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THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CHURCH

Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

6 November 1977

2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14

2 Thessalonians 2:15-3:5

Luke 20:27-38

This Mass, dear sisters and brothers, seems more and more to me to be a family gathering. We are the family of the archdiocesan community that gathers in the cathedral, the central church of the community, and also by means of the radio. The pastors are always present with the many parish communities and base communities as they gather in their chapels or their homes to share the joys, the hopes, the anxieties, and the ideals that should be common to us all. That is why these announcements and news items at the beginning of the homily are not just for the sake of information; they also help us share our common concerns. Those who sympathize with the church should feel themselves united in these ideals, these hopes, and these sorrows. And those who do not identify with us should at least know the path along which our people of God walk. Still, I am delighted to know that each day more and more people are sympathizing with the life of the church—not with me personally for I am secondary, but with the church which I unworthily represent. You know that all those who esteem me esteem Jesus Christ whom I represent, and all those who malign me and persecute me and despise me—it is not me personally they reject; rather, they reject the One who sent me. So I rejoice with all those who day by day are turning more toward the Lord. Hopefully the fruit of my poor words will bring people closer to God. My ideal is that of John the Baptist: that he, Jesus Christ, increase and I decrease, disappear (John 3:30). In this spirit, then, sisters and brothers I recount to you my diary for this week.

My diary for this week

Last Sunday I had the great satisfaction of sharing with the faithful of Cojutepeque their traditional feast of Christ the King, despite the obstacles presented for some pilgrims. I witnessed these obstacles because on arriving in Cojutepeque I saw some pilgrims being detained at gunpoint. They finally arrived, but there is no reason to view with suspicion devout folk who come to take part in these gatherings. I would hope that we can avoid these provocations and that our religious meetings can be freely convened since they clearly are held for pious, evangelical purposes. There is no reason to detain and threaten people. Nonetheless, the celebration was quite splendid. I want to congratulate the Knights of Christ the King in Cojutepeque, the many pilgrims, and their pastor for their fervent love of Christ who is king of our church.

On Monday an unexpected visit to the Colonia Amatepec and environs filled my soul with great joy. Though the visit was unplanned, I experienced a warm welcome

from those folks who are so carefully pastored by Dominican Father Luis Burguet. I assure you that a strong community is growing there in those zones that are very poor but have hearts that are very rich.

My spirit was also filled with great satisfaction at the Mass organized by the Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart. The Mass was celebrated at the grave of Father Grande in El Paisnal on All Saints Day as a prelude for All Souls. Before the symbolic grave of Father Grande and the two companions who perished with him in that murder in March, I prayed for all the deceased faithful of the archdiocese. And from there also we raised our sight to the many saints who form part of that international entourage of which the Apocalypse speaks, saints drawn «from every nation, race, people, and tongue» (Rev 7:9). And I saw there, alongside Father Grande and those who have died offering their lives for their faith and the Gospel, a countless host of people from every class of our society. There, amidst the cosmopolitan multitudes of heaven, they surround the Lamb who is Redeemer of humankind.

That same afternoon of All Saints Day I presided at a beautiful confirmation ceremony organized by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who work in the rehabilitation of young people. I was confirmed in my belief that preparation for this sacrament of strengthening in the Holy Spirit should be excellent, as it was that afternoon with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. How impressive it was to see that group of young people walk in procession behind the paschal candle that represents the risen Christ. Then, gathered around that candle, they renewed the baptismal commitments and received the new gift of the Holy Spirit that is confirmation. This morning we are going to celebrate a similar ceremony in the parish of Colón. And so from here I call upon all parents to prepare your children better for confirmation. I tell you frankly that I do not like those massive confirmations in the crypt of the cathedral. I do not like them because many do not know what they are receiving. As little children they do not need that strength that they will certainly need when they are older. So it is better that they prepare themselves well. The pastors are already collaborating in this regard; they are providing better preparation for confirmation groups so that the sacrament is what the word says: confirmation of their baptismal faith, a strengthening in the Holy Spirit, a sacrament for young women and men.

