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THE CHURCH: A COMMUNION OF LIFE, LOVE, AND TRUTH FOR THE WORLD'S SALVATION

**Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time
29 October 1978**

Exodus 22:20-26¹

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

Matthew 22:34-40

Dear sisters and brothers, I honestly feel that our Christian community is a true family. I was very sorry to be absent last Sunday². It was like when a family member cannot come to a weekend gathering with the rest of the family. At times, however, the Lord asks this sacrifice of us. At the same time, I thank you for your presence at the celebration and the attention you gave to the preaching of Father Jesús Delgado, who was kind enough to take my place. Some very good comments have been made about his reflections.

For my part, I have looked at the biblical readings, and as I usually do, I have chosen a title for my homily today, one that reinforces our sense of family and of communion. I will title my words today: «The Church: a Communion of Life, of Charity, and of Truth for the World's Salvation». Indeed, today's readings seem to be summed up beautifully in one of the Second Vatican Council's densest texts. In speaking of the church as a messianic people, the Council uses these words: «This messianic people, although it does not actually include all people and at times may appear to be only a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, love, and truth, it is also used by him as an instrument for the redemption of all and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth» (LG 9; Matt 5:13-16).

This is what we are, dear sisters and brothers. This is what we must be if we want to build the church. I want to reaffirm the reason for my preaching and the reason for our meetings and our Christian reflections on the word of God. They are all aimed at helping us to become day by day more established as the people of God and as followers of Christ so that we truly feel that we are «the sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation» (LG 9). May the world and may our nation come to look upon our Christian groups not as suspect gatherings but as people who are truly light of the world and salt of the earth.

¹ The reference is incorrect in the UCA edition of the sermons. The corrected reference is given here.

² On Saturday 21 October 1978 Archbishop Romero was admitted to the Hospital de Emergencia y Diagnóstico, and he stayed there until 23 October. See *Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, su diario*, Arzobispado de San Salvador 2000, 61-62.

Life of the church

That's why I like to speak about this community that is reflecting together this morning in very concrete terms. This is not a Christian community meeting in a church of Europe or Africa or in some other country of our continent. It is a church right here in the archdiocese of San Salvador; it is this cathedral and those communities out there that are perhaps tuned in to this Mass to reflect along with us. The church is the community of such-and-such a village, of such-and-such a hamlet. In our case, therefore, we must experience this community with all its realities, both joyous and sad. Here I like to tell you about the joy and the hope you should all have so that we may all truly feel ourselves to be part of a communion of life, a communion of love, and a communion of truth. Let us bond together as Salvadoran Christians or as persons who aren't Salvadorans but still identify with our community and truly live as members of this tiny flock.

Notice carefully that the Council has no illusions about the church being the totality of the people. Often she may be only a very small group. Christ said as much to his apostles: «Do not be afraid, little flock». *Pusillus grex* is the affectionate expression Christ used to comfort them. «Don't think that people are going to accept my words, but there will always be a faithful group», he told them. «Even if the flock is small, rejoice in it because to you the Father has decided to give the kingdom. You are the seed of unity and salvation for the world. You are the hope of the world» (Luke 12:32). Yes, dear sister and brother Christians, let us be truly holy followers of Christ who are full of hope and united in love as befits a Christian community. We should not seek the glamour of huge crowds but simply pursue the sturdy love and the life that comes to us from God.

