

83

THE CHURCH, CHRIST'S RETURN IN THE SPIRIT

Fifth Sunday of Easter

23 April 1978

Acts 6:1-7

1 Peter 2:4-9

John 14:1-12

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the Fifth Sunday of Easter. As I have been insisting during this time, the church considers the fifty days of Easter, from Holy Saturday until the feast of Pentecost, that is, the coming of the Holy Spirit which will be on May 14, as one single Sunday, the great Sunday, the great feast of the Lord. I do not want us to lose sight of this triumphant figure of the risen Christ. This is the center of the Gospel message.

For this reason, when I announce this risen Christ within our historical setting, many people focus simply on the setting and then criticize the preaching. They say that I have become political, subversive, rebellious, and all the other labels that you've already seen in the diverse means of communication, which should perhaps better be called means of defamation since they attack the bishop and the archdiocese. When they look only at the setting, they distort the truth of the message. I call on them to pay attention to the main focus of my preaching, which does nothing else than echo the liturgical year. That is why I lead this flock of the archdiocese through the liturgical year, guided by the presence of Christ. This is what is meant by liturgy: the presence of the saving mystery of Christ in the people's history where this mystery is reflected. What is central, therefore, is the very mystery which saves, for it is this saving mystery that illuminates the reality around us. In this way it becomes a mystery which saves us right now as we seek with Christian hope in the central figure of the Divine Redeemer the strength to resolve the grave problems that confront our nation.

But if we focus only on the setting and analyze the words from our own perspective, if we do not confront the divine message and its demands on us, then instead of listening with faith we become like the Pharisees who listened to Christ and thought, «Let us see how we can ensnare him. What is the accusation we can make to justify our action?» (Luke 20:20). Thanks be to God, I can appeal to the public who hears me, and I can speak the same words Christ spoke to his enemies: «I have spoken publicly. Ask those who have heard me to see if there is any truth hidden in your campaign of slander» (John 18:20-21).

Events of the week

For example, one thing to reflect on in light of God's word today is the fact that we are able to gather here in the cathedral once again. Last Sunday it was occupied by the Popular Revolutionary Bloc. That provided me the opportunity to make it quite clear that the church is not the Bloc. The signs speak for themselves. Those who occupied the cathedral have returned to their homes. Many are saying that they were not all *campesinos*. I ask you: who in El

Salvador is not in some way *campesino*? We are all *campesinos*. In any case, they have returned to their homes.

I want to congratulate the diplomatic corps and the Red Cross who provided such efficient services. But this leads us as Salvadoran Christians to ask: why do our people have to resort to the strength and the voice of international diplomacy and the Red Cross in order to resolve a simple thing like returning home? A new genus of Salvadorans has been created here in El Salvador: people exiled in their own country.

I also want to make clear that the occupation of the cathedral and the church of El Calvario should not be measured by the charity we have shown to other *campesinos* in other places, where the charity of the Good Samaritan welcomed them and gave them assistance. The occupation of a cathedral or a parish church shows the need for a sign other than the normal language for expressing an anxiety. Understand me well, because someone who read my article¹ this week or heard my radio interview said, «So are you giving a green light to the occupation of churches». I told him, «Be careful! I did not say that! I said that the churches were occupied against the will of the church, but the church understands what they are trying to say by this action». And now that the conflict has passed, I can say this: the church should not be used this way. The occupation of a church is a powerful sign, and recourse should not ordinarily be had to it. Those who want to use the church for that kind of pressure are not friends of the church. What concerns them is their own interests, and the church matters little. Therefore, sisters and brothers, the church is not with one side or the other. The church is church. The church wants to be always a place of prayer and a place where the words and the rights of human beings are proclaimed freely, but from a Gospel perspective. Therefore, I ask you please not to multiply or repeat these kinds of actions.

