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THE FORCE OF PRAYER

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

17 July 1977

Genesis 18:1-10a

Colossians 1:24-28

Luke 10:38-42

Esteemed radio audience, I want to begin today by expressing profound gratitude to the bishops of Panama who have published an official statement that refers directly to our situation in El Salvador. They denounce the «war statement number six» of the White Warriors Union, saying that «its tone and content cause horror and certainly merit the strongest repudiation of all those who consider themselves human and, even more, of those who consider themselves Christian». According to the bishops' statement, «This group, whoever they are, presumes to take the law into its own hands and ends up trampling upon the law. This is more than an isolated act of terrorism since it contravenes the whole juridical order, representative constitutional government, and respect for human rights. No accusation against any person can justify this attitude on an individual level and less so on a social and collective level».¹

The archbishop of Panama placed this document in the hands of the Salvadoran ambassador and asked him to give it to our president. The message therefore was addressed directly to the president. The bishops go on to say, «Our voices seek to reach the highest authorities of the Salvadoran government so that they will apply the full force of the law to the authors of a declaration which threatens the state of law itself. We are hoping that in these initial days of the new government in El Salvador a definitive position with regard to this situation will be taken. We believe that such action is demanded not only by the citizens of our sister nation but by all of us who join together in solidarity as fellow Christians and Central Americans».

We want to thank our brother bishops for their solidarity. The Secretariat of the Conference of Central American Bishops has also recently issued a statement against these abuses.² However, the statement of Panama is especially timely because everyone knows that during these days our dear brothers, the Jesuit fathers, are living under a terrible threat.³ I ask that we pray earnestly for them and that we embrace the example of their serenity, which can only be inspired by a great love for the truth and for Jesus

¹ «Comunicado de la Conferencia de los Obispos de Panamá sobre la Situación de la Iglesia en El Salvador» in *Orientación* (24 July 1977).

² «Mensaje de SEDAC a la Gente de Dios y a la Gente de Buena Voluntad de Centroamérica y Panamá» (24 June 1977) in *Orientación* (10 July 1977).

³ The White Warriors Union (UGB) threatened the Jesuits with death unless they left the country before 20 July 1977.

Christ. In our journal *Orientación*⁴ I praised this living message that the Jesuits offer us today. I also refer to the message of loyalty from the Salesian fathers, who in the person of Father Contreras expressed their solidarity with the diocese. It appears that his action was manipulated by the media, a truly shameful system that gives no importance to a person's honor but is simply interested in defending particular interests. Would that there were more honesty in our publications. Nevertheless, Father Contreras has expressed his unwavering allegiance to the bishop and has at no time sought to be a countersign to archdiocesan pastoral policies. He repeatedly expressed the spirit of Salesian faith which he learned from the great saint Don Bosco who was known for his adherence and firm loyalty to the church's teaching.

All of this, sisters and brothers, and many other beautiful things reach us through diverse letters. We also receive denunciations from mothers and wives, including a young woman who was about to be married just as her fiancé fell victim to this injustice: he was «disappeared». I would prefer not to have to announce only sad things, but reality imposes itself. I would like to announce, as a prophet should, the marvels of God, the kindness of people's hearts, and the goodness that our Salvadoran people have as a congenital condition. For example, I received a letter from Aguilares that affectionately recalled the teachings of Father Grande in that community. The letter said that «Father Grande knew how to discover the greatness of people, and he identified with their sufferings». What a beautiful trait of what the church is all about! Exactly, sisters and brothers, and this is what I want, because one of the most beautiful characteristics of the letters I receive is when they say, «We are praying in our community; we are praying much in our family». I believe there has never been so much prayer as there is now.

In my homily today I hope that everyone understands me, including those who have dedicated themselves to hating and killing and threatening and slandering. May this ray of light which the word of God brings us today enter into their hearts. For those of you who feel that the light of faith and trust has been extinguished, I pray that your consciences may be illuminated with a great confidence in the power of prayer. For those of you already distinguished for your prayer—pious communities, group meetings where prayer spontaneously arises from the heart—I pray that you may be encouraged to keep that force alive.

