

5

THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Fifth Sunday of Easter

8 May 1977

Acts 14:20b-26

Revelation 21:1-5a

John 13:31-33a, 34-35

Dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience.

For the archdiocese this is a family hour. Because of this marvel of the radio we all feel like one great family, and not only those who at this moment are sheltered beneath the roof of this cathedral, symbol of the church's unity and truth in the world. The cathedral is a special place. It is the seat of the pastor who is responsible for the unity of the whole diocese and responsible also for the truth that is preached in the diocese. Through the radio, however, we feel that the cathedral has expanded to every corner of the diocese, and we are delighted that this message is multiplied through the use of the radio.

When we speak of the radio as a «miracle», we are echoing the voice of the Second Vatican Council, which dedicated one of its documents to the means of communication such as radio, television, and the press. This document seeks to awaken Catholics to their responsibility to support the church's own means of communication.¹ Each year one day is set aside to promote people's awareness about the importance of the media; this year it will be Sunday, May 22, two weeks from now. But today I want to anticipate that event because, as you all know, the church's means of communication, namely, our radio station YSAX and our newspaper *Orientación*, are the objects these days of intense persecution. This week, as you know, a bomb exploded and destroyed some of the machinery in our printing office, *Imprenta Criterio*. This week we also received threats that that this radio station might be closed down. Who knows whether this is the last time that you will hear me on the radio? May God will otherwise.

God wants it to be understood that the mission of the church does not involve backing defamatory campaigns against the church. Let it be understood that a voice is needed to speak out against those slanderous campaigns that are raging like a storm against the church. It is not right that the church should be silent when she must speak to defend herself and offer guidance to the faithful at this time of confusion. I am most happy to have received some correspondence on this matter. The community of Ciudad Arce sent a beautiful letter that states, «We are strengthened when we listen to your messages that are filled with optimism and at the same time speak the truth. In our

¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Inter Mirifica* on the Means of Social Communication (4 December 1963).

communities we pray that God will continue to strengthen you in this same spirit». Thank you very much, my beloved Christians. I know that this voice that speaks is not an isolated voice, for when a representative individual speaks, the whole organism expresses itself through that mouth. So also, the mystical Body of Christ is an organism in which every last Christian takes part, including the persecuted, the silenced, and the tortured Christians.

The Church's mission

But there must be a voice that speaks for the whole organism that suffers, a voice that cries out and speaks the truth, a voice that encourages and strengthens. I honestly feel, sisters and brothers, that I am that voice and that we are fulfilling a mission. That is precisely what we stated in the message that you all probably read in the papers this week.² On the one hand, we are in solidarity with the anguish and the hope of the people of our time, especially those who are poor and who suffer. On the other hand, be aware that we are not being political when we speak in this way. The Council has stated (and I put these words in quotation marks): «The church has the right to pass moral judgments, even on matters touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary» (GS 76). When I was a student in Rome, I was deeply moved by a very beautiful statement of Pope Pius XI: «The church is not involved in politics, but when politics touches the altar, the church defends the altar». The rights of the human person are of great concern to the church. Whenever life is endangered, mother church is concerned. At this moment the church is very mindful of the many mothers who are suffering in our land. The church is concerned about those who are unable to speak, those who suffer, and those who are tortured or silenced. This is not being political. Rather, those involved in politics are touching the altar and touching morality, and the church has the right to speak its word of moral orientation.

It will be said that this is Marxism. I am not going to read right now the whole message that was published this week because it is too long; at the end of the Mass that message will be read here over the radio. But I want you to pay heed to the part of the message where it says, «We want to remind you that we are human and therefore have limitations and can be mistaken». I fully recognize, sisters and brothers, that I am a man and I can make mistakes. That is why I am open to dialogue. Anyone who is not in agreement with me, come and let us talk with one another. Convince me of my errors. But don't criticize me or silence me without first listening to me. We are aware of our limitations and we know that we can be mistaken. As human persons we can all make mistakes. Nevertheless, the message speaks for all the priests united with the archbishop when it states, «We want to be faithful to our prophetic mission in order to guide the people in the midst of such great confusion». This is our intention; do not distort it. We want to guide and give witness to the people of God who listen to us and read our bulletins; they are seeking orientation. Let us not silence this voice that offers guidance. Let us correct the possible errors. We are willing to dialogue and to let them tell us how we are abusive or in what we are mistaken. These are accidental matters that can be corrected. But let us speak, and let us offer guidance. «Therefore we restate

² «Declaration of the Archbishop and Clergy of the Archdiocese of San Salvador on Recent Events» in *Orientación* (8 May 1977). Quoted passages in this homily are from this message, unless indicated otherwise.

our oath of fidelity to the word of God and the magisterium of the church». This is the guidance that the priest offers: the word of God and the church's magisterium.

