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THE CHURCH OF TRUE INDEPENDENCE, THE CHURCH OF AUTHENTIC LIBERATION

**Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
11 September 1977**

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14

Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-32

My dear sisters and brothers.

We are grateful for the solemnity provided for this Mass by Teresa Sánchez Yáñez, who in this way wants to offer a prayer for the nation and at the same time for the eternal rest of her beloved Antonia Yáñez.

We also unite ourselves to the sorrow of our beloved Bishop Luis Chávez y González, who at this time is accompanying the body of his sister, Carmen Chávez viuda de Hernández, in Rosario, Cuscatlán. May our condolences reach him there. I ask all of you in our radio audience and those present in the cathedral to pray for the eternal rest of these souls.

We also recommend to your prayers the anguish of the family of Mrs. Lima de Chiurato.¹ As you know, she was kidnapped, and nothing more is known. The church feels all this human suffering as her very own.

The life of our church

In this same line of thought, we remind you about several very sad realities. Today marks six months since the assassination of Father Rutilio Grande and four months since the assassination of Father Alfonso Navarro. Although these crimes still remain a mystery, the reality is that the church is still in pain and there are hands stained with blood. It is not so important if human justice is not done. What is important in the heart of the church and above all in the eyes of God is that these murders are acts of martyrdom that will bring us great blessings from the Lord. At the same time, they are serious sins against the fifth commandment: «You shall not kill» (Exod 20:13). They cry out for the sincere conversion of the sinners before that terrible sentence is fulfilled: «All who take up the sword will perish by the sword» (Matt 26:52).

¹ Elena Margarita Lima, wife of Luis Chiurato, manager of the manufacturing company Saltex, was kidnapped on 7 September 1977. See *El Diario de Hoy* (7 September 1977)

More sad news: tomorrow at 6:30 in the afternoon in the Sacred Heart Basilica the Cursillo Movement will celebrate the funeral of our brother, Felipe de Jesús, a great Christian and catechist. He was murdered a few days ago in El Salitre.

Tomorrow also, at 11:00 o'clock in the chapel of the Rosales Hospital, I will celebrate Mass for David Agustín Cristales. His mother, who asked me to celebrate this Mass, told me, «I do not know if we should offer the Mass for the dead because he disappeared. He was a student who was going to class, and I know nothing about what happened to him. Perhaps he is already dead». I told her, «Just trust in God. We will offer a Mass and pray for his reappearance, and if he is already dead, we will pray for his eternal rest». This is a new class of dead people that has appeared in our Salvadoran society: the «disappeared».

Today in Aguilares there will be a demonstration at the same time that a military operation is being prepared. May the Lord prevent more violence and more bloodshed. In the face of such realities the church has only one message that she keeps repeating, the same message I spoke last Monday during the outdoor Mass in El Salitre, a truly beautiful church event. The anguish and sorrow of that family became true Easter joy, for our people know that those who die believing in Christ do not really die, but overcome. This is the victory that overcomes the world: our Christian faith.

Among these notices that form part of our life as church and as archdiocese, I want to mention also the beautiful liturgy on Friday night in the church of Ilopango. Their pastor, Father Fabián Amaya, has been designated to go to Chalatenango as episcopal vicar. He will be the one to whom the bishop delegates his episcopal powers so that he can organize and lead the pastoral ministry of that department. I highlight this point because in other parishes, when there have been changes, the reaction of the people has often been anger against the bishop who makes the change, and even insults and offenses. In contrast, this community of Ilopango gave thanks to God and promised their pastor that they would remain spiritually united with him and would help him with his work in Chalatenango. As during the time of Saint Paul, they felt themselves to be a missionary community. They even read the beautiful passage when Paul says farewell to one community because he has to travel to another (Acts 20:17-38). Everyone loves Father Fabián and feels the pain of separation, but the church's solidarity goes with him. Those parishes that react with sadness when their pastor is changed have not understood the meaning of church; they seem to be working for a human person—if it is not Father so-and-so, then they don't want to work. This is not the church. Church is what I saw Friday night in Ilopango: union with the bishop, union with their missionary who is leaving, and the feeling that the whole community goes with him. The community knows it is not left on its own, because the pastor has helped the laity mature so that they can now say, «Even if you are not with us, we will continue to work as this church». Blessed be God, for not everything is grief and sorrow in our pastoral life; there are moments of great consolation. At this time, then, I invite you all to be there when Father Amaya is installed as episcopal vicar of that region on Saturday the twenty-fourth at 10:00 o'clock in the morning.

My sisters and brothers, we are preparing to celebrate our national holiday on September 15, and the king of Spain will be visiting our country. He comes here at a time when our own difficult circumstances, though in some ways very different, are

nonetheless substantially the same as in the colonial era. In *Orientación*² you can read a letter that the people of Spain sent to the king, urging him to reflect on his trip to El Salvador, where he would find Spanish citizens themselves being attacked—some of the Jesuits who were expelled were Spaniards. The king is coming here to extend a helping hand to a government that threw the Spanish Jesuits out. We believe that there will be much that is positive in the king's visit, just as there will be with the visit of our president to Washington and his meetings with other Latin American presidents. But in regard to these high government officials one must ask: do they truly understand that they represent a whole people, a people who are suffering and in anguish? Will there be a clear explanation of the way people are living here?

As we prepare for this national holiday, I want to focus my thoughts concerning today's readings on these events I have just mentioned. The church of the archdiocese has gone through six months of calvary, gathering up corpses, consoling families, decrying violence, and yet our voice seems to be lost in the desert. It seems we have not understood about the church, sisters and brothers. We might call today's homily «The Church of True Independence; the Church of Authentic Liberation». This is the message that the three readings proclaim to us today.

