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THE CHURCH OF THE COVENANT AND OF TRUE POVERTY

**Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time
28 August 1977**

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Life of the church

... on the other hand,¹ in the same village of El Salitre nothing is known about what was reported in yesterday's edition of *Diario de Hoy*² concerning the assault that left a policeman wounded. Either the same crime is being reported in distorted fashion, or the reporter is mistaken about the place of a crime that happened somewhere else, because in El Salitre the only thing known is that on Friday morning three poor souls were captured and later found dead, their wounds inflicted by machetes.³ We want to unite ourselves to the sorrow of their families, and we want to be the voice of the voiceless and shout out against such awful violations of human rights. Let justice be done! Let us be rid of all these crimes that taint our country and the army. Let us find out who these criminals are, and let us recompense justly these families who are now left helpless. Our Catholic radio station has already commented sufficiently about this deed. Here I simply want to make this an intention of this Mass so that, as always, we ask the Lord for eternal rest for the victims, and we pray for the conversion of those hardened sinners who refuse to hear the call to justice and repentance.

I have visited Aguilares and will continue visiting its hamlets. There is an atmosphere of bravery there. They have the heart of Christians who truly live in hope. Still, human as we are, there is also an atmosphere of fear. Our communities are watched as if suspect. Some people think that the church is preaching subversion and so are always suspicious. The catechists and celebrators of the word are persecuted as dangerous elements. Once again the church protests that her message continues to be one of justice and love; the aim of her preaching continues to be the message given by Christ to proclaim to the world. She will not betray this mission of promoting justice and love in order to gain favor with others. She will preach a message of brotherhood, a message that becomes daily more necessary in a situation where the ruling forces are terror, brute force of arms, espionage, and psychological warfare.

¹ The greeting and opening words are not recorded on the tape of this homily.

² *El Diario de Hoy* (27 August 1977).

³ Archbishop Romero mentions their names later.

As always, the church speaks out in broad daylight, and her message continues to be that of Jesus Christ. It is not some theory about loving one another, but a message that is enfleshed in this reality where there is no love, where there is only hatred, where people prey on one another like wolves, and where the extortion of some by others continues to be a sad reality. Such exploitation should not exist in a Christian environment, and the church wants to remove from the world the sinfulness that blemishes our history. I repeat once again: God wants to use the history of every people, and concretely the history of El Salvador, for his history of salvation. Since the church is sent by God to purify history and make it the source of salvation, she must continue to denounce the sins of history. In whatever quarter sin is found, it is an obstacle to the kingdom of God, which cannot be established in the world while sin impedes its presence. That is why Christian communities continue to be faithful to their mission of removing sin from the world and so remain faithful to Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday my visit to Aguilares was in response to the offense against the Blessed Sacrament committed there. What wonderful people there are! Despite their poverty and their difficulties they already were able to obtain a new tabernacle—the old one damaged by the soldiers was no longer secure enough to house the Blessed Sacrament. Even though the government promised us that they would repair the damages caused by the unjust occupation of this private building, yet we have had to repair what was destroyed and replace the tabernacle ourselves because everything was left in a terrible state. There are still certain things that have not been returned, such as typewriters and materials used in the evangelization of Aguilares. But, thanks be to God, we have the new tabernacle. It was wonderful to see those people weeping with emotion as the ciborium with consecrated hosts was placed once again in the tabernacle. The people sang the well-known hymn, «Let Us Praise the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar». No one can silence that voice coming from the heart of our people. They believe in Christ present in the host, and not even a bullet-riddled tabernacle can instill fear in these people. In fact, just the opposite. When will our foes understand that the faith rooted in our hearts grows only more ardent as they increase their attacks?

In our dialogue last Wednesday (which unfortunately was taped badly so that many were unable to hear the complete message) we made allusion to Aguilares. We especially appeal to all the faithful to provide help for the many people living in true misery. We ask everybody to maintain the generosity which, thank God, has been awakened among you. Many donations of clothing, shoes, food, and also cash are arriving at the chancery, and a committee of religious and lay people will make sure they reach the people in need.