By way of news about our priests this week, our community has celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of ordination of several of its priests. Twenty-five years ago thirteen priests were ordained. What a magnificent harvest from San José de la Montaña! We remember one who is already in eternity, our beloved friend, Monsignor Jorge Castro Peña, who was ordained that year. There are many people in the community who shared life with this priest who is now in heaven. He wasn't able to celebrate with us, but from his place in heaven he no doubt looks down on us with his enchanting smile and still feels that he is a member of this community. A Franciscan from Italy, Father Cosme Spessoto, is also celebrating his twenty-fifth anniversary in Zacatecoluca. Yesterday in Acajutla two young Franciscans were ordained, Oscar Arturo Gutiérrez and Mario Antonio Benítez. Next Saturday—let this serve as an invitation—here in the cathedral at eleven o'clock we're going to ordain a young man of our archdiocese, Rafael Urrutia; he has completed his studies in Guatemala and is now going to work with us. Other fruits of our communities of El Salvador are two priests who are being ordained in Spain to work with Opus Dei, an organization of professionals who seek to live holy lives and about whom I've spoken on other occasions. In keeping with what I've been saying, such holiness should expand to the life of the whole community because no one lives a Christian life just for himself or herself. We live as Christians so as to be a sweet aroma, a seed of unity and salvation.

This community that reflects together here on Sunday is a community whose life becomes concrete in the parishes and the villages. I had the good fortune to visit the parish of El Carmen in Colonia Roma where we celebrated the feast of their patroness, Saint Teresa. I also visited Divina Providencia parish in the Colonia Atlacatl; that's a very lively community, as could be seen that night when they were organizing their Caritas commission. I also took part in the joy-filled life of the Christian community in Soyapango, meeting with pastoral ministers

and youth groups who are striving to follow Christ. I've also received news from the community that meets in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart as part of the Cursillo movement; there they have dedicated themselves to studying the pastoral letter on the church and the people's political organizations.

Unfortunately, sisters and brothers, because of illness I could not attend to several communities that I had programmed for this week, but I send affectionate greetings to the parish of San Juan Opico, where the lay ministers are studying our pastoral letter, and also to San Rafael in Chalatenango, where we were going to celebrate the feast of the archangel Saint Raphael. I ended up celebrating Saint Raphael's feast in a hospital, thus giving evidence of my broken state of health but also showing that a hospital stay can serve as a time to pray for the community. I also was supposed to go to El Paraíso, where the Bethlehemite sisters were preparing an evaluation of their pastoral agents.

I could not participate either in the joy of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Father Moreno's ordination, which was held in the parish of San José Guayabal; that's where he had dreamed of celebrating his joyous years of priesthood. I also missed yesterday the famous Corn Festival that for years now they have organized in San Antonio Los Ranchos, but I sent them warm greetings and expressed my desire that that grain which is the basis of our diet never be lacking in our homes. I also congratulated them on their initiative in making good use of the waste products such as the husks and cobs to produce very artistic national products. This is an example of what a community can do when, besides embracing the Gospel, it also tries to develop its material resources. Last night I was also supposed to be in San Antonio Abad, but I couldn't attend that meeting where they were gathering together the fruit of their reflection and their work for the missions.

As you can see, then, there are a lot of reasons why our community should feel very concretely alive in so many places. In these days our community takes special joy in the Catholic schools because they have finished their difficult work of teaching for the year. With true family affection we hope that all the teachers, the religious, and above all the students will enjoy happy and healthy vacations. With regard to Catholic schools, we also celebrated the feast of Saint Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionist Sisters who serve in the Colegio de la Divina Providencia. In Sagrada Familia Parish I also had the satisfaction of receiving some excellent works on religion, including a study with responses to the questionnaire on the pastoral letter.

Let me also share with you, sisters and brothers, the immense satisfaction I felt in a meeting with the fifteen young men who graduated from the minor seminary. What is even better, they have all expressed their desire to continue next year in the major seminary. So fifteen graduates will start philosophy, in addition to others who didn't study in the minor seminary but come to the seminary from various public and religious schools. Our problem is that we've reached a point of almost not having space to accommodate so many promising vocations who are now starting philosophy. When they finish secondary school, the young men may broaden their academic horizons and consider a secular career, but many say they want to serve the people by being priests.