Prayer, a personal meeting with God

With prayer nothing is impossible. If the whole Christian people of the archdiocese adopted the attitude of Mary of Bethany as she sat before Christ, then Christ would say to us as he said to Martha, «Do not be worried about so many things. There is need of only one thing» (Luke 10:41-42). What is that one thing? It is something envisioned centuries before Christ, as recounted for us today at the conclusion of the first reading, which describes Abraham being visited by God in the figure of men. Abraham, the blessed witness of this theophany, comes face to face with God and has the opportunity to welcome God and serve him with heifers from his flock. He gives God all that a generous person would give to a friend who comes for a visit. Hebron, the city in Palestine, has a name in honor of Abraham; the place is called *el Kalil* which means

⁴ «The Voice of the Archbishop: Salesian Loyalty and Jesuit Dedication» in *Orientación* (17 July 1977).

friend. One could not give another person a more honored name than that given to Abraham: the friend of God, a man of prayer who dealt with God as with a friend. Why don't all of us who are reflecting on this resolve to earn that title for ourselves: friends of God? This interesting encounter of God with Abraham, in which they share food together as friends, ends with this statement: «Tell Sarah that within a year, when I return, a son will have been born to her» (Gen 18:10). This is the essence of the message of that first reading, because this son of the elderly Abraham and his aged, sterile wife Sarah is the child of the promise. From him will be born a people that will have the honor in history of being the bloodline that will give birth to the Redeemer of humankind. Jesus is a descendent of Abraham. What an honor, an old man and a sterile woman are the ancestors of the Son of God!

This was the great and wondrous plan of God. «Nothing is impossible for God» (Luke 1:37), the angel also tells Mary, referring to another sterility that has become bountiful, namely, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. And in today's second reading Saint Paul describes for us the only thing necessary: the mystery of Christ, «the mystery hidden in God that has been revealed to humankind» (Col 1:26). Blessed are those who understand that God became human to save humankind and that every human life incorporated into that current of salvation and converted to Christ becomes divinized. God became human in Christ in order to make divine all those who believe in him. This is the only thing necessary. In today's gospel we see Mary of Bethany in rapture as she listens to Christ's words while Martha is busy about the house preparing the meal. Martha complains to Jesus, «Look, my sister is not helping me; tell her to give me a hand». But Jesus defends Mary: «Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her» (Luke 10:40-42). Mary is hearing God's designs and feeling God's love in Christ's words. Everyone who discovers the one thing necessary is a soul in prayer, a contemplative soul. Martha is the image of the active person. This is how this beautiful gospel passage has been interpreted for centuries. In the light of Martha who is busy about many things we see the church in her multifarious activities. What a marvel the church is! For even though Jesus praises Mary's attitude, he is not reproofing Martha's solicitude. What he is telling her is this: hopefully all your busy activity proceeds also from the one thing necessary. It is not enough to pray and be contemplative; one must also work. But when you are working, you should feel in your heart the unity between all your activity and the perspective of faith that illuminates your action. It is here, sisters and brothers, that I want to insist on the need for you to find that one thing necessary, the need to pray.

During these days I have been visiting some wonderful Christian communities, and I assure you that from their reflection on the Bible there arise many beautiful prayers. And these prayers reveal that the work that the church is doing in El Salvador, especially in the small communities, is in no way subversive and in no way political. In fact, if there is anything political about this work, then it has to do with the grand politics of the kingdom of God, the politics of increasing people's consciousness of God and how God relates to them. That is prayer! That is contemplation! It is necessary to pray and to work, but work must proceed from prayer; they cannot be dissociated.

The media have made everyone aware of the fact that last Wednesday there was a power failure in New York City that lasted many hours. When the mayor complained

to the electric company, they told him, «It is the work of a higher power. God did it». The mayor, for his part, blamed them for negligence. Both sides are right. It is very similar to when they prepared for the moon flight; the engineers said, «Technically everything is ready; now we just have to pray. We have to pray and apply all our human energy». It is not a question of working without God or of praying without working. «Pray and work» was the great motto of Saint Benedict, the founder of the Benedictines, monks who never stop praying and working while they live. In their monasteries the monks appear to work like industrious bees without resting a moment, but they are always praying in their hearts. Like Mary they contemplate the one thing necessary, and like Martha they are coming and going, busy at work. How beautiful would be our cities and fields and towns and villages if all of us—professionals, merchants, students, housewives, market vendors—had in our hearts this great sense of prayer and at the same time were honest and diligent in our work!

When Pope Paul VI closed the Second Vatican Council, he made a superb analysis in what is one of his most beautiful speeches. I recommend it to you as a fine explanation of the new Christian humanism. The pope made it clear that the Council had reaffirmed the religious mission of the church, namely, her union with God. As a result of this union with God, the church teaches men and women of today that prayer and contemplation are the noblest human activity for they lead to encounter with God. Prayer brings unity to all the great variety of the world, and it enables people to discover the secret of truth and the steadfastness of the church. Through prayer people discover the true face of God in the faces of other human beings and so learn to respect their duties toward others. The pope stated that twentieth-century humanists who prescind from transcendence toward God should appreciate how this Council, by starting out from God, offers the world a humanism that is more complete and more true than are the humanisms without God.⁵ Yes, what most gives meaning to our prayer is our discovery of God.

