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THE CHURCH IS CHRIST IN OUR HISTORY

Sixth Sunday of Easter

15 May 1977

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29

Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23

John 14:23-39

Dear sisters and brothers, esteemed radio audience.

As we listen to the readings at this time in the liturgical year, it feels like a light rain, with the sweetness of something coming directly down from God. Indeed, the liturgical cycle coincides with our national season which is so full of storms. The liturgical year is the spiritual cycle that the church goes through each year, starting in December with the expectation of a Redeemer, then passing through the Nativity and moving on during Lent to the preparations for this work of redemption that blossoms in a Passover that is both cross and joyful life. And in the church this Passover is prolonged in cross and glory, death and resurrection, tragedy and hope. There are fifty days from Holy Saturday night, when we sing of the triumph of life over death and proclaim the hope of the church, to Pentecost, which we will celebrate in two weeks. Fifty days and then comes Pentecost, the fulfillment of the message of redemption.

This coming Thursday we will celebrate the feast of the Ascension. Forty days after being raised, Christ ascends to the Father. For practical reasons this feast is transferred to next Sunday so that those who are unable to go to Mass during the week can still receive this beautiful message of Christ who leaves us physically but who ten days later, on Pentecost, comes to reveal himself again. We say this because from the very moment Christ rose, from the time that his physical life is no longer of this earth, he leaves his mystical life breathing over us in his Spirit. Just as the Creator breathed intelligent life into the clay in creation (Gen 2:7), so Christ on the very day of resurrection breathes his new Spirit, his resurrection, his Passover onto those who would become the church: «Receive the Holy Spirit» (John 20:22). Fifty days later, however, on Pentecost, that presence became manifest in the form of a hurricane and in tongues of fire (Acts 2:2-3). That silent Spirit that always accompanies the church is hurricane, is fire, is the power that impels the church. It is the Spirit that Christ refers to when he is preparing us for his departure. Today, then, is the last Sunday that Jesus is with us in the stage between heavenly life and earthly life. But he does not leave us orphans, as he told us with these precious words: «Whoever loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. . . I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you» (John 14:23-26).

The church of the Trinity

Behold in these words the origin of the church: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. If Christ had not gone to heaven to be glorified as man and God, the Father would not have been able to ratify with the sending of the Holy Spirit this work of redemption, this institution which is the church. The three Divine Persons work together to give us the trinitarian Spirit, which is the church of the Trinity. It is the church composed of men and women who are imperfect and fragile but who have received the breath of redemption: «Receive the Spirit» (John 20:22). It is the Holy Trinity. We will come, says Christ, and we will dwell in this church and in the heart of each person who believes in this redemption. It's marvelous, I tell you, to think of the many people who at this time live in panic and terror. They ask, «Are they going to do away with the church? Will they kill all the priests?» I say, «What does it matter?» The Spirit of God will not allow the church to perish. The Spirit will not be defeated by arms, by terror, or by the psychoses of humans. This Spirit of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—hovers over creation, as Genesis says, and gives life and strength to this church wherever she is alive (Gen 1:2). Let us not be afraid, sisters and brothers, for this is the origin of the church. That is why Christ could say to Peter (and this is the human element), «You are Rock; you are a fragile man; you are going to deny me; you are going to betray me. It doesn't matter because I am the one bearing this church over you, fragile little man. But I constitute you Peter, and you will be called Cephas because on this rock I, God, will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her» (Matt 16:18). This is a hymn of victory that the church carries in herself, sisters and brothers, but not to confront human powers. Let it be well understood that, when we try to define the church and present her in all her beauty despite her weakness, it is a joy to feel that we are a work of God and to tell you, to tell everybody, that the church is God dwelling among us.

What a beautiful description John gives us in the Apocalypse when he says that the angel transported him in spirit to a high mountain and showed him the Holy City, the figure of the church, descending from heaven, sent by God, bringing God's glory (Rev 21:10-11). This is the church, a city coming down from heaven, bringing the glory of God. It is Christ living among us. It is God who wants to give us his love and his peace. It is God who redeems us. If he descends to be with us, it is not to be in competition with human organizations, but to bestow the Spirit of God on human realities. He sends his Spirit so that the politician who believes in God and belongs to the church will transform politics into an instrument of God. He sends his Spirit so that the capitalist who truly believes in the church will transform and humanize his capital, thus giving it a sense of charity, justice, and love. He sends his Spirit so that the workers, the poor, the outcasts, the day laborers will see in this church something that transforms their poverty into redemption, so that they are not led down paths of resentment and class struggle to join organizations seeking merely earthly paradises, and so that their situation is touched by the breath of God.