This community also opens its eyes to the whole universe. Even though this community has many concrete achievements, as I've just mentioned, it incorporates them into the flow of the universal church as part of its wealth and its experience of being blessed by God. And so,

within this perspective of the universal church, on Thursday this week our archdiocese gathered here in the cathedral with a goodly representation of priests, religious, and faithful to unite itself to the joy of the whole world for the new pontiff, John Paul II. I hope that you have seen him on television and realized that he is a truly pastoral man, humble but strong in his thoughts, popular, and polyglot. He is a marvelous man who knew how to give true meaning to the tiara, that triple crown that they place on the pope's head on the day of his coronation but that was not used with John Paul I. In reality, it is not the pope alone who has to bear the triple significance of the three powers of Christ: priest, prophet, and king. All the labors of the pontiffs, the priests, and all the pastoral agents are aimed at crowning the people of God from their baptism onward so that they develop the Christian qualities symbolized by those three crowns. All of you who are baptized, all of you who belong to the community of the archdiocese and beyond, are a priestly people, a prophetic people, and a royal people. This is your great dignity. Blessed be God that a pontiff knows how to remove the tiara from his head and place it on the people, telling them, «All of you are pontiffs, prophets, and kings». It is not just the pope but the whole baptized people who must assume the beauty of being responsible for the universal church. And so it is, sisters and brothers, that these events and others we might recall lead us to our reflection today.

But I want to make some announcements before beginning my reflection. On December 3, which will be the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new liturgical year, we're going to put into practice what we've been announcing all along: confirmation will now be conferred only on youngsters who have been prepared by their pastors and have a good understanding of the sacrament. They will have to show that they have received proper instruction. Just as children are not allowed to make their first communion without learning their catechism, so there will also be a catechism for confirmation. No one will be dispensed from this requirement, because this is a serious matter and has to do with the dignity of God's people. It is sad that so few people truly live the sacraments because they received no catechesis when they began their Christian lives. Therefore, pre-baptismal talks are also required for children to be baptized. Even if there are priests who don't want to impose this duty, Christians are not doing any favor by not receiving the talks. To the contrary, they are losing out on a service the church wants to provide for them. So I beseech all the priests to take this seriously and not baptize children who will be left ignorant of the faith. Rather, let us require preparation for those who are going to be responsible for educating them in the faith because at the time of baptism the children are unaware of what is happening.

This community, therefore, that seeks to live more intensely its sacramental life of faith is portrayed for us in today's readings as a communion of life, of love, and of truth. There you have my three thoughts.

Communion of life

We find an example of communion of life in the second reading. Saint Paul is writing to the community of Thessalonica, where he experienced the same difficulties he did everywhere. The Jews were his worst adversaries, but his message made sense to the Gentiles. This community accepted the preaching of Paul and his collaborators, Silvanus and Timothy, but the book of Acts tells us about the community's problems and how difficult it was for them to be truly a communion of life.

I'm going to read you this passage from the book of Acts so that you can see better what is happening in our own Christian communities here in the archdiocese. It's the same story as always. The community of Thessalonica, you should realize, was born some twenty years after the ascension of the Lord. The letters to the Thessalonians were the first writings of the New Testament. This was a budding community, we might say. Remember what it was like here twenty years ago, in 1958. Many of us can remember things that happened in that year. Well, in Thessalonica there were many people who had heard from the apostles about the recent happenings in Palestine; they had heard that the Son of God became man, died on a cross, and rose, and they were taught that believing in him meant salvation.

Even though the Jews experienced all these events close at hand, in Jerusalem, they did not understand them, except for the small group that followed Jesus. And that's why the apostles told the Jews, «We are going elsewhere to preach because there are people out there waiting for this Good News». And that's what happened. But the book of Acts reports the consequences: «The Jews, filled with envy, recruited some worthless men from the streets, formed a mob, and set the city in turmoil. They attacked Jason's house» (Acts 17:5). This Jason was a recent Christian convert who offered other Christians lodging because they were not accepted in the synagogue or in the official temple. That's where Paul began to preach to the Jews, but they told Paul, «You can no longer preach in this synagogue. Here we are the Jewish officials, and your teaching is against our order». (The same thing is happening in the churches that the usurpers have taken over: they have thrown out the Christians. Don't yield, beloved Christians!)