We are still grieved by the many denunciations of kidnappings, such as five high school students and a *campesino* there in Cojutepeque. We are especially saddened by the growing wave of defamation. There are interests that want to maintain an environment that discredits the church. But I call upon the good judgment of those who desire to hear the true voice of the church; they should know how to distinguish between language that provokes disorder and the voice of Gospel justice which points out our society's sores. The church does not do the former; she does not seek to confuse or arouse people, as some say. The church speaks with the voice of justice; she demands peace founded on justice because there can never be true peace among the people as long as the foundations of justice are not laid. Provoking disorder is indeed subversive, but raising our voice for peace is Gospel justice. The church's voice is one of Gospel justice, and it should not be confused with other voices. Her voice should not be maliciously confused with revolutionary voices simply because she points out the need for change and the need for a more just order. Let this also be very clear, sisters and brothers: the voice of the church cries out for peace, but as that holy pontiff Pius XII used to say, *Opus justitiae pax*—peace can only be the fruit of justice (Isa 32:17). Any other peace is fictitious and futile.

Life of the church

Therefore, besides this historical setting of our nation, I want all of us who are gathered as a family in the cathedral to celebrate our Mass to ask ourselves, as active members of the church: What is the church doing? How is the church building herself up, and how must we as good

¹ «Comments of the Archbishop. Let It Be Quite Clear» in *Orientación* (23 April 1978).

Catholics help build the church? The information that I share with you now enables us to give thanks to God because our church, despite the persecution and the malicious misinterpretations and the bad ambience created, knows that her advance does not depend on external circumstances. The solidity of our church derives from her being reliant on her Christ, her being faithful to the Gospel, and her carrying on the mission that Christ entrusted to her.

Therefore, I share with you some wonderful news about our celebration of Pentecost, and I thank you for the way you have welcomed this. At 8:00 o'clock on Saturday evening, May 13, the vigil of Pentecost, we will have a gathering of young people who are now preparing to receive the sacrament of confirmation. This is a sacrament for young people, a sacrament of Christian commitment. They are high school students or young people who are not in school but are at least sixteen years old. They are being given a good catechetical preparation that helps them understand that this sacrament is received only when one is resolved to follow Christ faithfully, even if one's very life is at stake. If it were not for confirmation, we would not have martyrs in the church. Confirmation is the sacrament of martyrs. I am sharing this information with you now so that our beloved pastors will have sufficient time to provide this catechetical instruction in their parishes. Beginning with the next liturgical year in December, there will be no more confirmations of small children. Please understand that the proper age for confirmation is mature youth.

I also rejoice in announcing to you how the church is being built up in pain. The women religious who minister in our communities had a day of profound reflection, actually three days. One of their concrete proposals was to organize a mission of pacification, reconciliation, and Christian love in those zones that have been devastated during the recent conflict. The people living there are good-hearted *campesinos*, and we do not want hatred and division to take root in them. We want them to return to the paths of Christ's commandment: «Love one another» (John 13:34).

I also rejoice to tell you about the work of the Archdiocesan Federation of Catholic Educational Centers. Catholic colleges and parochial schools are uniting their criteria and their efforts for determining what role a Catholic school should play as an instrument of the diocesan pastoral mission. Very soon they will meet for a day of reflection to analyze further the pastoral ministry of the schools, which is often misrepresented since some people claim that our schools are teaching socialism. This is a lie! It is slander! What the Catholic schools are doing is making people aware that true education has to be a reflection of the Gospel.

As we consider the educational mission of our schools, we must be aware of the educational reforms, especially when these reforms just want to continue to form masses. Their aim is to manipulate young people and professionals in order to maintain unjust situations, when instead they should be forming these people with independent criteria that will enable them to be protagonists of their own destiny and the history of their nation. True educational reform has to seek what the church has pointed out for quite some time: the formation of authentically independent, Christian criteria that will help women and men to become true designers of the destiny of their homeland.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, while I could share with you much more information, I prefer to get to my central theme. The central theme of this homily is based on today's readings and could be summed up in this title: «The Church, Christ's Return in the Spirit». I repeat these

words because they are a synthesis of my thoughts this morning: the church, Christ's return in the Spirit.

These days of the church's reflection on the paschal mystery lead us to unite Christ's departure from this earth with the presence of Christ in his mystical and heavenly life. In other words, the end of Christ's earthly life is related to the beginning of the church's history. The Gospel of Saint John, in those beautiful chapters of the farewell discourse at the Last Supper, provides us with the constitution of the church as Christ bids farewell to «his own», as Saint John calls the members of the church (John 13:1). What an honor it is for us this morning to be called «Jesus' own». As Jesus Christ looks at those who have come to Mass today, he calls us his own, his disciples. With his own he celebrates the inauguration of the church that will be prolonged in all the followers of Christ, who now are us.

