is not God. We should make use of things—money, power, wealth—to serve the common good, to do good to others, but always looking to God, the one who is to be served. What is dreadful in these situations is the idolatry that separates us from God, even when materially we call ourselves Christians.

My dear sisters and brothers, at this time when the church is recovering her identity, we all have to examine ourselves to see if we have understood what it means to belong to this poor, pilgrim, detached church, a church that relies not on earthly powers but on Christ, with her hope placed on God. We are trying in this way to build a better world because the kingdom of God must begin here right now, but not with simple brute force or the kind of violence that we invent and institutionalize. No, not that way! Christ calls us to act with love. That is why Saint Paul in the same letter concludes with a phrase that I would like all of us to remember during these days. Sisters and brothers, Saint Paul writes, «If you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another» (Gal 5:15). This is the suicide of our country: we are biting one another and destroying ourselves. So what is the remedy? I will tell you, as the word of God tells us today, «You shall love your neighbor as yourself. . . . Live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law» (Gal 5:14b,16-18). This means, then, that love is the power of the church.

Let us make an effort, sisters and brothers, to forgive, an effort to love. Let us begin by loving God and not offending him; let us leave sin and love our neighbor even if the neighbor has offended us. This is the power that will create a better world, what the pope has called the «civilization of love». ⁵ Let us proclaim this civilization and make every effort to build it. Is it possible that El Salvador is not civilized? Does being civilized mean publishing and broadcasting by radio such brutal, savage threats as those that have recently come out? That is a low grade of civilization, when people are unable to see the light of reason in certain documents! If reason is to be combated with reason, why threaten with arms and with death those who reasonably communicate the message of the church? The only road is the road of conversion, not to what the Jesuits say, but to what the Jesuits teach, because they learned it from the church and the church learned it from God.

This then, is the only road by which we can escape from the incivility in which we live and in which we are destroying one another. Saint Paul invites us to be led by the Spirit, and this is summed up in that brief saying of Christ: «Love one another» (John 15:17). Let us make an effort, sisters and brothers, and we will make of our church a

⁵ PAUL VI, «If You Want Peace, Defend Life», message for the World Day of Peace (1 January 1977).

true torch of freedom, the freedom which was proclaimed today in the word of God and which we now profess with Christian faith.