Paul then went with his group of Christians to the house of their friend Jason, and the authorities pursued them there, wanting to try them before the people. They shouted to the magistrates, «These Christians have been turning the world upside down. Now they have come here, and Jason has given them lodging. They go against the decrees of Caesar and claim that there is another king named Jesus» (Acts 17:6-7). What do you think of this, sisters and brothers? It's just like what they're saying about us now, «They are subversives. They are against authority. They should be put in prison». There is nothing strange in this, sisters and brothers, for the history of our communities is the history of persecution. Christians have always proclaimed that Jesus is truly King and Lord, and they have always proclaimed that his Gospel is the one and only word of salvation. And whenever Christians have used the word of God to denounce the abuses of worldly power, persecutions have arisen.

According to the book of Acts, they arrested the Christians, but they let Jason go free on bond (Acts 17:9). Later, in his letter to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul wrote the wonderful words of praise you just heard: «You have not allowed yourselves to be overcome by these difficulties, and from your community the word of the Lord has resonated throughout the world. You have believed in the living God» (1 Thess 1:8-9). So you see? This is the community of life. This is the church, a communion of life. And that's the reason why we come together now in the cathedral, in our country chapels, and in all our Christian gatherings. It's not to commemorate someone who's dead! What a sorry lot are those Christians who think that their religion is a museum of memories; their only desire is to preserve the memories and not expose themselves to danger. No, sisters and brothers, the church is communion and life; she is communion of life, and her members must confront life in real time. That is life. The church's laws, dogmas, and beliefs must be transformed into life. Those who don't want to understand the church this way are not worshiping the eternal living One, Christ, who will never die. We worship a living God who walks alongside the people, the God who tells us in today's first

reading not to commit injustices because if the poor victims of usurers and loan sharks «cry out to heaven, I will hear them, for I am the living God» (Exod 22:26).

Our religion is life. This is the most beautiful thing I want to tell you, and I do so with gratitude to God because preaching this religion as life is what has given resurrection and new life to many people whose faith had perished. There is meaning in believing; there is meaning in attending Mass on Sundays and nourishing yourselves there on the words of life, not because so-and-so speaks these words but because they are Christ's, the living Word par excellence. And so take courage, dear sisters and brothers! I know that many have fled like cowards when the hour of testing arrived. Our adversaries have terrorized catechists, celebrators of the word, and other people who have shared with us the joys of our meetings. People we thought were very strong are frightened, but it's because they have forgotten that ours is a religion of life and that, as life, it must clash with any life that is not God's life but exists as a kingdom of darkness and sin in the world.

Let us hope, dear sisters and brothers, that this invitation extended to us today by the word of God and the example of Thessalonica may stay alive among us. Since people are now reflecting seriously on the Holy Bible, I invite the base ecclesial communities to take as a theme of reflection the story of this community of Thessalonica and learn from it how history is constantly repeating itself.

Communion of truth

A second aspect of the church is that she is a communion of truth. It is beautiful to realize that our Christian faith is the truth. None of us can say that we are the sole owners of the truth. No person is infallible, only God. But when we believe in him who is the source of truth and commit ourselves to him, we are persons of faith. We have the truth, and even if we don't understand it, we have accepted it. I hope and pray that all of you who are listening to me now are persons of faith, so that Saint Paul might address you as he did the Christians of Thessalonica: «I know how active your faith is» (1 Thess 1:3). Faith is active because faith is life. What I wish, sisters and brothers, is that our communities be what Saint Paul says of Thessalonica: «Your faith in God has spread from mouth to mouth so that we have no need to explain anything. The people themselves talk about the visit we paid you and how you abandoned the idols and turned to God. Now you serve the living and true God and wait for the return from heaven of his Son Jesus, whom he raised from the dead and who will deliver you from the coming wrath» (1 Thess 1:8-10).