Using Christ's words that appear at the beginning of today's gospel, we discover the meaning of this return of Christ in the Spirit. He tells his disciples, «Have faith in God» (John 14:1). He consoles them tenderly because of their sadness after sharing for three years, day and night, the problems, the hopes, and the anxieties of their Divine Master. He tells them that they will not be left alone. Where he is going they cannot go now, but they will follow him later (John 13:36). The passage through death and the ascension into heaven will also occur for them, but he goes through them now as head of the Mystical Body. One day all will follow him, and he will then return. This is the theme of this homily: Christ will return not only at the end of history, but he will return even now, after rising, to live with us in an invisible but very real way in his church. This April morning of 1978 Christ lives not only in heaven, but he is here, sisters and brothers. He has returned to «his own». The church is the return of Christ in the Spirit.

Christ, true God and true man, returns in the Spirit

In the first place, who is this Christ who is able to proclaim that even after death he will return to live with us? The dialogue is magnificent. We could say that our first reason for believing in this Christ is what appears in the dialogue of today's gospel, the dialogue with the two apostles, Thomas and Philip. They still do not understand the great mystery because Christ has not yet returned in the Spirit. They are simple men who have heard about sublime mysteries but cannot comprehend them. One of them asks Jesus, «Where are you going, Lord? Tell us so that we can follow you» (John 14:5). Jesus replies with a phrase that synthesizes his whole life and the whole Gospel: «I am the way, the truth, and the life» (John 14:6). The other disciple says, «Show us the Father, and that will be enough for us» (John 14:8). Such was the desire of the whole Old Testament: to know God—«Show us God». Christ's response is like a theological treatise or a course in Christology: «Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father. Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?» (John 14:9-10).

Dear sisters and brothers, as long as we do not see Christ as true God and true man, we cannot understand the church or the saving mystery of the Lord. That is why God became man: so that by means of this God-man we might enter into the mystery of the divine. «I am the way. No one comes to the Father except through me» (John 14:6). God did not come to save humankind except through Jesus Christ, the only mediator. Blessed are those who know and believe in Jesus! Blessed are those who are aware, even in the midst of these dark hours of our history, that Christ lives! He lives powerfully as God, and he lives caringly as man. He is a man

of our ways; he is a man of our history; he is a man like the one in a popular hymn:² «God appears as a worker, as one walking in the park, working on the highway, or repairing tires in a gas station. God is incarnate in every person and understands everyone who wants to follow him and love him». That is why Jesus said, «Whatever you do for one of these, you do it for me» (Matt 25:40). He is the way to know humanity, just as he is the way to know God. No one can come to God except across this bridge, this way that is our Lord Jesus Christ.

This Christ-God, who was exalted by the Father on Easter, is the Christ who comes on Pentecost. Let us understand this well: the coming of the Holy Spirit is the return of Christ in the Spirit. It is the Spirit of Christ who comes to his church. It is the Spirit of Christ with all his saving power, with all his love, with all his courage to denounce sin, with all his strength. The Spirit comes to tell people where they can find the one and only way to be saved and to point out the broad roads where they can get lost (Matt 7:13).

This Christ comes, and in the last part of today's gospel he proclaims, «Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do and will do greater ones than these» (John 14:12). What does this mean? It means that all the saving power that Jesus brought from God will now be entrusted to this group that forms the newborn church, so that over the centuries and among many peoples the church will do greater things than Christ in a geographical and numerical sense. He saved the world with an objective redemption, we might say, by dying on the cross and leaving us the fountain of redemption. But his disciples have to set up channels to distribute this saving work to the whole world. Christ could already see his church extended among all peoples and doing greater things than he was able to do personally.

