

11

VOCATIONS TO THE PRIESTHOOD

**Vigil of Pentecost
Church of María Auxiliadora
28 May 1977**

Brother priests, and all my dear sisters and brothers.

This is a scene that marvelously reflects today's biblical readings. Like the apostles gathered around Mary, the Mother of Jesus, we prepare for our Pentecost. The virginal breath of Mary is felt in this sanctuary where Mary receives such devout honors, but this morning she ought to feel very specially honored. I feel, as I believe each of you here present feels, that we constitute a small image of the universal church, and we feel that Mary protects us as mother of the church. With her warmth and protection Mary joins us as we implore the Holy Spirit who is intensely renewing our own church.

When the Second Vatican Council studied the theme of seminaries, they began their document with these two famous words, *Optatam Totius*. «The desired renewal of the whole church», they wrote, «depends in great part upon a priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ, and [this Council] solemnly affirms the critical importance of priestly formation» (OT Introduction). The two great agents of the renewal of the church and consequently of the renewal of the world are the Holy Spirit, renewing the church from within, and our priests, acting as instruments of the Spirit of God. All others, religious and lay, form the people of God who are led, sanctified, and instructed by the priestly ministry so that they become «salt of the earth» and «light of the world» (Matt 5:13-14).

That is why our former bishops wanted to unite the celebration of the seminary, now called Seminary Day, with the feast of Pentecost. Through the wonderful initiative of those responsible for the seminaries, we are experiencing our Pentecost this morning with these young men who are preparing for the priesthood. We were counting the students here in El Salvador and found that there are about four hundred seminarians in San José de la Montaña and the various seminaries of the religious communities. These are young men who have been called by God, and they are preparing for this renewal of the world that is the duty of those who bear the responsibility of priestly ministry. Today, then, these young seminarians in our seminaries form the center of our loving family. We direct our thoughts and reflections toward them this morning, knowing that as the people of God we are all interested not only in this holy intimacy of the Spirit who comes to us on Pentecost, but also in these priests who are human instruments of the Spirit of God. In these times that are so difficult for our clergy, we feel more than ever the need to have our own priests.

We want to express homage, thanks, and admiration to the priests who have come from other regions to lend us their vital collaboration. We need them! That is why

we regret that their collaborative presence is being taken away from us. We send them our love and gratitude, not only we who are their brother priests, but also the communities who feel sorely orphaned by having their leaders taken from them. We hope that one day they will return,¹ proven innocent of the false accusations and defended from all the slanders, so that like the apostles they may continue to preach the Lord's word.

But they are aware of the supplementary role they are playing. They are the first to understand that when there are sufficient native priests among us their presence will not be so necessary, even though the universal church always needs this constant circulation of pastors, just as an organism needs the circulation of blood which carries oxygen and brings life to the whole body. Therefore, there is no such thing as «foreign» priests; there are Catholic priests, there are preachers of God's kingdom, there are sanctifiers of the people. They have more merit when they come from other cultures and regions to learn about our idiosyncrasies and our way of life in order to convey to us, by means of our own culture, the holiness that Christ wants in all people, the Gospel that is life, and the grace that is holiness in our hearts.

Mission of the priest

For this is the mission of the priest: to make holy, to teach, and as pastors to lead the community toward unity, toward holiness, toward God. We distinguish between priests as foreign or native only when we lose sight of this goal or when we confuse the sublime goals of preaching human dignity and defending human rights with other more earthly political interests. Let us hope that one day we learn this solid, sacred, legitimate language of the church that promotes and orients human beings, not only in spirit, but in their whole being, in all the complexity of their community, social, and family lives, and in all the demands of this earthly existence. In this way we will be sanctifying temporal interests and giving primacy to the spiritual transcendence that elevates not only individuals but also all institutions and the whole earth to the freedom of the children of God. For the destiny of creation is to place all things at the feet of the universal kingdom, and then Christ will one day place his kingdom at the Father's feet. This is done by priests, the messengers of Christ the King, who seek to hasten the hour when Christ the King is truly respected and when his laws become the norm for political, economic, and social life. It is not that we meddle in politics; rather, we bring the kingdom of God to the kingdoms of humankind, for as the pope says in one of his famous phrases, «a humanism closed off from other realities becomes inhuman» (PP42).