In that same dialogue we also spoke about our vocational campaign. At this time Father Ladislao Segura, an indefatigable Jesuit, is doing the vocational work—let this be proof that the Jesuits are not sowing subversion but helping the church in all her functions. Father Segura is a tireless pilgrim who travels from parish to parish, speaking with the pastors and with the young men in the schools who have a vocation. Many of the young priests are the fruit of these visits of Father Segura. We naturally understand that as the church matures, she seeks to discover new ways to recruit vocations. The true process should be that each community, or the families that are cells of the community, would create such a devout Christian environment that vocations naturally

arose in these communities, just as flowers and fruits grow in our gardens. The communities need priests, and God raises up vocations in the communities. What is lacking is cultivation. Thanks to these base communities of the church and the intense dialogue that takes place in the parishes (which unfortunately is interpreted as subversive, as getting involved in politics), that maturing of the faith that we are seeking is clearly underway. There is an awakening of the sense of human dignity and the dignity of the family. People are being encouraged to develop themselves as Christians and to create their own destiny by their own efforts.

When the authorities grasp these ideas and truly understand us, they will see that they have nothing to fear from this work but rather much reason to be hopeful. The nation can expect much from human groups that become more aware of their dignity and lay claim to it; naturally, they will also be more critical of acts of injustice. This is what disturbs and upsets some people, but that is precisely why the church must continue her mission, so that her people will not remain indolent through ignorance and so that she will no longer be falsely accused of communism. The church is not selling opium to the people. To the contrary, the church is doing far more to awaken consciousness than all the earthly ideologies, for she stirs up a hope for eternity, a hope that makes people work harder to forge their own destiny and the destiny of their community.

In this way the true priests that our communities need will also arise, but meanwhile Father Segura continues to travel from parish to parish. I have asked our dear priests to help him out, and I hope the young men who are discerning a vocation will talk with him. Do not use as an excuse your poverty or lack of money. Almost all our priests come from families that are poor. Indeed, our greatest joy is to remember our poor mothers and fathers working hard to sustain that poor household. We rejoice that such homes produce vocations that speak out for those who live in honest poverty, vocations that help us all orient the world on the paths of God.

I also told you in that dialogue, and I repeat it here since it was announced for this Sunday, that according to the tradition of my venerable predecessor, Bishop Luis Chávez y González, this last Sunday in August is designated catechism day. Many times this celebration consisted of asking for donations to help the catechesis programs of the parishes and the diocese. I am not so interested in donations because they will come in due course when people have a better understanding of the meaning of catechesis. That is why I am not asking for money but simply asking you to be very aware of the fact that we are here in this cathedral because of catechesis. Our parents were our catechists. A good parish priest reminds us of our happy childhood when some kind person taught us the Our Father and how to make the sign of the cross. The church keeps evolving. In fact, catechetics is going to be the theme of the next synod of bishops in Rome.

Representatives of all the bishops of the world will come together to respond to the pope's consultation: how should catechesis be done in our time? The times have changed greatly since we were children. In those days we were drawn to catechism class by holy cards and candy. Would that it were still so easy, but even children's attitudes have been changed by television, by movies, and by the modern media. Holy cards and candy no longer motivate. We must try to instill true love of the content of the faith and the divine revelation that God brought to the world to make us divine. Thanks to this faith that comes to maturity in catechesis, there is very great hope in our time.

Parents, to you are entrusted the first steps of that tradition. Tradition means entrusting—*tradere* in Latin—handing on from grandparents to grandchildren, from generation to generation, the doctrine that God revealed and that the apostles taught. What are the four Gospels if not catechesis? They tell people about Jesus and what he taught. They tell children and young people and adults how God became human to save us and to make us all sisters and brothers to one another, children of God, so that we would be saved. This is the very simple message of love that is God's revelation, and it is to be transmitted with love so that it takes on life in every man, in every woman, in every young person, in every married couple, in every part of society. This is catechesis: the transmission of God's revelation addressed to the faith of humankind.

Thus, catechesis is something different from theology or apologetics or sacred history or all the scientific systems that assist catechesis, for catechesis has as its object not science and knowledge, but faith and life. That is why it is not enough to teach formulas, such as: Who is God? Who created you? Memorizing answers is good, but it is not catechesis. Catechesis means living these realities. If God has created me, then my faith tells me that I must live as a child of God. If Christ has saved you, then don't just memorize it—live it! Hand your life over to Christ who gave himself over for you. How blessed the church will be when these modern ideas mature and people understand that the contents of catechesis are transmitted to strengthen the faith of our people!