A Christian community is evangelized in order to evangelize. A light is turned on in order to give light. «People do not light a candle and put it under a basket», said Christ. «They light it and put it up high so that it gives light» (Matt 5:15). That is true community. A community is a group of women and men who have found the truth in Christ and in his Gospel and who join together to follow the way of truth more resolutely. It is not just a matter of individual conversion but of community conversion. A community is a family that believes; it is a group where each member accepts God and feels strengthened by the others. In their moments of weakness, they help one another and love one another; they shed the light of their faith as an example for others. When that happens, the preachers no longer need to preach because there are Christians whose very lives have become a form of preaching.

I said once before and I repeat today, sisters and brothers, that if some sad day they silence our radio and stop us from writing in our newspaper, then all of you who believe must become microphones, radio stations, and loudspeakers—not by talking but by living the faith. That's why I'm not afraid that our faith will depend only on the archbishop's preaching. I don't think I'm that important. What I do think is that my discourse, which is nothing more than a poor echo of the word of God, enters straight into your hearts—not because it's mine, but because it comes from God. And I believe that all you people of good will—men, women, communities—are taking this word and giving it life so that it gets preached by the way you live. With the same joy as Saint Paul I can say to the communities of the archdiocese that you are the ones who are carrying this preaching to those round about you (1 Thess 1:8). If I were to begin to name all our communities, it would take me all day, but just change the name of Thessalonica to the well-known names of our towns and villages—you are the communities who are now preaching the Gospel.

Be well aware that there is a content to faith; it is not simply blind faith in God. Rather, we must make an effort to be instructed. Saint Paul sums up the content this way: «You turned to the living and true God to await the return from heaven of his Son Jesus» (1 Thess 1:9). There are three things here: first, monotheism, that is, renouncing all idols in order to believe in the one and only God; second, Christology, believing in a Son of God who became man, who was named Christ, and who died and rose again; and third, eschatology, believing in a world beyond and hoping that that Son of God who is alive in eternity will come to judge the living and the dead. The sin of this world is already condemned, and he will condemn it definitively when he says, «Go into eternal fire, you accursed ones», to those who never wanted to be truly converted (Matt 25:41). This is a summary of the content of our faith; this is the communion of truth; and these are the great truths. We believe in the one true God, and for the sake of this true God we renounce all the false powers.

Do you remember last week when John Paul II spoke about the power of the tiara as the power of Christ that belongs to the whole people of God? He told us, «Open the doors to that power of Christ. Don't be afraid! Let society's economic, political, and social concerns be opened up to that power»³! Don't tell me that the pope is not talking about politics. He told us to open up the field of politics because Christ is going to preach his kingdom to the politicians because without the kingdom politics become a tragic drama of wolves preying on humankind. Only Christ can instill a human meaning into the relationship between capital and labor. Only Christ can make that relationship humane and considerate. Now that we are coming to the season when the harvesting of our fields should bring happiness to all of us who were born in this nation, may the Christian sensibility we heard about in the first reading inspire us so that what God has created for us all is equitably and justly shared between the privileged and the poor.

Two years ago the man who is now pope was invited by Pope Paul VI to preach a retreat in the Vatican. Cardinal Wojtyla followed that retreat up with a book that his fellow cardinal, the primate of Poland, recently published. In one of the meditations that Cardinal Wojtyla presented for Pope Paul VI and all the members of the Roman Curia, he said what now appears in *L'Osservatore Romano*: «In this world there is certainly a great charge of faith»—these words came to my mind because I'm saying that the church is a community of faith—«and there is a

³ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the Official Inaugural Mass of his Pontificate», 22 October 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 October 1978).

considerable margin of freedom for the mission of the church, but often it is only a certain margin. To see this it suffices to observe the principal tendencies that prevail in the mass media; it suffices to pay attention to what is kept quiet and what is announced loudly; it suffices to tune the ear in order to detect what encounters the greatest opposition; it suffices to see where Christ is accepted and where there is opposition to Christ with respect to the complete truth about his person, his mission, and his Gospel. It seems that people want to "mold him" and fit him into the human dimensions of the age of progress and the program of modern civilization, which is a program of consumerism with no transcendent goals. Such attitudes produce opposition to Christ and provide no support to the truth proclaimed and preserved in his name. Even as people talk about Christ, including some who call themselves his disciples, there is opposition to him, and that is a significant symptom of the times in which we live»⁴.