Therefore, my dear sisters and brothers, we want these young seminarians, both diocesan and religious, to be solidly formed in these holy ideas of the contemporary church. We want them to be priests of their time, priests who defend the rights of God among men and women created in the image of God, priests who are heralds of the Gospel in which Christ declared, «The truth will set you free» (John 8:32). This is a

¹ Archbishop Romero is referring to the foreign priests expelled from the country by the government during the first five months of 1977. Between 22 February and 19 May eight priests were expelled and a further seven forbidden to reenter the country. See «Why the Image of El Salvador is Being Disfigured Abroad» in *Orientación* (19 June 1977).

Gospel that is unfettered, an authentic Gospel of renewal. At the same time, may they be true exemplars of the Gospel they preach, holy priests whose very presence draws people toward Christ, priests who in their communities are a true ferment of the Christian life that is so necessary today. Let us thank God, sisters and brothers, that we have very good priests. We want our seminarians to study their sublime ideal.

Priestly people

One day, says the Council, this whole priestly people—religious women and men, married people, university students, professionals, *campesinos*, workers, market vendors—all who are part of this people of God must divinize the work of their hands, for they are all priestly people (LG 10). You give divine meaning to all your work by offering it as a host to God. You are priests, but your priesthood remains truncated and pointless unless there is an individual chosen from this same people and anointed with the powers of Christ and in his name. He it is who brings to the altar under the symbols of bread and wine the work of the laborer, the work of the professional, all the work of the people of God. He can say to God as he lifts the paten and the chalice, «We offer you this host and this wine, fruit of the earth and work of human hands».

At that moment the priestly people feel the culmination of their priesthood because there is a sacred minister who changes their work into bread and wine and then changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, into the glory of God, into the salvation of the world. That is what priests are prepared for: giving divine meaning to the priestly work of the world. That is why a community is not complete as long as there is not a representative of God who gives a divine orientation to people's lives and divine meaning to their work. In every town and village and neighborhood the people offer their work and their lives to God through a priest mediating between God and themselves. That is why having priests is for the benefit of the whole people of God.

Cultivating priestly vocations

My sisters and brothers, I would like today to be a day of reflection so that we can reflect each according to his or her particular vocation. We have groups of seminarians, aspirants to the religious life, novices of religious communities. We also have older folk, religious women, priests with their bishops, and lay persons: married couples, students, young men and women. I invite all of you to reflect, each according to your role and your particular vocation, on the need we have for priests, priests who will give to religious life and lay life their true meaning as God desires and as the church desires. The Council teaches us that «the duty of fostering vocations falls on the whole Christian community» (OT 2). The Christian community must foster vocations by living lives that are fully Christian. The Council goes on to outline various categories of vocation.

I want to begin by talking to you about my own obligation as pastor. «It is the duty of bishops to encourage their people to foster vocations and to see that all their energies and efforts are closely coordinated, sparing themselves no sacrifice in the efforts to help, as fathers, those who in their judgment have been called to God's service» (OT 2). This obligation falls first on me, but what can I do all alone in the tremendous responsibility of a diocese? Even though our enemies mock these words of mine, yet they are true: when I am missing a priest, it is as if I have an arm cut off. I

affirm this truth just as I also affirm the following: whoever touches a priest touches the pastor, because without them, without the priests and the pastors, the bishop is mutilated. The persecution of the church mutilates the bishop, and therefore we need to cultivate vocations. I want to say to you, my beloved seminarians, you are the hope of the hierarchy.

