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Chosen to Be Sent

Ordination to the Priesthood of Jaime Paredes, Basilica of the Sacred Heart, San Salvador, 1 March 1980

Dear Jaime, beloved fellow priests, and much loved people of God, to understand the profundity of this moment, we must hark back to that morning when Christ, after spending the night in prayer, chose the first priests of Christianity (Luke 6:12-14). And we must go even further back to the eternal depths of God, which Christ revealed to us on the day when his enemies attacked him as a demoniac. Christ responded that the Father had chosen him and sent him into the world. Those words contain the essence of our priesthood: chosen to be sent¹.

From that same eternity of God, whence came the act of creating a human race to populate the world, arose also the idea of a priestly people, of men and women inhabiting the world who would lift themselves up in prayer to God and be missionaries of his love to the whole of humanity. Immediately after the incarnation of Christ, therefore, there came the people of God, a priestly people to which we belong by our baptism. In God's plan this is what comes first: a priestly people called «the church» which has a very sublime mission to accomplish: a mission of worship and a mission of salvation.

Through our mission of worship, humankind is raised up to the Creator in thanksgiving, in supplication, and in recognition of his divine majesty. Worship is the essential act of every creature that has intelligence, heart, and will. But it is not only worship that God desires. He also wants the people who are raised up to him in worship and prayer to be a missionary people who carry redemption out to this world that is mired in sin.

That is the priestly mission of the church. When Christ became incarnate, the incarnation did not end with that miraculous event in the virginal bosom of Mary but has been prolonged through the whole of history. Every man and every woman who comes to believe in Christ is incorporated into him by baptism, so that Christ continually becomes incarnate in order to continue the creation of the people of God that worships and brings God's salvation to the whole world.

Out of this incarnational reality there arises the need for the ministerial priesthood, men who will preserve the priestly line of the people of God. They are men taken from among the people, and their ministry is to be concerned about the things of God and to inspire the people in their mission of worship and salvation. They are men who follow the example of Christ, who becomes incarnate in order to be present among the peoples and the families of every race and every sector, to be present wherever humanity understands the need to be saved and to be raised up to God.

¹ These words have been made the title of the homily since Archbishop Romero did not supply a title himself, as he usually did.

That is how ministerial priesthood comes to be, and as the first reading just told us, it requires men who have been known by God from their mother's womb. Saint Paul says that God made us suitable for this ministry. By God's design we were born as persons who would be dedicated to worshiping God, preaching his word, and calling all people to salvation.

Nourishing the people is our reason for being; we do not exist for ourselves. We should take care of the priesthood, but not as something we possess. It is a gift of God to the people. The mission Christ confides to the church is not something to be kept pure and spotless and tidy. It is not a source for self-satisfaction but a mission that is to be carried forth to the world. The church's reason for being is the same as Christ's: «He anointed me; he chose me; he consecrated me to go forth, to be sent into the world».

Your priesthood, then, consists in two things. One is to be consecrated, and that is what we are doing this morning. In a short while we will have the honor and delight as bishop and priests, your brothers in a new family, of placing our hands on you, as if we were entrusting a great treasure and heritage to your responsibility and your conscience. I will also have the immense honor of taking the sacred chrism, a sign of the anointing that made Christ supremely holy, and anointing your hands with it, thus making you a priest forever.

I am going to set you apart, but it is not I who do so. I am the humble instrument of almighty God who anointed Christ in eternity and who today will anoint you. He will choose you and consecrate you. He will call you forth from the world to be a man who is definitively consecrated not just for a time but for always, not just at certain levels of your humanity but in the whole of your being. Like the humanity of Christ, your own humanity will be anointed and permeated by the Spirit of God. You will no longer belong to yourself, you will no longer belong to your family, and in a way you will no longer belong even to humanity because God is choosing you and anointing you and making you his own. He is giving you the ability to carry forth God's word and God's blessing. You are to be intimately consecrated by God, as Christ said, «He chose me, he anointed me, and he sanctified me, not simply to rest in that blessing but to be sent».

This consecration, which in a certain sense removes you from the human sphere, allows you to go deeper into what is truly human so that from there you can carry the mission of worship and salvation to the world. Whenever you celebrate Mass, you must gather together, under the sign of bread and wine, the fruits of the earth and of human labor, all the sufferings, the hopes, the sorrows, the longings for justice for the people, the anguish of so many who suffer, and you must say, «So that all this is not lost on earth, let us lift it up in worship to God». And all that will be transformed into the body and blood of the Lord thanks to your words, which will make the Mass into the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, thus giving divine meaning to all the sorrow and all the hope of humankind.

Besides celebrating Mass, you will pray and recite your breviary. Prayer is the essence of our priestly life: spending nights in prayer as Christ did and finding in the depths of the Father forgiveness for this desperate humanity and the grace that we need in our limitations. We should offer thanksgiving for all the holy people there are in our country, and we should ask forgiveness for all the bad people there are in our country as well. Such will be your labor of worship before God.