On Wednesday at the school of the Sisters of the Assumption in the parish of Lourdes we had a very interesting meeting regarding the pastoral planning of that parish. This pastoral work gives us great hope because that community of religious sisters has been ministering there for a long time.

On the afternoon of November 3 in Quezaltepeque I had the joy of celebrating the feast of Saint Martin de Porres. Many boys and girls carrying brooms and dressed like Saint Martin represented the call and the message of this kind and humble saint, namely, that the persons who attract God's best blessings are not privileged people in lofty positions, but the humble souls who like Martin de Porres make their brooms and their daily chores, whether small or great, instruments of their sanctification. The destiny of men and women is not to have a lot of money, not to have much power, not to be famous and esteemed, but to fulfill the will of God. This is the message that we left in Quezaltepeque alongside the black saint, Martin de Porres.

I also take delight, sisters and brothers, in telling you about the profound reflections we shared with the seminary leadership team, the young priests who have been trained to form our future clergy. I realized how serious and how deep their commitment to this ministry is, and so I ask that we all have confidence in our seminary and pray hard so that it will truly forge the apostles that our archdiocese and our church need today.

Finally, the high point of our week was yesterday morning in Santiago de María. There, in communion with all the hierarchy and in the presence of many religious and parish communities, our beloved brother, Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas, took possession of the diocese of Santiago de María. Using the same words that he spoke during his homily to the multitudes that surrounded the pavilion of the central park, I can tell you that on very few occasions has Santiago de María seen such an eloquent presence of the church as yesterday. Besides the whole hierarchy and many priests from all the dioceses, the presence of many faithful laity and many men and women religious made it clear that the church is very much alive and present in our country and concretely yesterday in Santiago de María. I want to repeat to Bishop Rivera all the pledges that were made yesterday as well as the pledges we expressed last Sunday here in this cathedral, namely, to remain united with him in prayer and in work.

Also, sisters and brothers, I want to tell you about two letters among the many I received this week. One was from Cardinal Bernard Alfrink, the international president of Pax Christi. From Holland he writes that he is informed about the situation of our church, and he says, «I ask you to communicate to your collaborators and the people of your country our feelings of sympathy and solidarity. We are united with you in praying for justice and in your struggle to restore respect for human rights».

There is another important letter. You have heard of Brother Roger and the famous monastery of Taizé. It is neither a Catholic nor a Protestant monastery, but rather a Christian monastery. There in France its doors are open to all those who love Christ no matter what their confession, Protestant or Catholic. Brother Roger has promised to visit El Salvador. You were able to read in *Orientación*¹ an open letter that Brother Roger wrote to the president of the republic asking for his effective collaboration in respect for human rights. His letter says that he will visit our country «so that we may pray together and listen to one another, and also to obtain from the president guarantees that the acts of persecution will cease».

For it is sad, sisters and brothers, that the persecution continues. This week we have received very sad news from the department of Chalatenango. But the saddest news came this weekend: the attack against the pastor of Osicala, Father Miguel Ventura. It is true he does not belong to our diocese but to the diocese of San Miguel; still, a sense of solidarity compels me to protest against this assault on a brother priest.

I received some rough details about how they tied him up like a vile criminal; they beat him and kept him detained at the police station in Gotera. Besides him some catechists have also suffered and been disappeared. There is no time to enter into

¹ «Open Letter of the Prior of Taizé to the President of the Republic of El Salvador» in *Orientación* (11 September 1977).

details, but it is clear that these actions do not allow us to conclude that government relations with the church are getting better. I want to remind you about canon 119 of our ecclesiastical laws, which states, «All the faithful owe reverence to clerics according to their various grades and offices, and they commit a sacrilege if they do real injury to a cleric».² Anyone who touches a priest, especially in the way they touched Father Miguel, is guilty of sacrilege. There is also the sanction found in canon 2343: «Whoever lays violent hands to the person of other clerics or to religious of either sex is upon that fact subject to excommunication reserved to his own ordinary, who shall punish such a one with other penalties, if the matter requires it, according to his prudent judgment».³ In other words, all those persons who tied up Father Miguel and who assault any priest are excommunicated by the simple fact of doing so, and only their own bishop can lift this sanction. In this case, only Bishop Alvarez can lift the penalty of excommunication for the offense committed against one of his priests; he can also punish those guilty of sacrilege with more serious penalties.

