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THE CHURCH, A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 October 1977

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4

2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14

Luke 17:5-10

My dear sisters and brothers, the divine word ought to be for us who believe in it a light that illuminates our steps. It should also comfort us in our afflictions and give us reason for our hopes. Accordingly, I would like to speak with you about the events that occurred during the week so as to illuminate these events, as well as other public events and intimate family events, with the word of God. For the church everything human is important, as the pope once said, «She is the life of humanity».

Events we experienced during the week

For example, this week we were saddened by the catastrophic military plane accident in which several of our brothers died. We have prayed for their eternal rest. Also, in their efforts to earn a living, some workers were buried under a ravine. A young boy was carried away by a strong current, and his mother was greatly distressed because his body could not be found.

Above all, I want to thank the media even though we have been unsuccessful in intervening and finding Elena Lima de Chiurato.¹ We have experienced firsthand the desperation of her family. In tears her husband told me, «I fear the worst—twenty-five years of marriage ending like this—if only they would give me her body». In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and his church that I have the honor to represent, in the name of all that is noble in the hearts of those who gather together this morning in this reflection, including perhaps those who committed this crime of kidnapping, may you have compassion on human suffering and give us news. Communicate with me since I have offered to mediate, or communicate directly with the family of Mrs. de Chiurato. I earnestly beg you to do this.

Dear sisters and brothers, the grief of this family has struck deep in my heart even as other disappeared persons continue to suffer awful tortures despite our pleas. This grief is felt by all the families searching for their loved ones. The respect we feel for the Chiurato family we also feel as well for all those families grieving for this new class of Salvadorans: the disappeared.

¹ Reference to Elena Margarita Lima de Chiurato.

Life of the church

Meanwhile, the church continues to organize herself and to review her mission so that she will be more effective in serving humankind. Yesterday in Rome the synod of bishops began. In the synod the pope will engage in broad consultation about catechesis in the world. Last year all the bishops of the world were informed about this theme so that they could consult with their priests, religious, and laity. This gave us the chance to advise the pope, who is responsible for the universal teaching office, regarding the best way to evangelize, catechize, and bring the Good News to all our young people, children, and adults. This great consultation will continue until the end of October, and we pray that from it will come a new impulse and a new orientation for the catechesis that the church needs. Attending the synod as representative of the Salvadoran bishops is Bishop Marco René Revelo, the auxiliary bishop of Santa Ana; he is in charge of catechesis in our country.

Another important item of church news this week is the appointment of Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas as the residing bishop of Santiago de María. In our newspaper *Orientación*² I expressed my feelings with regard to this appointment. On the one hand, we lose a valuable collaborator in our archdiocesan curia. On the other hand, it is a great joy because the promotion of an auxiliary bishop to become a residing bishop implies that the pope trusts him. By this gesture all the calumny and defamation that many persons have directed against our beloved Bishop Rivera are shown to be false. His person rises above this tangle of calumnies and misunderstandings. The pope has chosen him to become the leader of a young diocese alive with hope; certainly it is a place where his great gifts as a pastor will work wonders in accord with the new mentality of the church. I am happy that his pastoral vision coincides with that of the archdiocese, which views human development as inseparable from evangelization. Let us rejoice, then, and pray to the Lord that in his new post Bishop Rivera will bear witness to this church that is concerned about the actual problems of the world.

During these days the schools are ending their classes and graduating those who have finished their studies. We have had the good fortune to be able to participate in some of these ceremonies. We have been unable to attend others, but I thank you for the invitations all the same. From this pulpit I want to extend my congratulations to all Catholic schools and voice my confidence in them. This year, during this baptism of fire of the archdiocesan church, our Catholic schools have also aligned themselves with the church in her present teaching. There have been reactions against them and attempts to divide the church. Unfortunately, these reactions have been given a forum even though they are mistaken. In order to carry out evangelization that is in accord with our times, the church must call upon every means of evangelization at her disposal, and that includes the Catholic schools.

At this time the schools are registering students for the next academic year. I hope it is not true that certain groups of Catholics are attempting to undermine the work of the schools by encouraging students to go elsewhere. If such disloyalty is occurring among Catholics, then I denounce it. No group of Catholics, even if they organize a school, has the right to take students from another school under the pretext

² «A Word from the Archbishop: A New Bishop in Santiago de María» in *Orientación* (2 October 1977).

that they will do a better job teaching the doctrine of the church. The Catholic schools are all authorized by the hierarchy of our archdiocese, and what they do should be respected by all groups, by anti-Catholic groups and much more by Catholics themselves. Let us not give the impression that we are two churches. Let us live as one church in the line proclaimed by the teaching authority of the church; especially for the new times we are in thanks to the Second Vatican Council and the documents of Medellín.