But worship is not the only mission of the priest, just as Christ's offering was not only worship². ... [Your mission is also to save] families that are disrupted by sin, to save people from the idolatry of worshiping the things of earth, and to make them worshipers of the one God. Your mission is to save people from the injustices that cause them great sorrows. And do not be afraid, even if the people do not understand. Remember that Israel, when Moses was leading them out of Egypt, pined for the flesh pots of Egypt and heaped abuse on poor Moses: «You should have left us to die there» (Exod 16:2-3). If we don't understand the liberating dimension of salvation, we are defenseless before those who don't want to make history, those who don't want to journey to the promised land and free themselves from the servitude in which they've been accustomed to live.

Freedom from sin—the priest cannot tolerate sin. He must denounce and destroy it wherever it is found even though he knows that often he will be killed by those who are determined to glorify sin. The priest cannot be an accomplice of the glorification of sin. His salvific mission will therefore be filled with difficulties and conflicts. In last Sunday's gospel Christ told us, «Woe to you if you are praised and held in esteem by those who think they are important in the world because that is the way they tickled the ears of the false prophets» (Luke 6:26). Instead, «blessed are you when they pursue you and vilify you for my name's sake because your reward will be great in heaven» (Luke 6:22-23).

The authentic prophet, the true priest, and the true mission of the church will be known by the independence given them by God. By God's free word they will keep preaching and keep denouncing all sins and all injustices. Their mission must be one of salvation, but they will not save if they do not denounce sinfulness. They must also be ready to be denounced for their own sins, for the prophet must be ready to receive reproaches for his evil and unworthy behavior. That is why we must make every effort to be the principal followers of the Christ who asks of us the stubborn radicality of the Gospel: «No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven» (Luke 9:62). «Let the dead bury their dead» (Luke 9:60). «Whoever does not love me more than his own family and his dearest ones is not worthy of me» (Matt 10:37). These words are astonishing and appear heartless, but we must understand that those who abandon everything for his sake «will obtain the kingdom of heaven» (Matt 19:29) and that «those who are afraid to lose their lives or who avoid the conflicts that come with the Gospel end up losing their lives» (Matt 16:25). If we understand this, then we will value more this radical posture that makes us faithful to the Lord's mission.

Beloved Jaime, I have drawn very close to your soul but still do not know the depths of your spiritual and priestly riches. I am sure, nonetheless, that you will be faithful in carrying out the mission that comes with this tremendous heritage of priestly consecration. Christ chose a very deliberate path, which is the path we all must choose. It is the path we must follow if we want to present a good account of ourselves at the end of our lives. The path of Christ is what theology calls kenosis, which means emptying oneself or humbling oneself. Though Christ had all the richness of divinity, he became poor to save the poor and, as one of the poor, to save all humankind. There is no other path of salvation. It is not demagogic when Christ himself says, «The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to announce Good News to the poor» (Luke 4:18). This is not meant to exclude anybody. The Gospel is calling all social classes to experience the problems of the poor as if they were their own problems, which is how Christ experienced them. Even though he was God and deserved earthly honors more than anyone

² The tape recording of the sermon was interrupted here for a moment.

else, he wanted to be born unworthily in a manger as the poorest among the poor; he wanted to be a poor man sentenced to ignominious suffering and death. This is the kenosis that Christ wants us³. That is why «God gave him the name that is above every name, before which every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth» (Phil 2:9-10). Our true glory and our true prestige are not found in our successful accomplishments but in God's being pleased with us and in Christ's seeing that we are trying to follow him closely in his poverty, his humiliation, and his cross.

I assure you, dear Jaime, that you will deserve the greatest prestige when your priesthood embraces the cross, the poverty, and the kenosis of the Lord. There is no priesthood more appreciated, more effective, or more beneficial for the whole of humanity than that of the priest who faithfully fulfills the mission for which he has been consecrated. He will identify with his consecrated state and never betray his priestly identity or exchange his priestly goals for things of the earth. Rather, he will give salt, leaven, light, and vigor to all earthly things, including the very difficult liberation struggles our people are now involved in. And all this he will do with the courageous integrity of the Gospel which demands the justice of God's kingdom.

So, giving thanks to the Lord, we are going to proceed to this very significant act. I especially want to thank your dear parents and your family because there's no doubt that a priest is always the product of the seeds of faith and love that were sown in the good ground of the family. You also bring glory to them, as you do to all of us who have known you for a long time and are here now as your friends. Here with us also are you new friends, the seminarians and the communities who have come from Chalatenango. You have shared with them the simple and holy life of those regions. All these people now constitute your priestly family. You are not betraying your family name or your blood relations; you are betting on the future and will not lose.

Who can be prouder today than your dear parents, knowing that their intimate love is now prolonged in your priestly life, in your new spiritual family, and in your brother priests, who will now approach to place the priestly character on your head and on your conscience. You will find support in them and in the prayer of this people, who are the reason why all of us are priests. The destiny of the entire church is at stake. All of us want priests to always be priests, and we want their words to teach authentically the ways of the Lord. We don't want them to deceive us, like those false teachers that Saint Paul denounced, the ones who in their desire for flattery would not commit themselves to facing the world's difficulties.

The longing I want to sow in the consciences of all of you, dear fellow priests, religious and faithful, is the longing to build a church like the one the Lord wanted when he had his Son become man: a church which keeps extending the incarnation in which all of us are involved as the people of Christ, a church that is lifted up to the Lord in prayer and worship and that, by the integrity of the Gospel, saves this world so badly in need of salvation.

³ Some words on the tape recording are indistinct.