I think enough has been said, sisters and brothers, so that we all understand where we are heading in our church at this moment. From the perspective of this historical moment we lift our sight to contemplate in today's homily the light of the beautiful words the church has read to us.

The eschatological church

We might title this homily, «The Eschatological Church». The word «eschatology» means the study of the last things. Through eschatology the church points out to all people the final realities, the destiny toward which we are moving as individuals, as communities, as a nation. Eschatology is one of the most important themes in contemporary theology for it is the science, the knowledge, the experience, and the hope that Christians have about the last things. I would say, sisters and brothers, that eschatology gives our church a most original dynamic, a dynamic of hope that can be born only of very great faith. But sadly, as Saint Paul has told us today, «Not everyone has faith» (2 Thess 3:2).

Not everyone has faith. What sadness I feel to think that some of my listeners belong to this excluded group! And this not through God's fault but because of the ill will of people whose hearts reject the preaching or the preacher. Do not focus on my person, repugnant for many. Focus rather on what I say in the name of the One who speaks with a profound knowledge of eschatology. I say to you who hear me, dear sisters and brothers, dear priests, religious, catechists, collaborators of God's kingdom: the day when we Catholics understand eschatology, many of the petty divisions will disappear from among us.

As we were saying two weeks ago with regard to the missions, the day when we understand this universal work of the church—this mission of carrying the message of salvation to all the world, a mission God has entrusted to our people—divisions will disappear because of the universal demands upon us. I called upon our Protestant sisters and brothers to struggle to unite instead of sowing more sects and making Christianity more divided. We as Protestants and Catholics are giving a horrible witness

² *Code of Canon Law*, 119. Archbishop Romero quotes the 1917 Code, valid until the promulgation of the new Code in 1983.

³ *Code of Canon Law*, 2343, # 4.

by being so divided, and more so you Protestants for being divided into so many sects, all of them calling themselves Christian and all professing the Bible. It is as if Christ were divided, says Saint Paul (1 Cor 1:13). We have the obligation to unite in his message by rooting out our selfishness and our individualist ways of thinking. Only in this way will we present the one faith in the one Christ and form the one flock that will save the whole world.

This universal perspective is needed for us to become more united, but I also believe that this eschatological perspective is another dynamic, another force, that can unite us solidly. By this perspective we realize that we journey toward the same destiny; we realize that we are crew members on the same ship; and we realize that it is the same beacon with the same light that guides our common ship in the midst of the storms of time and life.

What do this Sunday's readings teach us about eschatology? I would like you to take note of this circumstance: it is almost the last Sunday of the church year—the Sunday after next is the very last. The church crowns the church year with the feast of Christ the King. Next Sunday we will be celebrating the feast of Christ the King as the crown of the whole liturgical year. He is the king of time, the king of all the years; he begins and crowns the years of life. That is why today, the Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time, is practically the end of the year, and this is the last of our reflections on the church. Just as we do on the thirty-first of December, this end of the church year is an opportune moment for the church to analyze what we have done during the past year and to see where our thoughts are oriented for the new year. Thus, eschatology is like a compass on our ship that helps us see if we are on the right course. That is why the readings speak to us about the reality beyond, about the resurrection.

The first reading is a precious epic, one of the most heroic passages in the Bible. The era of Alexander the Great and his conquests of the East marked the beginning of a very dangerous period for the Holy Land, a situation that continued up through the time of the Seleucid kings. One of these was King Antiochus, mentioned in today's reading. There was a process of Hellenization; that is, the rulers wanted to introduce Greek customs into Palestine. That is the meaning of Hellenization. Hellenic means the same as Greek. The Greek customs were pagan ones, such as the gymnasiums and the stadiums. All this went in many ways against the sacred law of Moses, and thus there was conflict. Whenever attempts are made to impose criteria that are contrary to the true desires of the people, there will be conflict and discontent. When Antiochus tried to impose Hellenism, the people revolted. One family, Matthias and his seven sons, the most famous being Judas Maccabaeus, managed to organize an army against this pagan invasion of the Holy Land. As a result of their heroism many wonderful acts were performed in Palestine.