During this week I visited the communities of Huizúcar and Nejapa for the festivities of their patrons. Bishop Rivera also brought episcopal presence to Guazapa where they were celebrating the feast of Saint Michael. I want to congratulate the people for their devotion and for knowing how to integrate the tradition of these patronal celebrations—an ancestral tradition that has been carried forward for many years—with the new pastoral lines of the church. That is to say, the church is like an ancient tree which despite the age of her trunk keeps sprouting new branches and inspiring new hopes. This is the life of the church. If we simply respected traditions without seeking to change them, then we would be like a dead trunk, like a museum of ancient artifacts. This would not be the life of a church whose centuries of tradition are bound together by the golden thread of Christ's life. The church responds to the new needs of the new communities that sprout from the ancient trunk of our Christian faith, and she keeps them ever renewed in fresh visions of the real world.

Out of filial devotion to the Virgin I want to remind you, sisters and brothers, that yesterday we began the month of October, which is the month of the rosary. How I wish that the old custom of praying the rosary together as family would return to our homes. Try to learn this custom, those of you who do not know it already. And those of you who practice this tradition, be aware that you are also in line with the church which respects these popular traditions of love and devotion to the Virgin. I simply ask you not to practice these customs in a routine way. It should not be a mechanical repeating of the Our Father and the Hail Mary. Let it rather be what it was in the beginning, the message of the Gospel. The mysteries of the rosary are a precious summary of the Gospel. This is understood even by little children who count the beads of the rosary in their tiny hands while they meditate on the Child Jesus, on the Jesus who dies for us, on the risen Jesus, and on the Virgin who accompanies this Christ in his childhood, in his agonies, and in his resurrection. Those who pray the rosary while recalling these Gospel mysteries become Christians in the best of schools, the school of the Virgin who is the best Christian.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I sincerely recommend that you return to this custom that many believe has become outdated and irrelevant. Only those things we do not love become outdated. Those who have problems with the rosary must also have problems with the Virgin, and those who have problems with the Virgin must also have problems with Christ, and those who have problems with Christ should search their own conscience for their problems have to do with their own lives. Make amends, and be converted, and you will find joy in the company of the Virgin and Jesus and in the company of the family that prays these immortal prayers with affection.

And that is what the word of God tells us on this delightful morning of the Twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time. As we move forward toward the beginning of a new year, the church takes care that her Christians, as in a university, keep learning

more and more about the mysteries of her kingdom, her doctrine, and above all, her community. Today we could title this homily, «The Church, a Community of Faith». Faith is the theme of the three readings today: faith enlightens Habakkuk's insoluble problem; faith is the secret solution that Paul gives his disciple Timothy, who is perhaps going through a vocational crisis; and faith is the response of Christ when the apostles make a request of him: «Lord, increase our faith» (Luke 17:5). Let that also be our request this morning.

The just person lives by faith

The prophet's response today is beautiful. The prophet Habakkuk probably lived during the times when the Chaldeans and the Assyrians invaded the Holy Land. As a prophet looking toward the future, he merges two different planes: the plane of injustice among the people themselves and the plane of God's just punishment of the people at the hands of an invading army that acts as a lash to chastise the sins of Israel. The prophet understands that God is punishing the people for their sins, but he does not understand how a foreign nation even more sinful than Israel could be chosen by God to come and commit even greater injustices than those for which the people are being punished. The poor man is perplexed, and he confronts God with a problem that is similar to the problem of evil spoken about in the book of Job. In our day we can translate this problem into a question about our own national problems, and like Habakkuk we can ask: «How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen. I cry out to you, "Violence!", but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and clamorous discord» (Hab 1:2-3). This is an extraordinary book. It contains only three chapters. If you can read it this week, take special note of the second chapter where the prophet explains his concerns. He writes his complaints against God in the form of five condemnations.

The first is against economic exploitation: «Woe to him who stores up what is not his; how long can it last! He makes himself wealthy with debts» (Hab 2:6b). Here the prophet denounces the exploitation of the poor, such as the poor woman who is unable to provide food for her children and therefore must pawn her possessions or borrow money. This money is loaned, but at a high interest rate: «They store up what is not theirs».