In the light of God's word and the church's magisterium, we must speak in the same way that Peter addressed the authorities in Jerusalem when he said, «We must obey God rather than men» (Acts 5:29). And we must also obey the magisterium of the church. «Therefore we are conscious»—note the balance we propose here—«that we would not be in communion with our church if we proclaimed and worked for a liberation that was merely political or socio-economic». In other words, if the liberation and redemption that the church preaches through her priests seek only a political or economic sort of redemption—after the fashion of Marxism, which has no faith in God or hope in heaven—then it would not be the true message of the church. Let it be very clear, then, that when the church preaches social justice, equality, and human dignity; when the church defends those who suffer poverty or violence, this is not subversive nor is it Marxism. This is the authentic magisterium of the church. I sincerely hope, dear sisters and brothers, that we are all interested in knowing what the church has been saying since the Second Vatican Council.

This does not mean breaking with traditions of twenty centuries; rather, the church is adapting the tradition to these modern times. And you can see that it is easy to confuse our message with Marxism if one is not aware that the church lives by hope, by God, by spirituality, by prayer. This gives the church an even greater impulse to work for liberation of the earth than the communists have, for she knows that no paradise such as the communists announce exists in this world. Paradise is consummated there in eternity, but the kingdom of God is already happening here on earth, as the Apocalypse told us today (Luke 6:27). Christ came to establish with his resurrection a new human situation of holiness and justice and love. It is not necessary to wait until we die in order to possess heaven. Already on earth love is proclaimed. And as long as there is no love, we will have only that sad reality of people preying like wolves on one another.

This is what happens when Christ's love is extinguished in our hearts. Yet it is precisely love that the church preaches, love even for those who persecute and calumniate her. As Christ said, «Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you» (Luke 6:27). «Do good to those who hate you» (Matt 5:44). This is what we preach: No to vengeance! No to the class struggle! No to violence! You would have to be blind to believe that, in these circumstances of violence and persecution, we have not sided with those who suffer, whether they be poor or rich. We have defended the life of the foreign minister, Borgonovo Pohl,³ and we will continue to defend it. We do not want them to make him a victim of violence. But along with Borgonovo Pohl's mother who is suffering, we are in solidarity also with the mothers of all those who are imprisoned, with all those who suffer. We are not on the side of one particular class of people.

³ On 19 April 1977, the FPL (Popular Forces of Liberation) kidnapped Mauricio Alfredo Borgonovo, foreign minister in the government of Colonel Arturo Armando Molina, to obtain the freedom of thirty-seven political prisoners. The minister's family requested the mediation of Archbishop Romero, who accepted and promised to do all he could to save his life. See «Statement of the Archbishop of San Salvador on the Borgonovo Pohl Case» (26 April 1977) in *Orientación* (1 May 1977).

I also want this to be very clear, sisters and brothers, because some people have said that the new archbishop does not want to be the bishop of the rich, but only of the poor. This is a lie. That phrase is part of the defamatory campaign. From the beginning everyone has heard me say: I am with everyone. I am open to dialogue with everyone. I am willing to correct my mistakes. And I will speak with anyone from any sector. I love everyone, and my mission is to love people in order to save them. In my heart there is no room for exclusion, sisters and brothers, and I say this to you in total frankness. Therefore, the mission of the church should not be confused with Marxism or subversion or hatred, for this would be a betrayal of the church's mission. If any priest is convinced of subversion or Marxism, then we must separate that individual from the church—but he must be convinced of that in judgment and in truth.

On the other hand, notice how balanced the church is when she denies being subversive or Marxist. Our declaration continues: «We are aware that we would not be in communion with our church if we announced a liberation that was merely political or socio-economic. But we are also convinced that a priest or any Catholic would be out of communion with the Catholic faith if he or she, in the name of a tradition without evolution or immanence, that is, without involvement in real historical problems, were to reject the teaching of Vatican II, the Latin American Bishops' Conference of Medellin, the present pope, and the diocesan bishop who is in communion with the pope. For it is the bishop, in communion with the pope, who is the only teacher authorized to teach and endorse the authentic teaching of the church in his diocese».

Yes, sisters and brothers, for while one side accuses the church of being Marxist and subversive, another group of people wants to submit the church to a tradition without immanence, that is, a disembodied spirituality, a Protestant-style preaching that floats in the clouds, that sings psalms and prays, but without any concern for temporal realities. These people are not Catholic either, because all the modern documents of the church are inspired precisely in the words of today's gospel: «This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another» (John 13:35). The modern preaching of the church emphasizes this fraternal love. Perhaps we previously placed too much emphasis on loving God, and we thought we were loving God while we were treating our sisters or brothers badly. Today the church demands of us: if you truly love God, then do good to your neighbor, your worker, your subordinate, and the prisoner. Then we would find love even in our prisons, and there would no longer be that hatred and that violence that is so prevalent in our time.