How wonderful will be the day when all Salvadorans, instead of mistrusting one another, instead of viewing the church as an emissary of subversion, rather see the church as a messenger of God and as the city of God that descends to offer holiness to men and women, to free them from resentment and hatred, and to remove murderous weapons from their hands. If this were to happen, then we would not have to lament such sad events as those that occurred this past week: the assassination of the foreign

minister, a priest riddled with bullets in his own house, a blameless child who had his brains blown out by a homicidal bullet. The hatred and the defamatory campaigns continue, as if the church were to blame for all this chaos. Are not the persons who write those tendentious pages the really guilty ones? Are they not putting arms into the hands of the residents of Colonia Escalón when they pass out flyers saying, «Be a patriot: kill a priest»? That is certainly provocation. Yet no one calls this subversion. As our radio said yesterday, it is like in the times of Hitler when people were saying, «Build the country; kill a Jew». Today it is the priest who is the problem, the cause of all evils.

The unity of the church

But here comes the human element, sisters and brothers, appearing in today's readings in all its beauty. I beg you to reflect especially on today's first reading. It speaks about a conflict within the church, and all of us who belong to the church should examine ourselves in the light of this word. In the early church there was a struggle going on between two groups who in today's terms might be called traditionalists and progressives. The traditionalists were Jews who converted to Christianity and still wanted to keep observing the laws of Moses; they thought that otherwise the Gentiles could not be saved (Acts 15:1). The progressives, represented by Paul and Barnabas, were arguing differently: «It is not necessary to observe the law of Moses. It is sufficient to be baptized in Christ and to repent for one's sins» (Acts 15:11). They brought this conflict from Antioch to Jerusalem. Notice this detail: the magisterium of the church was located in Jerusalem; that's where Peter was. So they consulted Peter, and Peter consulted with his priests and elders (Acts 15:26). It's the same as when today we surround ourselves with priests and laypersons to consult about the word of God.

This was the first council of the church. It is beautiful to remember this now when many people do not want to hear about the Second Vatican Council or the bishops' conference in Medellin, authorized by Paul VI. They call them trifles, events not worth considering. Nevertheless, like the first Council of Jerusalem, today's Vatican Council and today's Medellín conference are consultations about the magisterium of the church. After the Jerusalem Council they sent out a letter (Acts 15:23-29). This was the first conciliar decree, a letter taken to Antioch by Paul and Barnabas, along with witnesses from Jerusalem. The decree instructed the traditionalists that the law of Moses was no longer necessary but that some substantial observances should still be preserved for the sake of peace and love. So they put in place some norms on which all agreed, but the main concern was love and peace.

Let us not fight over minor matters within the church; the important thing is to present a united front in love and peace. Let us not have doubts, dear Catholics. Let us not be radicalized either by extreme conservatism or by extreme progressivism. Let us support the magisterium of the church and remove all doubts about the documents of Vatican II and Medellin; they are documents of the church. Neither should we interpret these documents according to our own whims, as some people wish to interpret even the Bible, each one with his or her own interpretation. It is clear that the Bible alone is not sufficient; the Bible must be carefully studied and presented according to the living teaching that Christ left to his church. That is why in a recent

communication the archbishop together with his priests stated that «we once again swear fidelity to the word of God and the church's teaching».¹

My trip to Rome,² which some have criticized or misunderstood, had the same objective as that of Paul to Jerusalem: to consult with Peter, with the pope as successor of Peter, in order to see if what I teach and what I do are correct. And I return from Rome, as Paul returned to Antioch, with the testimony that we are on the right road. Do not doubt my word, dear sisters and brothers, and do not distort it. Many people are saying that I am being pressured and that I am preaching things that I do not believe. I speak with conviction, and I know that I am speaking the word of God. I have confronted God's word with the magisterium, and I believe in my conscience that I am doing the right thing. I want to invite everyone to dialogue with me. I have told you this from the beginning. I do not listen to just one sector. I listen to everyone, and I accept the good that each person offers. But this is the great mission and the difficult role of the bishop: to discern, to choose, to set aside what is bad, and to keep what is good.

But the Holy Spirit was promised by Christ, as we just saw in today's gospel. It is wonderful to hear the words of Jesus: «The Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you» (John 14:26). I believe that this is the reality of the present moment. I want to proclaim this by giving praise and thanks to the Lord, for my own personal experience bears witness to these words of today's gospel: «The Holy Spirit will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you» (John 14:26). One of my greatest joys is receiving those heaps of letters that reach me from all over the country. There are many who tell me that they are praying for me, that they ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate me. I thank you, sisters and brothers. Perhaps I cannot answer you all, but I pray to the Lord in thanksgiving, and I ask him to inspire you in prayer. During Mass when I pray those beautiful words, «Lord, look not on our sins but on the faith of your church», I think of all those humble pens and pencils that wrote these letters. I think of the many infirm Catholics, the elderly women, and so many nameless men and women, all of them praying without anyone else being aware of it. This is the faith of the church. The church prays, and the organ which speaks, that is the bishop, reveals all that holiness of the church. How can God and we who serve as God's instruments be mistaken? Help me so that I can always proclaim the word of God as faithfully as I wish to proclaim it.