This is the thinking of the present pontiff. When people want to think that anti-Marxism is something inspired by Christianity, they should not forget that what scares many anti-Marxists is not Marxism; what scares them is losing their privileges. They proclaim themselves Christians and say, «Look here, there is a margin of freedom!» Yes, the cardinal says, «but only a margin». There is a margin of freedom, but what is the main thing? The press, the television, the laws—they're not on the margin; they're the center of everything, and they have no room for Christ. They have room only for consumerism and greed. How misnamed certain Christians are! How can we call Christian a society in which Christ and his church are left with only a margin for faith and freedom, only the very edge of the page for their message!

Cardinal Wojtyla, who has also lived in different circumstances, continued his meditation for the pope thus: «But it is not just opposition to Christ. Along with that, another opposition has arisen, probably from the same historical base and perhaps even from the same opposition to Christ» Take careful note of those words, «another opposition has arisen».⁵ Who is to blame for the triumph of communism? The anti-Marxists are the ones who play into the hands of communism. What the pope is saying here is that, if that opposition to Christ called communism has arisen, a large part of the reason is the selfishness of Christians themselves.

The Second Vatican Council also stated that atheism is not a phenomenon that was born spontaneously. A major part of the blame belongs to those who believe in God but who, instead of revealing God, conceal him in their behavior and live as though God did not exist (GS 19). If communism is atheistic—don't be shocked at this, sisters and brothers—capitalism is also atheistic in practice. If capitalism allows faith a margin of freedom, it is just a margin. The important thing, though, is what the cardinal was saying when he spoke of the historical form of that opposition to Christ; he stated that the blame for it lay largely with the false Christianity of those who defended their greed more than they defended Christ. He called communism «a form of direct opposition to Christ». Thus you can see that the church is not communist. These are the words of a cardinal who lived in a communist society. And I am saying the very same thing, following the requirements of the church's social justice, namely, that communism «is a form of direct opposition to Christ, a blatant rejection of the Gospel, and a denial of God's truth about humankind and the world as proclaimed in the Gospel. At times this rejection takes on brutal forms». But one may sometimes ask: where is the most brutal opposition? The cardinal continues, «It is well known that there still exist countries where the churches of all

⁴ «Writings of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (22 October 1978).

⁵ Ibid. In these paragraphs Romero inserts his own comments into passages quoted from Cardinal Wojtyla.

denominations are closed, where priests are condemned to death for administering baptism». But also here among us, priests have been killed because they preached social justice. What difference is there between that world and this one? «Perhaps in those lands of persecution there are still remains of the ancient Christian catacombs and of the stadiums in which the witnesses of Christ were thrown to the beasts to be destroyed. Nevertheless, the persecution characteristic of the final years of the twentieth century offers a panorama completely different from the one of ancient times, and it therefore has a completely different meaning»⁶.

Cardinal Wojtyla's meditation is magnificent, but these two thoughts allow me to show you, dear sisters and brothers, that if our church is a communion of faith—this is the final thought—she will not let herself be deceived by the meager margins of faith and freedom that certain systems that claim to be protectors of the church want to impose on her. If we are really a communion of faith, we should not be content unless we feel that this faith is life-giving and unless we manifest this faith in our lives without fear of the situation we find ourselves in. Cardinal Wojtyla recalls the times of the catacombs and the martyrs in the coliseums, and he also recalls the prisons of Marxism because he experienced communism directly. And here we have experienced the prisons and the tortures of the capitalist system. The important thing is that, in whatever system we live, our faith in Christ should be the torch that gives serenity, courage, and hope to this life.