Today's first reading presents us with the case of a mother who had seven sons. Faithful to the law of the Lord, the mother refused to offer sacrifices of pork to the false Greek gods. Because her seven sons refused to obey the king, they were martyred one by one. In this passage of the second book of Maccabees—read chapter seven of Maccabees—you find a theology of martyrdom, a theology that our people badly need today. It is a theology of faithful witness to the law of God rather than obeying those who profane the law and the rights of the Lord. If we reflect on the responses of the

seven boys—or sons, since some were older—we conclude that these ideals prevailed in the thinking of Israel: the law of God must be obeyed even at the risk of dying (2 Macc 7:30). What a courageous principle!

But this ideal was reinforced by a great hope, a second principle: those who are mutilated and have their tongues and arms cut off because of their fidelity to God's law will rise again with their limbs intact. That life which earthly powers took from them will be restored to them in a glorified way by the Lord (2 Macc 7:11). The executioners will also rise, the Bible tells us, but not to receive glory; they will receive ignominy and just punishment if they have not repented of their sins.

This theology also leads us to this thought: it is not the case that those who are martyred are saints and the others are evil. The book of Maccabees also tells us that God punishes his children by means of the unjust. But while God's children, after being punished by his providence, will receive a reward for their contrition, those who served as a scourge of the children of God will be cast into eternal ignominy if they do not repent of their crimes (2 Macc 7:32-38). What a beautiful theology!

We see this theology applied in the gospel, which presents us with the curious case of the woman with seven husbands. The seven were brothers who married the same woman, one after another. A ridiculous question is then asked by the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They ridicule the resurrection by proposing to Jesus this case of conscience: if it is true that everyone rises from the dead, which of the seven men will be the woman's husband at the time of the resurrection? The case seems to be well presented; nevertheless, Jesus uses this opportunity to preach about the relativity of temporal things. «You are mistaken», he tells them. «You do not understand anything about this life of the resurrection». It is true that there was a law of Moses called the Levirate law (Deut 25:5-10). According to this law, if a man died without having any sons, his unmarried brother had the obligation to marry the widow in order to give the dead brother's name to a child of the widow. The problem is legitimate as applied to the seven brothers who died childless, but the solution is the following: all those marriage laws and marriage itself have only a relative, historical, temporal significance. Men and women need to have children only here on earth in order to preserve the human race, but in the resurrection, where they will be immortal, that sexual relationship will not matter. Marriage will not exist because then all will be like the angels of God. Naturally, the resurrected bodies will exist with all their members (Luke 20:36), but the functions of the members will be transformed. Read those chapters of Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he tells them that that body that dies and is buried is one thing, but the spiritual body that is raised to eternal life is in another category (1 Cor 15:44). In heaven there will be no need of sexual relations for the sake of procreation, as required by those laws. In heaven this will not be necessary.

Here we are going to try to draw a wonderful conclusion, sisters and brothers. This homily provides us with an opportunity to see the aberrations of those who abuse sexual pleasures by such practices as contraception, homosexuality, pre-marital relations, abortion, and prostitution. They are using their corporal functions only in the service of pleasure and selfishness even though God has given us these things for very great ends.

Here we confront the eschatological, the finality of what is ultimate. If in our human relationships we were always thinking about the finality of our lives, this problem we call the demographic explosion would not exist, for its source is not in matrimony but outside matrimony. The reason for the explosion in El Salvador is machismo, men leaving children all over the place. If all of El Salvador had faithful matrimonies, we would not have this alarming phenomenon of so many fatherless children who are simply the fruit of a moment's pleasure in sexual relations.