That is why, sisters and brothers, we all make up the church. In keeping with the church's teaching, I want to tell you that a well-known tactic in this defamatory campaign is to separate and divide. Some priests, yes; others, no. The archbishop, yes; the auxiliary bishop, no. That parish or that community, yes; those other parishes, no. If we are Catholic, we are all united in the magisterium of the church. It is not a question of pressure from Jesuits or pressure from leftist priests or pressure from the extreme right. In the church there is neither left nor right. There exists only one magisterium to which we must all be converted. Those who want to preserve traditions, like the Jews who wanted to preserve circumcision, have to be converted to Peter, who tells them that circumcision is no longer necessary (Acts 15:7-11). Those who want to take the

¹ «Declaration of the Archbishop and Clergy of the Archdiocese of San Salvador on Recent Events» in *Orientación* (8 May 1977).

² Archbishop Romero left for Rome on 26 March 1977 and was received by Paul VI in the general audience of 30 March.

work of the church too far afield and do not even confess Christ are also held accountable to the magisterium of the church. There are some people who want to preach liberation but are unwilling to take any action; there are those who get angry because their interests are affected; and there are those who are bothered by false concerns about state security when the church backs the demands of persons who are suffering the abuse of power. On the other hand, there are those who want to subvert authority and preach a liberation without God; they desire power through class struggle and hatred, and they are upset when the church reminds them that communism is not the solution, that subversion is not the way. Hatred results only in the murder of important people and ministers of God. Hatred that commits sacrilege and plays horrible political games with human lives is not the solution; it is crime, plain and simple. Neither right nor left: in the heart of God, under the word of God, under the magisterium of the Lord, this is the church.

I want to ratify publicly, as far as my poor voice reaches, that there is no division in the magisterium of the church. Both of us, the archbishop and the auxiliary bishop, form a single teaching authority. I also want to say that all the priests who are now active are in communion with the bishop. And I repeat here what I said on a solemn occasion, «Anyone who attacks a priest who is in communion with the bishop attacks the bishop». That is why I am greatly afflicted that one of the priests who works in full communion with the bishop has become the victim of a criminal act. It is like tearing the arm off the bishop.

During the past week there have been some very sad events, but some very fruitful activities have also taken place. We had a meeting of the bishops, and we will continue our meeting on Tuesday. We are meeting precisely to support this teaching and unity of the church, to repudiate the violence and the slander, and to invite everyone to collaborate, even if they are not Catholics. As I said in my homily for Father Navarro, we call on all the vital forces of our society. If Father Navarro, riddled with bullets, was on that afternoon a sign of a persecuted church unable to speak out, then what are the other organizations doing, those that criticize the church? And those phantom organizations that call themselves Catholic—what are they doing?³ Do not display your power just by criticizing the church; do something to remove the firearms from the hands of the criminals and those who kill. Do not give these firearms more power with your campaign of slander. What nobility is left in the hearts of these people? I believe, sisters and brothers, in the noble power of many hearts and many organizations, such as the Red Cross, Protestant organizations, the Boy Scouts, and so many other organizations that it would be impossible to name here. They all come from the good work of noble hearts.

I say to you: do not be spectators of the church, as when two groups of children watch two boys fighting to see who will win, the church or the government. We are not fighting. The government and the church want to and have to seek peace; it is their duty to seek peace and true progress, though in different ways. I remember that at the end of the Second Vatican Council the church addressed a message to the world's leaders: «Allow Christ to exercise his purifying action on society. Do not crucify him anew. This

³ In the Salvadoran newspapers there were often paid advertisements against the archbishop, signed by such groups as the Catholic Salvadoran Association (ACS), the Association of Catholic Women (AMC), and the Association of the Followers of Christ the King (ASCR).

would be a sacrilege for he is the Son of God. This would also be suicide for he is the Son of Man. And allow us, his humble ministers, to spread everywhere without hindrance the Gospel of peace on which we have meditated during this Council. Your peoples will be the first beneficiaries, since the church forms for you loyal citizens, friends of social peace and progress».⁴

This is the church, sisters and brothers, so please stop this repugnant campaign of defamation. Fortunately no one believes it, but it still has its effect. It is true that our priests have defects, and not all of them speak with the gentleness that everyone would like, but there is always fraternal correction. Instead of going public with calumny or defamation, go and discuss the matter with the priest: «What were you trying to say, Father? I did not like what you said». Correct him, but be aware that as long as he is in communion with the bishop, his doctrine is true. If there is error in some detail, then correction or correct understanding are called for. Dialogue clarifies many misunderstandings. How many times have people come to me saying, «Father preached against the government», and they condemn the poor man. But when the case is examined more closely, it turns out to be another case of slander. Perhaps there was an imprudent phrase, and if he had reflected some more, if he had understood the effect, he would have corrected it. Believe me, my sisters and brothers, the church wants to sow peace and harmony. I have great faith in prayer, and I believe that we are going to reach an understanding because the violence cannot last. Let us all be of good will.