The pope goes on to describe the nature of this age in which this Council proclaimed the existence of God. This is an age when the world is more oriented toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than the kingdom of heaven, when technology and human science strive to give human beings the right to be independent of God, when human philosophy makes human beings the final object and the center of all creation, when everything militates against transcendence and a sense of the spiritual. It is precisely in such an epoch that the Council in prayer has declared: God exists, God is good, God cares for us, God is personal, and we can engage in dialogue with him.⁶ This makes it clear, dear sisters and brothers, that prayer is a personal encounter with God.

We have the example of Abraham speaking with God as one person would speak with another, and we have the example of Mary keenly attentive to the words of Jesus: these are examples of the souls that the world needs today. Many people have stopped communicating with God. Many do not believe. Atheism is a phenomenon that is spreading among us—at least practical atheism, for God does not exist if people do not pray. But how can people live without believing in God if it is that encounter with the

⁵ PAULVI, «The Religious Value of the Council», Allocution for the closing of the Second Vatican Council (7 December 1965) 8.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

Almighty that gives them strength? Only from God do I have my origin and destiny, my reason for living, the light of my mind, the love of my heart, the force of my life, and perseverance in my resolutions. Every form of morality and liberation and every brand of humanism that does not take into account this contemplation and prayer with God is false and even hypocritical.

My dear sisters and brothers, I hope that my poor words awaken in those of you who do not pray a desire to enter into contact with God, for God has only to see his creatures take those first few steps of drawing near to him before he gladly enters into dialogue with them. We might say that God is more anxious to speak with us than we are to speak with him and that the slightest impulse to pray is enough for God to respond. Withdraw like Abraham to the shade of the terebinth tree. Go sit in the shade of an oak or a palm. Recline on a river bank, or stand before the beauties of our countryside. Why not pause for a moment and be carried by this beauty to the Creator? Be a contemplative soul, even if just for a few moments. Do not let this week go by without making sincere attempts to search for God, and I assure you that next Sunday you will come to Mass more immersed in this vision. We will all have greater fervor for encountering in the Mass this God whom we look for everywhere and whom we can find everywhere.

Prayer and a commitment to history

Besides this encounter with God, prayer gives us a sense of unity and an understanding of the reason for our existence. It helps explain this critical hour of the church that we are now experiencing. There are no Salvadoran lips that have not pronounced a thousand times the word «church», but many do not know her. For some it is the worst plague, something that must be eliminated; they persecute her and slander her and defame her. Many of them say they are children of the church; they belong to Catholic associations. What sense of church do the persecutors have? What is saddest of all, however, is that those living within the church still have no understanding.

The Council speaks about the church. The Council met and reflected for several years, as if the church were taking stock of herself. It was like that moment in life when young men and young women, upon reaching adolescence, begin to discover in their bodies and in their spirits the profoundest mysteries of their own being and their own life. It is like when a man reflects on himself and discovers the marvel of his consciousness, his freedom, his intelligence. That is what happened at the Council: by the light of God the church reflected on her own being, what it means for her to be the church founded by Christ. The church discovered that it was precisely in prayer that she connects with that God who gives her the juice of life, who gives her his perennial youth, who gives her the truth of his word, who gives her serenity in her suffering, who makes her unflinching in confrontation, like those who carry God within them in the face of all tribulations.

The church is not a human society. There is something divine in this human organism that fills and transcends everything and makes her aware that she is a sacrament of God in the world, offering herself and the power of salvation to the people of today with all the energy of the risen One. She gives life to those who are dying and finds hope for those who grow old and sickly. That is why at the start of this situation of

the church in El Salvador, when I first had the privilege of speaking to this dear archdiocese, I told you—and you understood my words—that what people are seeking in the world, the church possesses and offers to them. What has most filled me with deep satisfaction during my time here as bishop, a time full of interesting circumstances, is that many people have come to me and told me that they found in the church what they found nowhere else. They have felt the church as the power of God. I am filled with great joy whenever someone comes to me and says, «I was separated from the church, but now you can count on me. I want to be a faithful Catholic». They are discovering in this church what the church bears in her bosom: the power of God. To the extent that the children of the church pray, they also become instruments of God.

Pope Paul VI, in his exhortation on evangelization in the modern world, asked this question: «What is evangelization?» He answered that it is an individual or a group of people who encounter the message of Christ and then reflect on it and assimilate it, realizing that it is joy, it is life, it is satisfaction (EN13). Then they cannot contain within themselves but go forth and spread the Good News. They are evangelized so as to become evangelizers. They receive life so as to give life. Every Catholic who knows how to pray will become a fountain like those fountains filled with water that overflow to flood the fields and make them fruitful. Every Christian who prays, every child who enters into contact with this power of prayer, every Catholic who wants to be like Mary, eager to receive the words of Jesus, fills up spiritually and overflows and waters the land. Such persons make their families holy, they convert sinners, they bring souls to God, and wherever they go they bear witness that only God can give.