The second condemnation is against wanton pillage: «Woe to him who possesses evil gain for his household, setting his nest on high to escape the reach of misfortune» (Hab 2:9). Here the prophet says that the very palaces built as a result of this usury will cry out. Their stones and their adornments will bear witness to how the lender has become a human blood-sucker. What use is it to have a beautiful palace that is the fruit of pillage and robbery?

His third condemnation is against the genocide committed by this invading army that comes and kills his people: «Woe to the one who builds a city by bloodshed». The prophet's words seem to be written for our time: «Woe to him who establishes a town by wickedness» (Hab 2:12). No city or civilization can stand firm on foundations of injustice and bloodshed, on foundations of assaults and torture.

In the fourth place, the prophet complains about the corruption among the oppressed people themselves. «Woe to you who give your neighbors a flood of your wrath to drink and make them drunk till their nakedness is seen» (Hab 2:15). Here the prophet describes with what we might call pornographic detail the vices of carnal lust in which our people delight. Woe to those corrupt people! In this passage, my sisters and brothers, we find not only injustice denounced, but also immorality. Motels that are really bordellos are doing a great business; the houses of prostitution where flesh is sold are booming. This is corruption, and there is also corruption within matrimony which becomes prostitution when the spouses avoid having children and simply want the pleasures of the flesh. This is immorality, and God cannot tolerate such things. The government grants us the benefits of human rights but only on the condition that we use artificial contraceptives! The sources of life are mutilated; women are sterilized, and men are sterilized. The flesh reigns supreme. All this offends God, and the prophet feels in his own life the multiple abuses committed by his people. Abortion has been legalized even though the bishops asked the president himself and the assembly to respect the life that lives within the mother's womb. But the law was passed. That is truly persecution of the church, passing laws against the morality that the church preaches. This was done even though they had promised all the bishops that the right to life would be respected. It is the right to be born, as the movie says, and yet not even the right to be born was upheld. It is said that here in El Salvador human rights are respected, and yet thousands of abortions take place in our hospitals and medical clinics. People are paid to go abroad and get an abortion. The evil of these trips is plain to see. It is awful, sisters and brothers. We truly live under the curse of the prophet: «Woe to the people who drink until their nakedness is seen!»

Finally the prophet condemns idolatry: «Woe to him who says to wood, "Awake!" and to dumb stone, "Arise!" See, it is overlaid with gold and silver, but there is no breath of life in it» (Hab 2:19). Naturally we do not practice the same idolatries as the Chaldeans and Assyrians, but gold continues to be an idol that many adore. Because people adore that golden calf which is their wealth, they are capable of violating every right and committing murder, destruction, and slander. They utter every kind of epithet against a church that does nothing more than cry out with the prophet, «Woe to you idolaters! You make gold your god but have no life within you. As you lay prostrate before this metal, your heart has become hardened as well».

In the face of these problems that are the historical reality of sin in the world, God's response is heard in the first reading: «The Lord answered me: "Write down the vision. The vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late. The unjust man has no integrity; but the just man shall live by faith"» (Hab 2:2-4). My sisters and brothers, this is the message that I wish would cleave to every heart. The just person lives by faith. Only faith can give us an adequate response in the face of so many injustices. Where injustice, violence, and brute force seem to hold sway, the just person can feel helpless. There may be little we can do as a weak church to combat the assaults on human dignity. Nevertheless, we have the vigorous force of God, which is faith. The just person lives by faith. This is the life that I desire for every heart.

What is faith?

In today's gospel our Lord also invites us to have faith. «Ah», he says, «if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would do marvelous deeds like this». This is simply a rhetorical expression in the gospel, but it seeks to express a reality. As Jesus says, «You would say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you» (Luke 17:6).

We do not need to transport a tree to the sea, but there are other things that appear even more difficult. For example, how can we change this situation in El Salvador? Or look at those families who weep for the disappeared. How will my son, my spouse, my brother appear again? In the face of force and powerful weapons, the unarmed person appears very small. Nevertheless, if we who are tiny before the forces of the world have faith in God, then we are more powerful than all the armies of the world.