Finally, sisters and brothers, I am happy to tell you that we are now distributing the pastoral letter that I have so often spoken to you about. The Interdiocesan Social Secretariat has put out a very beautiful edition, not just because it is my document, but because the theme is the church as the Body of Christ in history. This is a response to all the calumnies and defamations and distortions that have been published in many paid ads for so long now. They have perhaps poisoned the souls of those who are without faith, but they fortify the faith of those who believe. Here they will find the best answer.

With all the calmness of a theological reflection, I want to make you aware that certain changes have occurred in the church and that it is vital to understand them in order to be truly Catholic at this time. In the second part of the letter I respond to the question of why there have been changes in the church. I explain that the church is the Body of Christ in history, which means that the church has to be Christ at this time and in this country. She must speak as Christ would speak today, here, in this cathedral pulpit. If the church acts in this way, then she is the authentic church of Christ, and she will annoy all those who violate God's law and who attempt to obstruct the project of God's kingdom in the world. Abuse of political power, selfish use of capital, idolatry of money, poor people who don't want to develop themselves to shape their own destiny—all these failures reveal the sinfulness of the present age. Just as the voice of Christ denounced the sin of his own time—the sins of his Herods, his Pilates, his Pharisees—so would he denounce today the abuses of authority and power in all their manifestations as obstacles to the one Lord of history: Christ, God, the King of our hearts.

I also take joy in telling you that a very useful pamphlet has been published to help people understand the social teaching of the church. It is called «Social

Orientations of the Church in Light of the Gospel».⁴ It is an arsenal of texts from the Gospels, the church fathers, and the papal encyclicals, and it will help to instruct men and women of today about God's desires for modern-day society. If you get this pamphlet and study it, you will become Catholics well-informed about this present situation.

I forgot to tell you, sisters and brothers, the names of the three persons killed in Tejutla whom we remember in our prayers along with their distressed families. One of them is Felipe de Jesús Chacón Vásquez, a devout Cursillista—how could he possibly be a guerrilla? The others are Serafín Vásquez Escobar and a man named Pablo, whose last name I do not remember.

Let us place ourselves in this concrete situation of our church and our country so that we might throw light on this situation with the help of the divine word that was just read. I want to present just two aspects that I believe are the two great messages of today's readings: first, the church of the covenant between God and humankind, and second, the church of true poverty.

The church of the covenant between God and humankind

Today's readings guide us well, for they are not the words of human beings but the words of God. Saint Paul presents the church to us by comparing the two covenants. The covenant that God made with Moses on Sinai and on Mount Horeb was a covenant of terror, fear, lightening, and thunder. In it the majesty of God was so powerfully felt that the pilgrims in the desert said to Moses, «Speak to us yourself, but let not God speak to us, or we shall die» (Exod 20:19). Saint Paul reminded his Christians about this covenant, saying, «You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast» (Heb 12:18-19). We are reminded here of how God in the beautiful pages of Exodus presented himself as awesome to a people prone to idolatry. He wanted them to realize that he is the only God, the living God who desired to make a covenant with them so that they would adore him alone. He wanted them to worship only the one true God in the midst of so many idolatrous nations. Therefore, on that mountain filled with divine majesty, God sealed this covenant by giving the people the tablets of the law, the Ten Commandments of the law of God (Exod 20:1-17). These commandments, which still have full force in the Christian era, were promulgated by this fearsome, frightful God. Have you yourselves not heard that voice that the people did not want to hear because they were afraid of dying?

While the people saw these divine manifestations, they kept their faith in the one God and respected the covenant of the old law. But when the temptation of idolatry presented itself, the people fell into idolatry. And when the people were attracted by gold and money and political power, they made alliances with the kings of the earth; they sold themselves for money, and then came the chastisements of God.

⁴ The Spanish title of this publication is *Orientaciones sociales de la Iglesia a la luz de los documentos pontificios*. See *Orientación* (28 August 1977).