The saints are marvelous examples of people who lived this fullness of God, and no one has created history as they have. The true protagonists of history are those who are most united with God, because from God's perspective they discern the signs of the time, the ways of Divine Providence, and the construction of history. Ah! If only we had people of prayer among those who manage the destiny of the country and the destiny of the economy! If only they relied more on God and his techniques rather than on their own human technology, we would have a world that the church dreams about, a world without injustices, a world respectful of rights, a world where all people generously participate, a world without repression, a world without torture. Forgive me if I always mention torture, but there is a heaviness in my poor spirit when I think about those people who suffer the scourges, the kicks, and the blows of another human being. If they had just a bit of God in their hearts, they would see a brother or sister as an image of God. I say this because these situations continue. The arrests and the «disappearances» continue. How I hope that a little contact with God will change these dungeons of hell, that a little light will shine on them and make them understand what God desires of them. God does not want those things. God repudiates evil. God wants what is good, what is love.

Only through prayer can we discover man's greatness

Only through prayer can we discover what God desires. This is my third and final consideration today. Only through prayer and contemplation of God can we discover the true greatness of the human person. Remember that thought I read you from the letter from Aguilares: «Father Grande knew how to discover the greatness of people, and he identified with their sufferings». He did not neglect people; rather, they criticized him

for heeding the Council which they said paid too much attention to ordinary people and was almost unfaithful to the Gospel. But the pope declared there was absolutely no infidelity to the Gospel. In fact, taking his lead from the Gospel command of Christ to love one another, the pope called this Council the Council of charity,⁷ the Council that drew near to today's humanity and all the human problems that are so difficult to understand. On the one hand, human beings are great, rising high with their inventions and ingenuity. On the other hand, human beings are depressed by their misfortunes, the bitterness of life, and the many false hopes. What happened, asked the pope, when the Council found humankind in this situation? It did not make a diagnosis of death, nor did it chastise humankind with anathemas.⁸ This Council that inspires today's church was characterized by great sympathy toward the human situation. Though people were overwhelmed by their unbelief, by their sins, by their crimes, the Council saw in them an image of God needing to be restored to its original grandeur and beauty. This is the church of today, dear sisters and brothers, the church of sympathy, the church of dialogue, the church that draws close to people in their greatness and in their misery. The church reveals human dignity and teaches all to respect this dignity in themselves and in others. The church speaks of the need to free people from inhuman conditions and give them more human conditions and even divine conditions of faith, prayer, and contact with the God who created human beings in order to dialogue with them and to make them his family for all eternity (PP21).

The church can never forget this precious vocation of humankind. When certain traditionalists or people concerned about their own self-interest say that the church has forgotten her religious mission and gotten too involved in political and social matters, they forget that it is in the political, economic, and social arena that people grow and develop. But the church is interested in political and economic matters only because they are related to human reality. The church wants to make people more human so that they do not become idolaters of money and idolaters of power, so that they do not use their power to oppress people or use their money to marginalize people. The church is concerned that these goods that God has placed in human hands—politics, money, resources—are used to help people realize their vocation as children of God, as images of the Lord. The church learns all of this only when she separates herself from the dangerous idols of the world and does the one thing necessary: place herself like Mary before the only Lord, the one from whom the church derives her sole reason for existence, her faith, and the greatness that is proper to humanity.

That is why, sisters and brothers, the message of today's word is vital. I would like all of us to leave here carrying within ourselves the image of those two women who exemplify the church: Martha and Mary. Let us continue to work; let us intensify our coming and going like Martha. But let us take care not to forget the one thing necessary, which Mary understood: that in our hearts there is a force which unites all our activity and reveals the reason for all we do—it is God, Christ, human dignity. Let us never lose sight of God as we work. Like the Council, let us incline toward humanity and toward the earth, but let us also be closely united to God with hearts full of hope, faith, and love. This is the true balance of modern holiness: Martha and Mary. Like Martha, let us be very active and dedicated in the affairs of earth. Let us acquit ourselves well in

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Ibid., 9.

managing the temporal realities that God has placed in our hands. Let us work and go out of our way to serve others. But let us not do this just out of philanthropy, that is, just for the sake of humanity and the earth. Rather, let us follow the example of Mary and do it with true charity that is inspired in God and discovered through continual meditation on the language of the Gospel. Let us be souls of prayer, souls of biblical reading, souls of communal reflection who are raised up to God and who then descend from God to work in the world. This is the true Gospel balance. Thanks be to God, many people today are living this balance, and I hope that this will become the norm of modern life for everyone.