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A TORCH RAISED ON HIGH

Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time
Aguilares
19 June 1977

Zechariah 12:10-11

Galatians 3:26-29

Luke 9:18-24

Dear religious women, who represent this portion of God that has been consecrated in a special way for the service of the church, and dear faithful, especially my beloved sons and daughters of Aguilares.

It is my job to gather up the assaults, the bodies, and all that the persecution of the church leaves in its wake. Today I have come to gather up in this church and in this profaned convent a destroyed tabernacle and above all else a people that has been disgracefully humiliated and sacrificed. Therefore as I come here finally—I have wanted to be with you from the beginning, but I was not permitted to enter—I bring you, sisters and brothers, the word that Jesus commands me to share with you: a word of solidarity, a word of encouragement and orientation, and finally a word of conversion.

A word of solidarity

In the first place, I want to express to you a cordial word of solidarity. We are with you now, and we have been with you at every moment. Indeed, if the church can ever say, «We have been with you in a very special way», it is in these circumstances of Aguilares, because chief among their victims are three beloved priests who have been shackled and exiled.¹

Yet Father Carranza has said it well: «The harsh voice of rifles will be silenced, and the prophetic voice of God will continue to resound».² The word of God is once again here, sisters and brothers, to tell you that God always rejects violence. God has no dealings with those who kill, with those who persecute, with those who assault. That startling saying of the Lord, «All who take up the sword will perish by the sword» (Matt 26:52), promises terrible consequences if sincere conversion does not first overtake the sinner. We suffer with those who have suffered so greatly. We are truly with you, and we want you to know, sisters and brothers, that your pain is the church's pain.

Today's first reading becomes highly expressive when the prophet bewails the desolation of Jerusalem, but at the same time he announces that the Lord's mercy and

¹ They are the Jesuit priests Salvador Carranza, Marcelino Pérez, and José Luis Ortega.

² «Father Salvador Carranza's Letter from Exile» in *Orientación* (19 June 1977).

goodness will rain down upon the suffering people. You are the image of the Divine One who has been pierced, the one of whom the first reading speaks in prophetic, mysterious language. That figure representing Christ nailed on the cross and pierced by the lance is the image of all those people who, like Aguilares, have been pierced and violated. But if you suffer with faith and give your suffering redemptive meaning, then Aguilares will sing a joyful hymn of liberation because when they look on the one they have pierced they will repent, and they will see the heroism and the joy of those whom the Lord blesses in their suffering.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, our word of solidarity extends also to our many beloved dead and our murdered friends. In this Mass we ask eternal rest for them, certain that the Lord will grant them this blessing and that from their place in heaven they will continue to work for this holy liberation that Aguilares has set in motion. We also suffer with those who are lost,³ with those whose whereabouts is unknown, and with those who are fleeing and don't know what's happening with their families. We are witnesses of this suffering and this separation. We experience it close at hand because as pastors we experience the aching trust of those who through the church hope to reunite again with those whom cruelty has dispersed. But be assured, dear sisters and brothers, that in the eyes of God they are not lost; rather, they are very close to the heart of the Lord even though their families who cannot find them are in pain. For God there is no one lost. For God there is only the mystery of suffering which, if accepted as sanctification and redemption, will also be redemptive suffering like that of Christ our Lord.

We are united with those who suffer tortures. We know that many are in their homes suffering those pains and those humiliations. May the Lord give them courage, and may they know how to forgive. Be aware, sisters and brothers, that God condemns violence, wherever it comes from, and especially when it comes from the Armed Forces, who instead of defending the people commit outrageous acts. God can never bless this violence. Know also that all your pain and suffering is well understood, for the church interprets it, in accord with today's first reading, as redemptive suffering, as suffering from which will flow new sources of blessings for Aguilares.