The sacred Council then calls upon all priests to participate in this work: «All priests should show their apostolic zeal by fostering vocations as much as possible, and should draw the hearts of young men to the priesthood by the example of their humble, hardworking and happy lives, as well as by their mutual charity and cooperation» (OT 2). What mystery there is in us priests! Behind every priestly vocation there is the figure of another priest. If we were to ask about the experience of those of us already ordained, I would recount my own personal experience, and I would find in the origins of my vocation the priestly figures of the missionaries who came to my town and the warmth of the pastors toward children. Each one of us could speak about some priest who inspired the sense of vocation in our lives. Now that we priests are being persecuted, maligned, and even killed, we feel these priestly figures grow even larger, so that many young men feel the impulse of vocation.

I hope that this time of reflection has been useful to the many young people who have not yet thought much about their future lives. Perhaps God is calling them at this time when they see so many parishes without a priest, when they see priests being murdered, when they see that something there is of great value, because what is not valued is not persecuted. The mission of priests must be awesome because they are treating them as they treated Jesus, as they treated the apostles. The ministry of the church will always be persecuted; we should not be surprised when the church is persecuted; it is one of her historical marks. We priests must be ready for martyrdom, for persecution. I love to hear today's young seminarians say that they feel excited about being priests and that they are attracted to this work, since it is not meant for lazy men seeking comfort; rather, it is meant for heroes, courageous followers of Christ, even to the cross. Therefore, dear brother priests, let us take advantage of this moment, and in our reflections let us see what we can do with the young people in our parishes and in our schools to awaken many vocations.

The document then refers also to teachers and all lay people: «The greatest contribution is made by families which are animated by a spirit of faith, charity and piety and which provide, as it were, a first seminary, and by parishes in whose abundant life the young people themselves take an active part. Teachers and all who are in any way involved in the education of boys and young men—and this applies especially to Catholic societies—should endeavor to train the young entrusted to them to recognize a divine vocation and to follow it willingly» (OT 2). Let us also be mindful of the women religious who work as catechists and who are involved in pastoral ministry and visiting homes. As the Council says, they make Christ present by their very example, by their prayer, and in their charity toward the sick (LG 46). Religious life is a face of the church that also attracts young people to commit themselves to Christ. Schools, teachers, families—indeed, all of us have something to say and contribute to this vocational ministry. It is a necessary work, for without priests the people of God would be without guides, without representatives of Christ, without divine guidance.

Since we will continue reflecting throughout the day, let these humble words suffice to move the hearts of all who take part in this concelebration so that they may ask themselves: what are we doing? Let us hope that our response today might mirror the recommendation of the Council; we want a more lively organization of vocational ministry in every sense, and not just the economic sense. It is necessary to support the work of the seminary, which means many expenditures, but this work above all presupposes truly Christian homes. This work must therefore involve the sanctification of families and a new orientation for our preaching of the Gospel, but without falling into extremes on one side or the other. We must present the Gospel of Christ in a way that is attractive to young people, so as to make them active agents in this evangelizing labor of Christ in the world.

In this setting of Pentecost I beg you, sisters and brothers, to join with Mary, who is awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit whom we already have within us. Pentecost is an external manifestation in the form of hurricane and tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-4) which make us aware of the power of the Spirit who carries this church forward. In the archdiocese we are experiencing an intense period of ecclesial renewal. There is no doubt about it! Since the Council says that this renewal depends in great part on priests and those preparing for priesthood, this miracle that the Holy Spirit has worked among us should unite us, draw us closer together, and make us feel more truly church. Let us experience this day as a truly privileged day, a day of the church, a day when we reflect on priestly vocation and realize that we are all a priestly people. God by his Divine Spirit is asking much of us, very much indeed. Let us not refuse God, because in the measure that we respond generously, we will realize that this renewal that has already begun will culminate by making our particular diocese and church a worthy and magnificent part of the universal church.

Let us love our local church, sisters and brothers, with the affection with which we love our families and want to see them ever more beautiful, more flourishing, more attractive, and more lovable. Let us create a congenial diocese, a diocese that is already becoming such, as an example for the continent and the world. To the extent that we give ourselves over to these demands of the Spirit, as we begin to do today, we will all be collaborators and agents of a church that is being renewed and embellished. This church will then become a splendid torch that sheds abundant light on our people who are in such great need.