With all the power that my sacred ministry gives me, as a sacred trustee of the word of God and the church's magisterium, I appeal to all Catholics, priests, religious, laypersons, and communities: let us consolidate our church in the light of this authentic doctrine. Let us try to understand one another as was done in Antioch: when mistrust was sown, peace was restored because the opposing sides were docile to the teaching of Peter and the first council. And like the Council of Jerusalem, the Second Vatican Council is responding to the needs of our time. Let us study its teaching. Many people criticize Vatican II and Medellín, but they have not read the documents. Study them, and you will see what wealth of spirituality and what messages of peace they contain. For example, look at what the Council told world leaders: do not fear the church; rather understand that she is making people more loyal citizens who know how to live in this spirit of faith. Brothers and sisters, don't be mistrustful.

The church's goal

I want to conclude by reminding you of the goal toward which the church journeys. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, the church proclaims a very original message, a message of renewal. The book of the Apocalypse tells us very beautifully that we are traveling in the midst of earthly tribulations, but that we do not fear these tribulations because the Spirit of God is with us. Our goal is the Lamb, Saint John tells us today, and he says something very beautiful: «I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, for the glory of God gave it light and its lamp was the Lamb» (Rev 21:22-23). My sisters and brothers, this is a very appropriate text for our times of desacralization and secularization. Everything is being desacralized, and there is good

⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, «Messages of the Council to the World» (8 December 1965), *To Heads of State*, 5.

reason for this: we have lived in an overly sacred world. We give exaggerated importance to the material temple and to technical means, and we can easily forget that the main thing is God; the main thing is Christ the Lamb.

Let us talk together, then. I want to thank you greatly for the wonderful reception given to the homily I preached last week about our radio station and our press. Hardly had I left here for Suchitoto last Sunday when just going between the sacristy and my car we collected one hundred *colones*. People have been giving me money spontaneously. There in Suchitoto, where people heard my message, they spontaneously donated almost two hundred *colones*, and here we have collected five thousand *colones* in the course of the week. Next Sunday the church celebrates the day of communication, featuring the radio and the newspaper. The radio station has received threats, and conditions have been imposed on it. The commission responsible is going to try to clarify this situation. But if through incomprehension they silence our radio station and take away our newspaper, we do not need them, sisters and brothers. After all, what the word of God tells us today is that the temple is not necessary, nor are the instruments that the church utilizes to proclaim her message. The book of Revelation presents us with the definitive phase of this kingdom which we must live here below. It is our faith in God, God who is the temple. The word of God is our radio; Christ is our press; the Christian community living as a bright torch in the world preaches more than the radio and the newspaper. These instruments of social communication would be useless if we could not rely on communities of love, on Christians who live faithful to the true God and the true Christ. That is what is great about this world.

Today the church is present in the world, supported not by earthly realities but by communities of love in their hope and their faith in their God and in the heaven that is under construction. I am delighted, sisters and brothers, to be bishop at this time when the church is being authentically defined, when the church is defining herself without hatred or rancor, when she is forgiving the same people who are defaming and killing her. Always remaining the church of love, she relies on her God, and that is why she rises up over all the miserable onslaughts that are waged against her. My sisters and brothers, let us live this faith. This is the church that I would want, a church of love and hope that relies fully on our God.

This afternoon, on the scenic heights of Planes de Renderos, there will be a spectacular event to which I invite you. I have the pleasure of presiding at this devout folkloric homage in honor of the most holy Virgin: the procession of palms. Just as on Friday there was a day of prayer throughout the archdiocese, in which we asked the Virgin to intercede on our behalf, so this afternoon we will offer special prayers and ask the Virgin, as true mother of the church, to hasten the hour of mutual understanding and to remove all fear from our midst.

Jesus said, «Peace I leave with you» (John 14:27), and so I conclude, sisters and brothers, with the peace of Christ. This peace cannot be confused with the peace of the world because it is dynamic, it is active, and it flows from faith and hope. It does not remain silent but loves and lives; it is a peace that moves toward that ultimate peace where God is everything for all people.