A word of encouragement

My sisters and brothers, I want to add a word of encouragement and orientation. Take courage! Don't let your spirit flag! In the Archdiocese of San Salvador, Aguilares already has a very special place, for it is here that Father Grande and his two beloved *campesinos* fell victim to the assassins' bullets. After that, the blatant persecution of priests and catechists has been without a doubt a sign of the Lord's favor. Jesus Christ told us in his Gospel that those who wish to be his disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow him (Luke 9:23-24). He also said that those who want to keep their lives safe and secure, often by shameful intrigues such as hypocritically betraying a brother or sister in order to gain favor, are guilty of great treachery. If you want to save your life, you must lose it. You must hand it over sincerely to the Lord. And right here priests and lay people have handed their lives over to the

³ Though Archbishop Romero does not yet use the term, he is referring to those who were «disappeared» in the repression.

Lord without thinking about martyrdom and suffering. They are giving witness, and we take this testimony from Aguilares in order to present it to all the parishes.

See how quickly the response has come: yesterday two lay people from every parish, a total of 200 lay people committed to the church, began a course that will conclude this afternoon in the seminary. Without a doubt they are following the heroic example of those who give their lives for Christ out of a desire to commit themselves to the church. Indeed, this is the condition for being part of this lay movement; it is what is required of all who have received baptism and who have pledged to follow Christ through his cross and through his suffering. This example of Aguilares, then, is marvelous; it is the frontline of the church; it is a commitment on the part of the church's members to proclaim what is most dangerous in the church's doctrine but also most necessary.

My sisters and brothers, I believe that we have mutilated the Gospel greatly. We have tried to live a Gospel that is very comfortable without handing over our lives. We accept only a Gospel of piety which makes us feel comfortable. But here in Aguilares you have started a bold movement with a more steadfast Gospel. In the recent publications of the Jesuits fathers⁴ you have been able to read and understand that we are making a very serious commitment with Christ crucified, and this demands the renunciation of many pleasant things that we cannot have when we embrace the cross of our Lord.

We must therefore learn the meaning of that invitation of Christ: «If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself» (Luke 9:23). Let us deny ourselves, let us forego our comforts, let us give up our personal opinions, and let us follow only the teaching of Christ, which may lead us to death, but which will also surely lead us to resurrection. All these heroes, the priests and catechists of Aguilares who have died for the name of the Lord, are without doubt participating already in the unfading glory of the resurrection.

A word of orientation

I also want to share with you a word of orientation. Do not confuse the liberation of Christ with the false liberations that are merely temporal. As Christians formed by the Gospel, you have the right to organize and to make concrete decisions inspired by the Gospel. But be careful not to betray those evangelical, Christian, supernatural convictions by replacing them with liberations of a merely economic, political, or temporal sort. Even though Christians collaborate in the work of liberation with other ideologies, they must preserve the original liberation that Saint Paul announces to us today, the liberation based on Christ and inseparable from Christ. Baptism incorporated me into Christ (Gal 3:26-27); in Christ I am one with God, and I cannot betray all that derives from that: being a new person. We become new persons who purify their hearts of all sin, new persons who do not speak with resentful hearts, new persons who never foment violence, hatred, or rancor. We love with the heart of Jesus even as we defend our rights with love, which is the power of our church. We never promote hatred or

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

class struggle which are the false powers of other kinds of liberation that really leads to no liberation.

The Council has said that it is a form of modern atheism when people expect human struggle to achieve a future kingdom in which they will find great happiness (GS 20). My sisters and brothers, if Christ and his church are not taken into consideration, then this future kingdom will never be achieved. There will be nothing but tears, nothing but violence. No sound will be heard except that of machine guns and the violent outcries of those who are massacred. None of this leads to building up our society. Yet dying with faith in Christ, having worked in the light of Christ—that is authentic liberation.

Those who have been enlightened with the light of the Gospel and the teaching of the church have become aware of how shameful is the treatment of many who are the image of God on earth. These people have discovered their rights, which they must defend in the light of Christ; they must continue this struggle, remaining always faithful to that illumination of faith and to the teaching of the church. Doing this, they will not be deceived, for this will lead them to true redemption.