Christ did not have physically before him the multitude that I have here in the cathedral, nor did he have the radio audience at this hour, which I know is very numerous. It is truly Christ who is speaking through me, and he is telling me, «You are doing much greater things than I, not because you are greater than I, but because you are speaking my words through the miracle of the radio. As this assembly listens, you are repeating my words. You are saving the world by pointing out the way. Like me, you are also abused and maligned. They stoned me and persecuted me. In my time also there were people who, even as I revealed the power of God through miracles, still did not believe in me. They sentenced me to death and crucified me because my doctrine disturbed them. Your teaching must also disturb people, but you are doing very great things because you are continuing my work». Every priest, even in the humblest parish, is doing greater things than Christ in the sense of today's gospel. The same can be said of the catechist and the parents and the leaders of the word: they are all «his own», his disciples, bringing to the world the Lord's redemptive work.

Christ returns, then, in his Spirit. It is the Spirit of Christ that gathers us together; it is the Spirit of the Lord that every Sunday sees the churches filled so as to transmit his truth and life. How beautiful the church is, sisters and brothers! It is Christ returning in the Spirit! Christ is here! When we adore Christ in the sacred host without seeing him, let us have no doubt: it is the return of Christ in the Spirit. It is the Spirit of the Lord who anointed me as a priest to pronounce the same words that he spoke at the Last Supper: «This is my body» (Luke 22:19). Together we lift up our eyes and adore this Christ who is present among us. Christ is present in the sacrament of confirmation on Pentecost. When the bishop and his priests impose their hands, the Spirit of Christ comes to take possession of these young men and women who are

² A reference to the entrance hymn of the *Misa campesina nicaragüense* (Carlos Mejía Godoy).

now preparing to receive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who returns with a Christ who is not visible but is very real, courageous, and true. Christ continues to speak with different voices and inflections, depending on his instruments, but it is the same Christ who speaks. Moreover, it is the same Christ who is offended and despised when his church is slandered and despised.

The presence of Christ in the church as building, as people, and as community

My second thought, then, is the following. The presence of Christ who returns can be seen in three ways in today's readings. I ask you to reflect a lot on these readings. The church is first presented as a building, the house of God; the second figure is the church as the people of God, a chosen race; and the third figure is the church as a community of *diakonia*, that is, a community of service, for that's what «deacon» means: servant.

In the first place, the church is a «building of living stones». The image is magnificent! Today's reading says that Christ is «the cornerstone» upon which rest all you Christians as «living stones» (1 Pet 2:4-5). Christians are not dead, material stones. All of us—with our individual qualities, our charisms, and our own degree of holiness—are living stones. We are building a temple, and when a Christian dies, that stone is placed in the temple of glory. The splendor of God shines in this sanctuary made up of people taken from the quarries of earth, illuminated with the light of the Spirit, with the blood of baptism, which is the blood of Christ. What a beautiful destiny for all of human life! Every person is a living stone.

Have we ever thought, sisters and brothers, that even when we are old and infirm, when we feel useless, poor, and discarded, we are still living stones that the divine builder is molding into a temple that begins to shine here on earth? Saint Peter says, «This stone which is Christ has become for you the cornerstone» (1 Pet 2:7-8). Yet many people have cast this stone aside as useless because it does not serve their interests. They prefer the darkness of material things. For them Christ is the stone that makes them stumble and fall. How terrible! Christ offers himself as a foundation upon which people can build their lives; yet many reject this stone because they want to build on other foundations, on idols and other values. Christ does not fit into their construction plans.

We can see, then, that the church as God's building does not conform to the materialist construction of the world. As architects are well aware, cement made with mud does not adhere well. Building materials come apart when they are not made with materials that join together well. All those who are without Christ's Spirit are mud, clay, a weak and fragile construction. They are not built on the unshakeable rock of the one who builds in love, truth, justice, and all that has to do with sincerity. They cannot build on the foundation of Christ because Christ upsets those who thrive on lies and hypocrisy, those who use their pens to spread poison and hatred and insult. Christ cannot be part of an edifice that is built with hatred and is as weak as clay.

The other beautiful figure of the church is the people of God. In the second reading, the letter of Saint Peter, we find an echo of the Old Testament for it speaks of the qualities that the Christian people share with Israel. Sisters and brothers, I would like you to engrave deeply in your life the four phrases that Saint Peter uses here because they are four outstanding honors of true Christians. Saint Peter tells us today that those who are baptized are: first, a chosen race; second, a royal priesthood; third, a holy nation; and fourth, a people called to proclaim

the wondrous deeds of the Lord (1 Pet 2:9). This is our duty; this is the mission of the church as the people of God.