The church, then, keeps this careful balance and wants those Catholics who do not understand this modern teaching of the church to learn about it. (Sadly, one priest who is not in communion with the church has written recently against this teaching.⁴) The church does not preach a spiritualized love of God but rather a love of God that is revealed in the love of neighbor. I recommend that you reflect seriously on this message because it contains nothing that is subversive; it is simply a message of orientation.

⁴ The reference is to Ricardo Fuentes Castellanos, who frequently wrote against the archbishop and the archdiocese. He even stated, for example, that «since the pontificate of John XXIII, the Catholic church has abandoned the tradition of Trent and the Counter-Reformation, lasting until Pius XII, and has embarked on a socialist adventure». See «From Medellín to Riobamba and San Salvador», *El Mundo* (23 March 1977).

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, we want to say that the church cannot remain silent. She must speak out, and if unfortunately they also want to silence this radio station, then look for the word of God from the priest in your parish. Do not miss Mass on Sunday. The diocesan office will take care to continue publishing its informational bulletin. Look for it in your parishes. Do not become isolated from this communion of the word, for the persecuting forces who defame the church have at their disposition all the newspapers and all radio and television stations, thus creating an unequal struggle. But the church is not looking for a fight; she simply wants to state what she represents. Therefore let us get to know her well. Even if you want to condemn her, we must first know her before doing so. Do not condemn the church, especially her children, without hearing her first, without listening to her message, without carefully discerning the news about her that is so often distorted. Please then, dear sisters and brothers, let us remain in the communion of the word. The church is launching a campaign to help our own means of communication. Along with the letter from Ciudad Arce we received the first contribution of thirty-nine *colones* collected from the poor. They are a sign of hope and tell us that the church is not alone. I have also received early contributions from a priest and another *campesino*. You can make your own contribution through your pastor or by bringing it to the chancery. Let us do our part to maintain the church's means of communication.

Prayer is primary

In the second place, I want to ask you, dear sisters and brothers, to pray often. Not that prayer is secondary; rather, it is primary, and second only in the order in which I am expressing my ideas. This is the month of May, the month of the Virgin, the month of much prayer. The Catholic schools met this past week in a gesture of solidarity, and they are aware that a terrible campaign is being waged against them. We know that this campaign is aimed at the destruction of the Catholic schools. We also know that something called «The National Commission for the Defense of the Catholic Doctrine» is planning to establish its own school. We just stated that the bishop alone is authorized to endorse the Catholic teaching of the diocese. No one else should presume to exercise vigilance over the Christian doctrine in the schools. In the light of this situation, it was suggested that we need to pray, and it was decided that May 13, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, will be set aside as a day of prayer. I support this initiative of the schools because I want this to be a day of prayer not only for the schools but for the whole diocese.

On May 13 at 10:00 in the morning we will celebrate a solemn Mass in the cathedral with representatives from the schools, and I also invite the parishes to send representatives. On the same day, as you know, in the scenic mountains of Las Pavas in Cojutepeque, prayers will be offered to the Virgin of Fatima. Also, in La Rábida and in Los Planes de Renderos, places consecrated to the Virgin of Fatima, the parish churches will be special centers of prayer. I ask all the parishes and the priests to organize a Holy Hour on this feast of Our Lady of Fatima, so that all the people on that day can earnestly ask the Virgin to intercede on our behalf. Let us pray earnestly for our country and for our archdiocese. Let us therefore celebrate this Holy Hour in all the parishes on May 13, but let us not be satisfied to pray on just that one day. I ask of you all during the month of the Virgin: let us give new life to the beautiful traditions of our people, with processions through the streets of our villages and with flowers from the fields. The

flowers that fill the church and surround the image of the Virgin are signs of the prayers of our people. In the schools and in the seminary they are celebrating this month of May with great devotion. In regard to this program of prayer, sisters and brothers, I want to remind you that every day in the cathedral there is exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. So when you come from the towns and villages and pass near the cathedral, come in and pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament; pray for the needs of the church and the country.

Solidarity with the Jesuits

Another thought, sisters and brothers, regarding our communion as a family, is the solidarity of the archdiocese with the Society of Jesus, that is, the Jesuits. We can speak of them in the same way that we speak of other priests: they can make mistakes. Nevertheless, regarding the substance of their doctrine, I ask you to study the history of the Society of Jesus since it was founded in the sixteenth century by Saint Ignatius Loyola in response to the dangers of that time, very similar to those of today. The Jesuits came to form a valiant army of men who were always at the vanguard of the church. That is why they are called «the company», a military term of those days that referred to those at greatest risk during battle. So it is natural that the Jesuits are always the targets when the church is attacked.