Israel was deported to Babylon. The people were punished with plagues and other calamities that the Bible presents as the signs of a God who is appealing to his covenant. God spoke through Abraham and Moses and the prophets, «I will be your God and you will be my people» (Jer 31:33). They were a priestly people, a people with laws for the worship that God desires, a people who realized their ideals in the most beautiful temple of that era, the temple of Jerusalem. They saw that temple as the personification of God, so much so that when the temple was consecrated it was filled with smoke, with the majesty of God (Exod 40:34). God made his presence felt, and the people felt the need to be united with that God. When their idolatries and their sins distanced them from God, God punished them, not to cast them off forever but to bring them back to him once again. How often God compared the covenant with the bond of marriage! (Hos 2:21-22). God is the husband who takes the people as his wife. But how often that woman went off with other men and committed adultery! God compares himself to a disillusioned husband who continues to love his adulterous spouse. He waits for her, she returns remorseful, and he makes her once again his spouse. These comparisons touch our hearts.

The Vatican Council states that the whole of that old covenant was only a preparation for the new and definitive covenant that God wanted to ratify with us in Christ Jesus (LG 9). That is what the second part of the letter to the Hebrews tells us. Listen to these words, my dear Catholics who have come to the cathedral in such consoling numbers. How happy I am to see this cathedral filled and to be able to speak with you as a sign of our whole diocese which remains faithful despite the persecution. The letter to the Hebrews says, «You have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant» (Heb 12:22-24).

I speak to you, dear sisters and brothers who are present here in the cathedral or morally present through the radio, you who are listening in your remote chapels or in your homes or at the bedside of someone who is sick. I want to speak with you who are reflecting on this message with good will because I know that many do not listen to me with good will. They listen to me only to look for ways to catch me, to see how they can entrap me and denounce me. I forgive you and ask the Lord to touch your hearts so that you may also be numbered among the faithful who are here.

Sisters and brothers, Saint Paul tells you that you are the companions of those angels who eternally adore God. You form part of that noble group of people who have followed God. You are joined together with the firstborn of heaven who have been born for eternity, and you are united with the just souls who have achieved their destiny. It seems that I can count among those just souls the martyrs of our archdiocese, those who are dying today, the victims of injustice and slander. You also are arriving at your destiny, behind the procession of the angels and the noble blessed. The long procession of the archdiocese continues; it includes the parishes, the chapels, the villages that remain solid in their faith. Your hope is secure because it relies on the Mediator of the new covenant, Jesus. Jesus is the reason for our hope.

My sisters and brothers, do not follow the church because of her leaders, her bishops, her priests. We are sinners. Pray for us so that we may be faithful like you. My

faith as bishop finds its support in Jesus, and I pray that the faith of my beloved priests finds its support in Jesus. I pray that the faith of my dear religious women, so united at this time and fulfilling so many different commitments, finds its support in Jesus, and I wish the same for the faith of so many lay people who now have found in the church a reason to believe and to hope. Here is the reason for faith and for hope: the risen Jesus, who is the living head of this long procession of angels, of saints, and of the faithful who still sojourn in this world.

This is the new covenant. In a few minutes you will hear from the altar, «This is the cup of my blood which will be shed for you, the blood of the new covenant» (Luke 22:20). This is the definitive covenant. The one God sealed with Abraham and Moses and the prophets was only a figure preparing the way for this new and definitive covenant which we now have through the great Mediator who is Christ Jesus.

Here I want to clarify something. On August 5, when the procession of the Divine Savior was being described from these microphones, one of the announcers said that these people were following their true leader, the Divine Savior. That's fine, but there was someone who spread misinformation by saying I was inciting people and telling them that I was their leader! See how things get distorted! I have never believed that I am the leader of anybody because there is only one leader: Christ Jesus. Jesus is the source of hope. What I preach has its support in Jesus. In Jesus is the truth of what I am saying. My dear sisters and brothers and radio audience, I would be crazy if I, a weak and mortal being bound to die like everyone else, thought I could be the support of all the people and all their hope. Thanks be to God, my humble words help to reveal the One in whom we must have faith and hope. The church, I say in my pastoral letter, is nothing other than the Body of Jesus. Jesus is the strength of the church because Jesus is not just a man, but God who became man and lives and reigns forever.