What is faith? My greatest fear at this time, sisters and brothers, is that people are losing faith. The greatest offense that these criminals commit with their violent assaults is endangering the faith of the people and leading them to trust in the brutalities of violence. Be careful, my sisters and brothers, for there are many people, especially among the young, who no longer believe in spiritual powers and so join the guerrillas. They become involved in kidnapping and violence as though these were the solution. How I would like to give the lie to these false idolatries which in the end are simply weaknesses of the flesh that lead to nothing good. How I long to place in the hearts of the guerrilla fighters—and others who use violence, who assault, who torture, who trust in money and politics—the power that comes only from God. Only faith can move mountains and bring happiness to our people and our history.

What is faith? I have copied down some of the ideas of the Second Vatican Council contained in the document on divine revelation. We are told how God is revealed in nature in such a way that even a non-Christian, indeed any rational human being, can discover the existence of God in flowers, in fruits, in stars, in nature as a whole. This is called natural revelation. But besides this natural revelation, the Council tells us, God desired to reveal himself and his plan of mercy and love by means of his Word, the Son of God who became man and entrusted this revelation to a church (DV 5). So the Council asks: what should people do when they know that God has spoken? The response is this: «When God reveals, people must submit with faith. Through faith»—and here we are given a beautiful description of faith—«man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals». Consider the beauty of this, sisters and brothers. Perhaps from our childhood we have had a very intellectual concept of faith. That is because before Vatican II we lived with the doctrine of the Council of Trent, which had to combat the many abuses of faith preached by the Lutheran reformers. Luther taught that as long as we have faith in God we would be saved, even if we have sinned greatly. We attribute to Luther that phrase which I'm not sure is historically accurate, but it says, «Sin greatly, and as long as you believe strongly, you will be saved».³ Since this ghastly error can lead many sinners to a deceptive trust, the Council of Trent condemned such rash confidence and taught that faith means accepting the truths of God and the things that God teaches. As a result, we

³ This phrase, which Luther spoke in a moment of despair to his companion Melanchthon, should be understood as follows: «Even though you sin badly, if you believe you will be saved». See LORTZ J., *Historia de la Reforma*, Vol.1, Madrid, 1963, 317.

ended up with an intellectual concept of faith. Once a king was asked: «How are things with your Christian folk?» He answered, «In the area of faith, very well because they only have to believe, but in the area of morals, very bad». Faith and morality had become separated.

Having overcome this Protestant error, the Second Vatican Council taught once again biblical faith; such is the coherence of the church's teaching authority. Luther sought to interpret biblical faith but did so erroneously and abusively, but that same faith is interpreted by the church in the phrase I just read from the Council: «Man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and freely assenting to the truth revealed by him» (DV 5). Faith is the acceptance not only of God's truths but also of God's will. It means not only handing over my mind to God's truths but handing over my mind and my heart to what God desires.

Do you want to see an act of faith pleasing to the eyes of God? Behold Mary when God seeks her consent to collaborate in our redemption: «Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word» (Luke 1:38). This is an act of faith, an acceptance of the mystery of God without understanding it. But it is an acceptance of the One who is all-powerful and knows everything. I don't understand it but I accept it. In God's hands I am an insignificant instrument. I do not understand the mystery of history, nor do I understand why injustice occurs or why God allows greater injustices for the sake of punishing lesser injustices. I don't understand these things, but I do understand that God is the Lord of history and that I surrender myself to God. I understand that those scourges of God will also be thrown into the fire when they no longer serve to accomplish God's loving designs.

The Vatican Council goes on to say that faith is not something that springs from us alone. Pay close attention to this, sisters and brothers, because faith does not depend on you. «To give this faith response», the Council states, «the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind, and giving joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it» (DV 5). Thus, faith is a supernatural gift of God. Blessed are those who have faith! This explains the request of the disciples: «Lord, increase our faith» (Luke 17:5). I know that many of those listening to me do not have faith, or at least they brag about their lack of faith, but there is nothing wonderful about not having faith. How unfortunate you are, dear friend, without faith! You are blind; you are a beggar. While people of faith contemplate the beautiful landscapes of God's will, you are near-sighted and blind; you do not see; you have no faith. Ask God to restore your sight. Ask the Lord to lead you out of the darkness and the shadows in which you live. Faith is a gift of God, and he does not deny it to those who ask for it. What is more, says the Council, it is an aid that is given in advance. Even before you ask for it, it is already there in your heart urging you to ask for it. My sisters and brothers, let us ask for this gift. May this be our prayer during this week: «Lord, increase our faith» (Luke 17:5).