But take note: the Company of Jesus, the Jesuits, is not some sect separated from the Catholic church; they are part of the Catholic church. Anyone who attacks a Jesuit attacks the church. That is why we are saddened. This coming week, if we are allowed to do so, a paid ad will be published with the title, «The Jesuits and the Capture, Detention, and Deportation of Father Jorge Sarsanedas».⁵ I myself went to the barracks of the National Guard to receive Father Sarsanedas and take him from there to the airport to get a flight to Panama, where he is now. I want to make it clear that I could not sign the release document because it contained many false statements, which I made known there.⁶ But I state clearly that I am in complete solidarity as pastor of the church with the Society of Jesus, which has always been for our church a strong, powerful, and valiant bastion.

I am thankful because our archdiocese has already been bathed in the blood of one Jesuit, Father Rutilio Grande. Now another Jesuit has been deported, and we do not know what will happen next. We pray to God and to the Virgin for understanding. We pray that the church's message will be understood. We cannot continue to scour the countryside and deport people. Rather, we must understand what is happening in order to take advantage of the goodness that is in each person. We must assume, dear sisters and brothers, an attitude of dialogue and understanding. Even our enemy has an aspect of goodness and good will.

A greeting to the mothers

⁵ *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 May 1977).

⁶ Father Jorge Sarsanedas, a Panamanian Jesuit, was arrested by the National Guard on 1 May 1977 when he was returning from celebrating Mass in Tutultepeque (Nejapa). On 6 May he was expelled from the country after having been tortured. See «Declaration of the Archbishop and Clergy of the Archdiocese of San Salvador on Recent Events» in *Orientación* (8 May 1977).

I want to conclude by heartily congratulating the mothers. As we said at the beginning of this Mass: you mothers who suffer like Mary at the foot of the cross know that you are not alone. The church is with you, not in some subversive way or with devious intentions, but through love, as you heard in today's message of the word of God. Love is the sign that Christ left us. And I want to tell all of you, sisters and brothers, both those listening by radio and those present in the cathedral: even if they close down all our means of communication, there will still remain a great microphone in the world—the Christian mother, the Christian community. Of course, it is true that in the time of Saint Paul and Barnabas, as we heard in the first reading, there were no radios or newspapers. But it is said that if Saint Paul were to live today, he would be a journalist. Yet Paul, even though he had no radio or newspaper, traveled about establishing Christian communities, and these communities spoke out.

Mothers are like the sacrament of God's love. The Arabs say that God, whom we cannot see, created mothers, whom we can see, and that in mothers we see God, we see love, we see tenderness. Would that all mothers would embrace this love that the church preaches! Would that they knew how to tell others, «No, this is not subversion, this is not politics, this is not hatred. It is love like that which we have for our children». If they did this, how great would be the influence of mothers and wives on politicians, government officials, capitalists, and businessmen! Human relations would be humanized if mothers had more influence on the hearts of those who hold the reins of history. Remember that famous Roman mother: when Rome was about to be destroyed by a traitor, the senate sent the mother of that traitor to her son to try to convince him, and Rome was saved, thanks to this mother.

Mothers, this is the role you have at this time: saving our land. Therefore the church understands you and loves you and stands by you, just as you stand by the church. If some of you, because of this defamation, doubt the universal love of the church, then I ask you a question. Would you be happy if we doubted the love you have for your children simply because some enemy of yours defamed you and said, «This woman does not love her children. She hates them and persecutes them»? Yes, it would be a horrendous defamation to misrepresent a mother's love. Well, understand that the church is a mother. The church as a mother understands the mothers of children and says to them, «Let us keep solidarity, women, because I also am church, I am woman, I am mother, and I love and defend the truth my Divine Spouse entrusted to me for my children. Help me».

When the Second Vatican Council was ending, the Council fathers presented the final documents to a woman who represented all the mothers of the world. You can read that beautiful message of the Council to women. It says in part, «You women have always had... an understanding of cradles. You are present in the mystery of a life beginning.... You know how to make truth sweet, tender, and accessible, as hard as it may be. Receive this teaching and pass it on to your sons and your daughters».⁷ Christian mothers, how the face of El Salvador would be transformed—at this time of violence, bloodshed, suspicion, and misunderstanding—if mothers who have the mission of loving and uniting their children could unite all of us Salvadorans!

⁷ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, «Messages of the Council to the World» (8 December 1965), *To Women*, 5, 10.

We are going to offer this Eucharist for these intentions, praying in a special way for all the mothers. My sisters and brothers, if I have been mistaken in anything that I have said here, it is because I am human. I will always recognize my error if someone comes to dialogue with me and convinces me. But if I have spoken the truth, even though it hurts, let us accept it because only «the truth will set you free» (John 8:32), as Jesus said.