«A chosen race». You really should read the whole of Saint Peter's first letter; today we read just a small piece. There at the beginning he dedicates it to the Christians who are «residing abroad» (1 Pet 1:1). He tells them that Christians by their baptism constitute a chosen race. Whatever the color of their skin, whatever their social status, whatever their political tendency, they are a chosen race. They are like the Israelites when they had to leave their land and live in the diaspora. Wherever they lived, they remembered their historical origins and their destiny. So also, all Christians, wherever they may be, should feel that they are God's chosen race. Through baptism I have become part of God's chosen race. Through baptism I am a relative of Christ. I carry God's dynasty in my blood, in my veins, in my life. What an honor!

«Royal priesthood» means that this people made up of baptized persons has true priestly functions. How I would love to have the time, sisters and brothers, to describe for you the priestly functions of the people! From the time that children are baptized, they become part of this people that has been placed in the world to worship God. This is their priestly responsibility: to worship God. Saint Peter says that we are all priests in order to offer spiritual worship to God (1 Pet 2:5). The life of every baptized person, whatever his or her occupation, is the worship of God.

The Mass is not just what is celebrated here in the cathedral on Sunday. The Mass is people making their lives into worship of God. Never does a lie fall from their lips; never is there resentment or hatred in their minds. In their daily work, no matter how humble, they give glory to God. In this sense, Mass is being celebrated by the metal worker, the carpenter, the street cleaner, the market vendor, the student, and the professional. The people listening to these words are in so many different occupations! I tell you, sisters and brothers, you are all priests who celebrate Mass in your own occupation and in your own lives. Do not lose the divine sense of your existence.

I tell you this even when pain and suffering put you to the test, especially you, my beloved infirm sisters and brothers—I know that you are listening to me there in Divina Providencia Hospital and other hospitals and so many sickbeds. I know that you, my beloved sick, can speak with the words of John XXIII. When they told John XXIII that he was gravely ill and needed to lie down and rest, he said, «The bed is also an altar, and now I am the victim on this altar». What a beautiful concept! These same words can be spoken by any worker or employee: «My work also is an altar, so that I am the sacred victim on this altar. I will work with enthusiasm and fulfill my obligations». Now tell me, sisters and brothers, is this subversive? Tell me, is this upsetting things and not putting them in their place? We say also to the politicians, «You also can be sacred hosts for God if you carry out your political work with a true Christian sense». We say also to those who are wealthy and own large farms, «You also can be victims sacred to God, for as baptized persons you are the hosts on the altar when your relationships with others are characterized by a sense of justice, solidarity, and Christian principles». This is what it means to be Christian, to be baptized, to be the people of God, a chosen race, a royal priesthood. We are a consecrated nation placed in the world to proclaim the marvelous deeds of the Lord.

We are also a people who are God's very own. Christ has bought us with his blood. We do not belong to ourselves. Christ is our owner; he is our king, and he alone must rule over us. If some people don't want Christ to reign over them, then they should do what the people do in Germany, where church members are obliged to pay a tax as a contribution to their religion. When they don't want to pay that tax, they have to declare, «I am not longer a Christian; remove my name from the baptismal registry. We prefer this, not because we don't want to be taxed, but because we don't want to support the people of God at this time when we must be a chosen people, a holy nation, a courageous community that proclaims the marvelous deeds of God and denounces the injustices of the people around us». Yes, it would be preferable for people to have their names removed from the parish registries and no longer call themselves Christian than to be baptized and go about living the ignominious life of pagans and sinners. Such people are baptized but pagans at heart.

That is what our feast of Pentecost is all about: reawakening this Christian awareness of our people and telling them, as Saint Peter does in today's reading, that they should be mindful of their dignity as «a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God».

My final thought, sisters and brothers, is that Christ returns in the Spirit to «his own», to us, and he makes of us a community of service, a community of love, a community of hierarchy, and a community of prayer. Community and communion are what characterize the church. That is why the Second Vatican Council invites us to educate ourselves away from an individualism that proclaims, «My soul and God», and to enter instead into a spirituality of the people (GS 30). We are a people, a community, a communion. The first Christians called themselves a *koinonia*. This beautiful Greek word has become popular again and is used today by base communities and parish communities. We are discovering the deep meaning of this term *koinonia* for those ancient Christians, for it meant community and family life. And family life has special characteristics.