Communion of love

Finally, let us speak of the communion of love. I left this for last because the readings have already said it so well. The first reading from Exodus is from the book of the covenant, which speaks of God forming an alliance with humankind: «I shall be your God, and you shall be my people» (Lev 26:12). But like every covenant, there are conditions, including a series of laws that you can read in these chapters of Exodus. Today we heard only the social laws: «You shall not mistreat or oppress an alien because you were once aliens in Egypt. You shall not exploit any widow or orphan because if you exploit them, they will cry to me, and I will hear them» (Exod 22:20-23). What tremendous arguments!

Christ sees everything that is done to poor people. How moved I was by the grief of the poor widow of that man who maintained the water pump at the university! How hard she tried to save her husband! Even his children saw him when they were hacking him to death! How she was hoping he might still somehow be alive! Then they bluntly told her, «He's dead. He's buried over by Suchitoto». This is the cry of the widows and the orphans that rises up to God, and God does not remain deaf: «My anger will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, leaving your wives widows and your children orphans» (Exod 22:24). The Bible is tremendous! «If you lend money, do not act like a moneylender» (Exod 22:25). I know of a recent case where a loan of five thousand pesos became thirty-five thousand, and they seized the house of the poor man and his nine children.

Dear sisters and brothers, what we are seeing is not a communion of love. It is as though we are trapped in that whole complex of laws that the Pharisees invented. The Bible commentators say that in the time of Jesus the Jewish legal system was so complicated that there were 613 commandments; 248 were positive commands, and 365 were prohibitions:

⁶ Ibid.

«You shall not do this, you shall not do this, you shall not do this....» So the people lived entangled in casuistry.

During the days when Christ was waging his final battle to establish his kingdom, which was to be founded on his crucifixion and resurrection, one of those doctors of the law approached him. It was the last week of his life, and Jesus was in the atrium of the temple of Jerusalem. His adversaries arrived there to test him with very dangerous questions, such as the one from last Sunday that we didn't have a chance to discuss since it was the Day of the Missions: «Is it permissible to pay tribute to Caesar or not?» (Matt 22:17). This time they asked him another question about that massive tangle of 613 laws: «What is the greatest of all the commandments?» (Matt 22:36).

That's difficult, right? Choosing among 613 precepts which one is the greatest! That's why the most the scribes ever achieved was dividing the precepts between those that were serious and those that were minor. But Christ told them incisively, «This is the first commandment, and on it is founded all God's revelation. You have so entangled the revelation of the Lord that now no one understands it. You have made human laws instead of the law of God. Let's get rid of all those thistles and pay attention to what is important. This is the greatest commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your being. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself» (Matt 22:37-39).

My sisters and brothers, the uniqueness of Christ's statement is not in the words he recited. These were words that nearly every Jew prayed as a profession of faith in the famous *shema*, as it was called, the Hebrew word meaning «hear». That prayer begins with the words, «Hear, O Israel, there is only one God» (Deut 6:4). By recalling that famous text of the *shema*, Christ reaffirmed that God is most important of all. In saying this Christ was like any other Jew; he was recalling what the Bible says.

But what was unique about Christ was something else, and let us not forget it. Along with this great and grave commandment, «You shall love God», he placed at the same level: «and your neighbor as yourself». This indeed is unique about Christianity, that you love your neighbor with the same motive with which you love God. This is the chief characteristic of the Gospel. That is why, when Christ was taking leave of his disciples, he spoke the new commandment: «Love one another as I have loved you (John 13:34), because not only have I loved my Father with all my heart, but for love of him I have also loved you even to the point of giving my life for you». This is what is unique and original in our faith, sisters and brothers. It is very easy; indeed, it's almost an evasion to say, «I go to church out of love for God, and my neighbor matters little to me». Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan: the priest and Levite were men of the church, but they failed in their duty because, in their hurry to get to the temple to pray, they left the poor wounded man on the road; they were not neighbors, declared Christ (Luke 10:29-37).