And so it is with other things. If we were truly aware of how relative temporal reality is, then those in power would not make temporal reality an absolute but would use it for the common good. They would realize that God will one day come in judgment and demand an accounting of both rulers and governed about how they used their abilities and their wealth. They would realize that the golden calf is only an idol which will disappear and that when we die our hands will be emptied of all temporal things. If we were mindful of eschatology in our use of money, in relations between employers and workers, in the treatment of farm workers—if eschatology shed light on those relations, how relative all temporal reality would appear! Wealth, pleasure, and power are relative. Even marriage, which seems so stable, is relative. Priestly and religious celibacy is relative. If we priests have decided to forego marriage, then we must be faithful precisely because we are called to affirm in the midst of married people that sexual relations have only a relative value. Celibate men and women, as well as others who are single and embrace chastity, are already giving witness of what the other life will be: they will be like angels, as Jesus says in today's gospel; they will not die, they will be immortal, they will not need the things of the flesh (Luke 20:36).

My sisters and brothers, I hope I have made myself understood. A deep spirituality is the best response to so many problems that arise from making sex the center of our lives and our preoccupations. The primary aspect of matrimony is not sex but rather the mutual formation by which spouses sanctify one another and their children. By using this institution called matrimony chastely and honestly, according to the law of God, they are preparing themselves to be one day angels in heaven.

That is why, sisters and brothers, Saint Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians proposes Jesus Christ our Lord as the center of this eschatology. Christ explains what it means to be Christian. How I would love to engrave this great idea on the heart of each of you! Christianity is not a collection of truths you have to believe or of laws you have to obey or of prohibitions. Such a concept is repugnant. Christianity is a person who loved me so much that he lays claim to my love. Christianity is Christ. By the light of Christ matrimony is lived chastely! By the light of Christ we understand eschatology—there is an elder brother who awaits me and, even more, walks with me now. When we speak about eschatology, I would like you to grasp this other idea: eschatology is not just what is hoped for but what is already possessed when in our hearts we have faith in Christ. We don't wait to die to be happy; we are already happy when we have the kingdom of God, as Christ said, in our hearts (Luke 17:21).

Eschatology began when Christ came twenty centuries ago. It is God's final act in giving history its ultimate meaning. The ultimate meaning of history and the relative meaning of all things is revealed in Christ; all things are restored in Christ. All that gets

attached to Christ becomes eschatological. The young, the married, the elderly, the infirm, the dutiful, and the anguished—if they suffer intimately united with Christ who is King of the centuries, they are already experiencing eschatology. That is why there is a classical movement in the church expressed with the words «Already, not yet». It is like the pendulum on a clock: «Already, not yet! Already, not yet!» This is Christianity. Already I should live as if in heaven, but not yet, because what I am is still not revealed. Already I feel my commitment to Christ who becomes incarnate in this people whom I must serve and for whom I must give my life, even though I do not yet see the splendor of the glory that I carry hidden within myself. All you who are now in God's grace and who are going to receive Communion are already living the kingdom of God. You do not yet see what it is, but you carry it hidden in your hearts. This is called present eschatology. For eschatology has two movements: a present and a future. The present is lived by people of faith and hope. Even those on the margins of society—those living in poverty, humiliation, and torture—are experiencing this heaven and this hope. If they should die, it is only the vessel of clay that is broken, but a brilliant light illuminates all their lives. My brothers and sisters, let us live by this eschatology. Let us live already in this kingdom of heaven.

This, then, is the great hope of the Gospel, the hope that I want to preach with all my strength and I want to be impressed upon the hearts of all. Let us not despair! Let us not seek violent solutions! Let us put aside hatred and murder! I repeat this clearly because yesterday in Santiago de María I heard something from some friends of mine. Some people say I have changed. Now I am preaching revolution, hatred, and class struggle; I am a communist. You all know well the kind of language I use in my preaching. It is language that seeks to sow hope. Yes, it denounces the injustices of this world and the abuses of power, but it does so with love and not hatred. It calls people to conversion so that we can all live in this eschatological moment which is the soul and the essence of this church that is inspired by the Holy Spirit who lives and reigns forever and ever. Let us now proclaim our creed.