Why was the order of deacons born? The book of Acts told us about it today. There were conflicts between the Greeks and the Hebrews—divisions were already beginning in the church. They complained to one another, «Our widows are not being taken care of. Our people are being neglected» (Acts 6:1). Division in the church always begins with some form of selfishness or materialism. This is the first time we have any news of a division among those who form the church. We should not be surprised, sisters and brothers. The church is human and has all the weaknesses of humans; there will always be divisions among humans. We should not be scandalized but should look instead at how this crisis was resolved.

The hierarchy, Peter and the apostles, called together the community, the *koinonia*, and told them, «The community has grown in great numbers, and we apostles cannot care for all of these people. We cannot neglect our primary obligation of prayer and the ministry of the word. Therefore, select from among your group seven persons filled with the Holy Spirit» (Acts 6:2). And so they chose seven people and imposed hands on them (Acts 6:5-6). Saint Stephen, the first martyr, was among those chosen. Behold this beautiful gesture of the church, sisters and brothers; the hierarchy proposes the solution, the community collaborates by choosing seven members, and those chosen receive the power of the hierarchy. Once again the church and the hierarchy are acting together. Let us never forget this because the day when we give this community only a charismatic meaning, a sense of love and communion, and we forget the authority of the pope, the bishops, and the priests, then we will be destroying the backbone of this community.

Diakonia is another Greek word we need to learn in our time if we want to be up-to-date in knowledge about the church. *Diakonia* is a Greek word that means service. The deacons and all the hierarchy are part of this *diakonia*. We bishops do not rule as despots. It must not be so. The bishop should be the most humble servant of the community because Christ told his apostles, the first bishops, «Let the greatest among you be as the youngest» (Mark 9:35). Our mandate is service. Our way of life and our word is service. Note well this aspect of Saint Peter's life: his primary mission was prayer and ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). At this moment, sisters and brothers, I am serving you. My preaching is a service transmitting the word of God to the people. Thus I have an obligation, as far as lies within my poor abilities, to prepare my homilies, my writings, and all my interventions so as to transmit the word in the clearest way possible. That is why I am pained—how could I feel otherwise?—that this servant of the word, this humble servant of the community of the archdiocese, instead of being thanked, is maligned and is addressed in the insolent way masters talk to their poor cooks: «This is no good».

Sisters and brothers, I am grateful to you for all your beautiful expressions of solidarity. As I told you once before, they make me want to pray as Christ did, especially among humble folk: «I give thanks to you, Father, because this ministry of the word that I attempt to fulfill is understood by the people who are humble and simple of heart» (Luke 10:21). In contrast, offensive diatribes and slanderous words are proclaimed by those who believe they are self-sufficient. They are arrogant and entrapped in their own way of thinking. They don't want anyone to approach them with the authentic doctrine of the true Gospel.

I conclude with this thought, sisters and brothers: a community can solve everything with service and love. *Agape*, love. «This is how they will know that you are my disciples» (John 13:35). Love is the sign of this community. As we conclude this reflection, let us try to examine our own hearts. If you have love even for those who offend you, then you are Christian. Blessed be God! If you hold on to rancor and resentment against someone who upsets you, then you yourself know by that fact that you are not being Christian. If you pay someone to write or speak on the radio against your brother or sister, even if it's the bishop, you are not Christian. If you earn your living and fill your stomach by selling your pen or your voice on the radio to serve the petty interests of others, you are not Christian. But you are more understandable, and I understand you. You are hungry, and so you are willing to sell even your good name. Take care, sisters and brothers! Let us not sell out to anyone! We have been purchased by Christ, and his love must prevail among us.

Let us celebrate our Eucharist! What an honor it is to know that this baptism which made us a chosen race of God invites us to celebrate the Eucharist each Sunday to nourish our divine life! Our divine life is the most beautiful gift Christ has given us, because the risen Christ has not abandoned us. He has returned in the Spirit, and his risen life, his immortal life, his life that never dies wants to become our life. We can make this life of Christ present among us through faith and the sacraments. So let us now proclaim with profound conviction, by saying the Creed of our Mass, that Christ is here among us.