The church of true poverty

Therefore, I conclude now with this second consideration. Today's word, in the first reading and in the gospel, invites us to live true poverty. The wise man tells those who read the Bible, «My son, conduct your affairs with humility» (Sir 3:29). And in the gospel Christ proclaims, «When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not occupy the first places; do not be proud or think only of yourself. Make yourself humble; be humble, and take the lowest place. When you hold a banquet, do not invite those who can return the favor, for then you already have a repayment. When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous» (Luke 14:8-14). Humility and poverty are twins. It would be better to say that they are one reality. The humble person is truly poor. Truly poor is the person who has nothing, the person who confides in nothing and yet has everything in God.

When the Virgin proclaims in her marvelous song, the *Magnificat*, «The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty» (Luke 1:53), what does she mean? It's not that the Virgin despises the rich, but she criticizes the self-sufficient and the proud, those who have no need of God, those who make idols of the things of earth. They trust in their money more than in God; they love their wealth more than they love their neighbor. They trust in their power because today they have arms. They

abuse others and are proud. These are the ones God sends away empty. But there are those who are humble even if they have power and money; they do not place their hope in these things because they know they are as fleeting as the wind. People will never find stability in power—it comes and goes. True humility consists of trusting in God for everything. If I have power on earth, I must recognize that it comes to me from God, and therefore I must use it as God wants it to be used. For God can say to me what he said to King Saul, «This king is not pleasing to me, and so I dismiss him and put in his place David, a humble shepherd boy, a king after my own heart» (1 Sam 15:11; 16:13). The power of earth is transient, sisters and brothers, and humility is truth. The truly wealthy are those who trust in the richness of God. These are the true members of the eternal covenant with Christ.

That is why I believe that this church of the covenant, this church of the archdiocese, is the heir of God's covenant with Abraham and Moses and Christ. This church is truly authentic because she no longer relies on any power or any wealth. Today the church is poor. Today the church knows that the powerful reject her, but she is loved by those who place their trust in God. I ask you, then, dear sons and daughters of the church, never to betray this covenant with our God, because that was what angered God. When the people of Israel lost confidence in their own value and sought support in Babylon or in Egypt, God rejected them, and they became the victims of their own mistrust. But whenever the Israelites trusted God, even if they were surrounded by enemies, they were victorious.

This is the church that I desire: a church that does not rely on the privileges or guarantees of earthly goods, a church that is ever more detached from transient human things so that she can judge them with greater freedom from the perspective of the Gospel and her own poverty. We are not talking about a demagogic poverty because that is not poverty. Those who pretend to be poor in order to create revolution and plant seeds of hatred are not poor. They trust in their revolution, but this does not make them truly poor. The church is poor because she does not trust in any earthly revolution, nor does she plant seeds of hatred, because she sees no sense in that. The church sows love of God and love of neighbor, the kingdom of God on earth, true poverty, true humility. This is the church we dream of, sisters and brothers, and the church I believe we are building in our archdiocese.

I thank you all—celebrators of the word, priests, religious, and lay people—because you have understood this message. Those of you who distrusted the church but now are finding her more authentic, be assured that this is the true church. If one day I should betray you, then pay no attention to me, but follow this church that we now have envisioned so clearly. But my hope is that with your help I will never betray this church.

In this regard I now want to clarify something. When one of the newspapers stated⁵ that the church is not being persecuted, that everything is fine, and that the government had come to an understanding with me, this is false. I continue to say that there will be dialogue only when an atmosphere of trust is created with deeds. These crimes must cease. This distrust of the people must cease. The church feels herself committed to the noble interests of the people. As long as there is no atmosphere of

⁵ *El Mundo* (25 August 1977).

trust, dear sisters and brothers, I would betray you if behind your backs I were to reach an understanding with those who have no respect for people's rights.

Meanwhile, the church certainly continues to hope for dialogue and for an atmosphere of friendship that has been taken away from us. She hopes that the confidence that was lost will be restored again. And as I stated in my pastoral letter, the church is open to honest cooperation. She does not seek advantages for herself but wants only to serve the common good that the people truly deserve.