Finally, the Council states that this faith never ends. «So that we can more fully understand the revelation of God, the Holy Spirit continually perfects this faith with his gifts» (DV 5). There is an exquisite working of the Holy Spirit in the heart of every person and every community. I want to rejoice now, sisters and brothers, in

commending all those Christians—priests, religious, catechists—who are forming those communities of faith, the small base communities where the Bible orients their reflection and where the faith grows. These groups are precisely the ones called subversive. The people being persecuted are actually those who are maturing most in their faith. There should be no mistrust of a group which is legitimately biblical and legitimately convoked by the church. We will find there the faith in God that grows in people's hearts by the illumination of grace and the Holy Spirit.

Hopefully there is a Bible in every home. At mealtime or bedtime, along with the rosary, parents and children should read some Scripture passage together. That will nourish the faith of children and young people—and even of elders, because faith never stops growing during the whole of life. Those who say, «I learned my catechism lessons at the time of my First Communion», and worry no more about it are left with a feeble faith. Make it grow, sisters and brothers. Let your faith grow because within you is the Spirit of baptism and confirmation which urges you to grow in faith so that you will better understand the mysteries of the nation and the injustices of the social order. Faith will help you understand all that we do not understand, even those things we want to resolve with violence and power, with repression and torture. Do not seek to resolve things that way. We must discern the plans of God in history out of the depths of faith. That is how we must collaborate, not by becoming an obstacle to the Lord's designs.

The faith has been entrusted to the church

It is a shame that the time has passed so quickly. Commenting only briefly on the second reading, I will tell you that this faith, which grows within us as a gift of God, has been entrusted by God to the church. We should read the second letter of Saint Paul to Timothy and hear in Paul's voice the voice of the church, which ultimately is the voice of a bishop. Paul was a bishop like the one who is speaking to you, naturally with the great difference of his holiness and my mediocrity. But we are both the voice of the church: Paul as bishop and I as bishop. When Paul writes, it is the church that is speaking these words: «Stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands» (2 Tim 1:6). These are the gestures of the church. When a priest is ordained, the bishop imposes his hands on him and thus transmits to him the power of the priesthood. When a young person is confirmed, hands are also imposed to invoke the Holy Spirit. Within a few minutes, I will take bread into my hands and say, «This is my Body», and when I give you Communion, I will say to you, «The Body of Christ». These are all human gestures of the church, but they are also Christ's actions. It is Christ who continues to speak. Through faith the church continues to transmit Christ's message and to give Christ's life to souls. The sacraments are simply the contact, the presence, the encounter of a person with Christ himself through his minister.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, the church is telling us Salvadorans the following: «God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony about our Lord or about me, a prisoner for his sake» (2 Tim 1:7-8). As a prisoner in chains, Paul felt himself to be the church that was persecuted and kept prisoner. But even though chained, Paul was able to say to all his children, «I, as the persecuted church, am the face of Christ; do not be ashamed to be my child». Woe to those who are ashamed of the church! Woe to those

who continue this slanderous campaign against the church! They are making fun of their own mother.

«Bear your share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God» (2 Tim 1:8,13). Look again at what God tells Habakkuk, «Write down the vision, for the vision still has its time and presses on to fulfillment. Blessed is the just man who lives by faith» (Hab 2:2-4). And so Paul as church also tells Catholics, «Take as your norm the sound words that you heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Jesus Christ» (2 Tim 1:13). True love is love inspired in faith; it is serene love that does not fear violence or make use of violence for it has no need of it. It needs only to believe and to surrender to God. We need not understand God's times or the trials with which he tests us during life. We know God's time will come. It may be delayed, but it will come.

This is the hope that the church wishes to preserve, and that is why Saint Paul, speaking for the church, says, «Guard this rich treasure with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within you» (2 Tim 2:14). My sisters and brothers, guard this treasure. It is not my poor word that sows hope and faith. I am no more than God's humble echo in this people, and I am issuing a warning to those who have been chosen to be God's scourges and who use violence in every form. Be careful because when God no longer needs you, he will cast you into the fire. It is better for you to be converted in time. And I say to those who suffer these scourges and do not understand the reason for these injustices: have faith. Give yourselves completely to God, in will and mind and heart. God has his time. Our disappeared sisters and brothers have not disappeared from God's eyes, and those who have made them disappear are also very present before the justice of God. Let us pray for both the disappeared and those who are to blame. Let us pray that our world which suffers such uncertainty be given the assurance of faith. Guard this treasure that we now proclaim in our creed.