Events of the week

In this context of a community of love, sisters and brothers, I want to refer now to the social context in which we find ourselves. How lacking in love it is! I've heard that this week there has been much torture in an effort to extract extrajudicial confessions. I know that several prisoners have been brought before the courts for violations of the Law of Public Order, and

they've appeared in court with horrible signs of being tortured with electric shock and goads and being brutally beaten. Even more shameful is the immoral exposing of naked women. It is sad to see the state in which certain persons come before the court, almost having to drag themselves. The court doctors have confirmed the deplorable physical state of these prisoners.

Since August 19 Isabel Rodríguez Barrera has been convalescing in the Rosales Hospital under the guard of the National Police. His case has not been presented to any court of the republic. What will become of him?

There are many kidnappings and arrests that have remained a mystery. Recently one community begged me to denounce the capture of Neftalí Gutiérrez, Evangelina Galdámez, and José Salvador Menjivar. What we are asking, sisters and brothers, is what we have repeated many times, even though people say we're «repetitive». It's not for the sake of repeating; it's because what we want is for them to be brought before the courts and, if they are guilty, that they be punished legally. But nobody has the right to punish another human being with torture. It's impossible even to remember all the cases of arrests and disappearances there have been. That is the saddest thing. It's almost as if it's becoming something normal, something we're become accustomed to. The victims of the violence seem so intimidated that they cannot utter a word. Are the threats made to them so horrifying?

We also want to recall that the time is coming for the wages of the *campesinos* to be revised. Not much importance has been given to the publication of the Ministry of Labor which gave a fifty-centavo increase to coffee and cotton workers⁷. In our weekly paper, *Orientación*, there is an analysis which shows that this meager increase does not even make up for the inflation we are now experiencing⁸. As a result rural workers will have less purchasing power even with this increase in wages, which is in no way equivalent to what is just.

I have spoken with people who cultivate sugar cane and other crops, and I understand they have their reasons. But I say that there is a higher authority that imposes order; there is a moral force which requires the equitable sharing of the product of our earth which God wants to be truly for the benefit of all. It is not communism to be asking that the voice of the *campesinos* be heard. Rather, just as those who produce the harvests of our land can organize and make themselves heard, so also those who collaborate in bringing in the harvest should also be able to organize and make their voices heard.

We also deplore the many labor conflicts. Wherever workers try to organize themselves there immediately follow repression and dismissal. Labor is thus unable to organize, as the pontiffs themselves have urged on numerous occasions.

Also, sisters and brothers, in our prayer as community today we are going to remember the situation in Nicaragua. It seems that a pessimistic atmosphere is taking hold since the international interventions are not responding to the people's needs. For our part, I want to thank you for the generous donation we already sent to Archbishop Obando Bravo of Managua. It was more than 6,000 *colones*. If we can still continue to help them, the need is always there. They are a people who are suffering greatly.

⁷ *El Diario de Hoy* (24 October 1978).

⁸ «Impoverishment of the Rural Population Accelerates» in *Orientación* (29 October 1978).

We are also in solidarity with our sister republic of Guatemala during this time of anguish when terrorists belonging to an organization called the Secret Anti-Communist Army have issued very dangerous threats that are already becoming reality. We also pray this morning, sisters and brothers, for the intention of the pope that there be peace in the Middle East. Truly, the church's great desire is that peace return to the world.

Community of life, community of truth and faith, community of love and charity. Let us not be otherwise. This is our church. But because of her life, because of her love, because of her faith the church cannot remain dormant in the face of so many injustices. Even if people object, the church must cry out precisely because she is a community of life, faith, and love of God and because God requires love and justice among human beings as a proof of our love of him. She is not a church that places her confidence in earthly powers. That is why we now go immediately to the altar of Jesus Christ. There we find him, the eternal living One in whom we believe, by whom we live, in whom we hope. That is why we come to Mass. So let us now approach the altar of the Lord.