That is why I admire, and I want here to thank in a very special way, the Society of Jesus which illuminated these paths in Aguilares. Many perhaps did not understand them. Certainly those who persecuted them and struck repressively against the «Gospel of subversion» did not understand anything. The Gospel of the Jesuits is the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Gospel of the church, and there is no reason to confuse it with anything else. I want to thank the Jesuit fathers for having enlightened so many *campesinos* and for having organized so many communities with a Christian spirit and goodness of heart. With affection we remember Father Grande and his collaborators who knew how to instill into many hearts the light of the Gospel which should never be extinguished.

I therefore speak a word of encouragement because the light of the Lord will always illuminate these paths. New pastors will come, but the Gospel will remain the same. We ask future pastors to continue this work with the same light and courage. May they know how to guide the people along the true path of Christian liberation, as the church today desires, especially on this Latin American continent. The brilliant documents of Medellín, which are authentic church doctrine, should not be feared but understood; they should be put into practice because they provide light that will lead these peoples of Latin America to salvation.

In this sense Aguilares is a torch raised on high. We want to congratulate you in spite of the pain you feel because you are raising this torch on high. May you never let it be confused with other fatuous flames; rather, let it be the authentic light of Christ that shines in the midst of confusion and darkness.

A word of conversion

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, I offer a word of conversion. When Jesus Christ invites us to lose our lives in order to gain them (Luke 9:24), when he invites us to hand over our lives to him, he is calling us to conversion. When the first reading tells us how the

people looked on the one they pierced (Zech 12:10) and how, repenting of their sins, they hoped to gain mercy from the pierced one, it is describing for us what our own attitude should be. I invite you to forgive, dear sisters and brothers, though I understand that it is very difficult to pardon after so many offenses. Still, this is the word of the Gospel: «Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you and persecute you; be perfect as your heavenly Father, who makes his rain fall and his sun shine on the fields of the good and the bad» (Matt 5:44-45).

Let there be no resentment in your hearts. May this Eucharist, which is a call to be reconciled with God and with our sisters and brothers, leave in our hearts the satisfaction that we are Christians so that there are no traces of hatred or rancor left in our souls. Let us certainly be firm in defending our rights, but let us do so with great love in our hearts, because by defending in this way, with love, we are also seeking the conversion of sinners. That is the revenge of Christians! Let us pray for the conversion of those who have assaulted us. Let us pray for the conversion of those who had the sacrilegious audacity to profane this holy tabernacle. Let us pray for pardon and also for the needed repentance of those who have made this place a prison and a torture chamber. May the Lord touch their hearts before the dreadful sentence is carried out: «All who take up the sword will perish by the sword» (Matt 26:52). May they truly repent and have the satisfaction of beholding the One they have pierced so that from his side a torrent of mercy and goodness may rain down and we all see ourselves as sisters and brothers.

How blessed will be that moment when this terrible tragedy disappears from El Salvador, this time when we live in fear of one another and when there are places where our sisters and brothers are suffering. May the Lord make these realities disappear from our midst with an outpouring of his mercy and goodness, with a torrent of graces to convert all our hearts. Indeed, the Creator has gifted us with a paradise, a truly beautiful nation which the Divine Savior has blessed with his own name. May it become truly a land where we all feel redeemed as sisters and brothers, just as Saint Paul has told us today, «There are no longer any differences, because we are all one in Christ our Lord» (Gal 3:28-29).

This is the final word I give you in this message, sisters and brothers. We are going to take that Word made flesh that is now made host and is given up for us in the Eucharist which will now be celebrated by us priests to whom God has given this mysterious power. We are going to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. We are going to place it again in the tabernacle from which it was taken by sacrilegious hands, and we are going to restore it to the hearts of the people of Aguilares and all those who have come here to express their solidarity. Out of love for this sacred host, we want to love. We know that our hearts are small, but Jesus lends us his heart so that his one heart on the altar represents the hearts of all of us. Thus united we give glory to God, we give thanks because we are alive, we offer pardon to our enemies, and we ask forgiveness for our sins and the sins of our people. In this spirit, sisters and brothers, let us now celebrate the divine Eucharist.