My first thought is that we are a people with a great social sin. Social sin exists. When the bishops of Latin America denounced the sin of social injustice as the institutional sin of our continent, they were echoing these pages of Exodus (M 2,1). God himself tells Moses, «Your people have sinned. There is sin in the people. The people have strayed from the paths I have shown them. I will destroy this people» (Exod 32:7-8). But Moses, the true liberator in the eyes of God, intervenes: «No, Lord, have mercy on this people. You brought them out of Egypt. For your name's sake, forgive them» (Exod 32:11). The account concludes with the beautiful words, «So the Lord relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people» (Exod 32:14). The Bible speaks in anthropomorphic language, making God appear to be a human person who relents and changes his mind. God does not really change his mind, but to express the idea of divine pardon the author uses the image of one who makes a threat and then withdraws it—thus God has forgiven his people.

The second reading is an example of a sinner who confesses his sin. He is not ashamed of his sin, which remains as a glorious scar when he is converted (1 Tim 1:15-17). This example of Paul, sisters and brothers, is an example for all of us sinners, and me first of all. Imitating Saint Paul, I could say that I am preaching to you not as a model of holiness but as a sinner whom God has forgiven and to whom has been entrusted this ministry of proclaiming the word of salvation. Like Saint Paul, the more sinful I am, the more eloquent I am in witnessing to the goodness of God for whom the past is of no concern. The only thing that counts is the love with which we now serve him.

Therefore, I would like to invite all Salvadorans, no matter what your sins or your present situation: At this time when we celebrate the birthday of our nation, think of how many poor sons and daughters of this nation are submerged in vice, crawling on the ground, unaware of their dignity as human persons and Salvadorans! Look at the many turbulent marriages, the many adulterous spouses, the many wayward children,

² *Orientación* (11 September 1977).

the many young people consumed by vice instead of being nourished for the future with great ideals! Look at the many families destroyed, the families in anguish over their disappeared members! Look at the horror of so many walking corpses in the dungeons of our jails—tortured, horribly beaten, cruelly disappeared; they are the living dead of our own nation. This is the image of the people to whom God would draw near on September 15, and he would speak to Moses once again, «My poor Salvadoran people—they have turned aside from the paths of happiness that I pointed out to them». What we must do, sisters and brothers, is return to those paths.

Thus, the theme of my homily is based on this sad reality of our people's situation and on the great hope of what God is saying to this same people. Let us focus on this beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son, which has been called the pearl of the Gospel, for it is the precious jewel of God's mercy. Rather than preach, I want to place myself in silence along with all of you and invite you to look within yourselves. Let us discover the story of the prodigal son in our own lives—in my life and in your life—for this parable of Christ is the universal history of humankind. No one can feel excluded from this beautiful parable. Let us analyze where we find ourselves in the three phases of this parable.

First phase of the parable of the Prodigal Son: separation from God.

The first of the three phases of this parable is separation from everything. God is everything. God is happiness. That son who tells his father, «Give me my inheritance because I'm leaving» (Luke 15:12), is the man, the woman, or the young person who feels weighed down by the law of God. The son wants to leave, and so he goes. No one respects human freedom more than God. Only God has made me free and respects my freedom: «If you want to go, if you are not happy with my law, if you do not feel happy in my house, if you are tired of the advice your mother gave you in my name, if you are upset with the honesty of your wife who throws your adulterous behavior in your face, if you are ashamed that your brothers denounce your vices, then go ahead—leave here and enjoy your life». And the poor prodigal son goes, rejoicing because he now has money. He leaves the One who is everything, the One who fulfills the profoundest aspirations of humankind.

«We are made for God», said Saint Augustine, «and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in God». ³ We are restless until we rest in God. Blessed are those innocent ones who have never betrayed the law of God. They are few, but there are some, thank God. God has made me for himself, and all my reason for being—the cultivation of my qualities, the development of my faculties—should be for God's glory. Indeed, my life will develop and expand happily only if I center my life on the glory of God. Saint Ignatius Loyola gave the Jesuits this motto: *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*, «For the greater glory of God». That is why the Jesuits strive to advance to the dangerous frontiers of the church. They work hard, and even when they are threatened with death they do not leave. They remain and do not flee because they are working for the glory of God, and if death should surprise them in their work, it does not diminish God's glory, which they will continue to enjoy forever to the degree that they cultivate it here in this life. Blessed

³AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Book I, Ch. 1: «You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you».

are those who know how to work for the glory of God and who feel that they will never be happier in the world than when under the law of God.

As the psalmist says, «Better one day in your house, Lord, than a thousand in the house of sinners» (Ps 84:11). But there are many who think exactly the opposite, and they are the ones who are in this first phase of the prodigal son. They are tired of being faithful to the Lord, they are beginning to experience the first conflicts in their homes, or they are beginning to feel uncertain about their faith. Be careful, sisters and brothers! Do not leave! If you have not yet broken your relationship with God and the church, then remain, learn about the church, bear with us a little longer! The passions of the moment will pass; the eternity of God remains. The church will continue to give life to all until the consummation of the ages. Do not harm her with your slanders and your persecutions. You are harming yourself, as when Christ told Paul, «It is hard for you to kick against the goad» (Acts 26:14). The dumb beast that kicks a rock does no harm to the rock but only injures itself. So it is with sinners. Those who persecute the church, those who kill and exile priests, those who torture catechists are kicking hard against the goad. But the church does not move. The church will remain even when she is ignored in the newspapers, even when she is criticized. The church is a rock that will remain forever. That is why it is better to remain faithful to this church than to accept money to spy on her. It is better to be a humble child of the church than to be well positioned politically and economically while reviling the church. There is still time, sisters and brothers, for those who have not yet left the father's house. This first part of the parable gives us much to reflect on.

Second phase of the parable of the Prodigal Son: the idolatry of wealth

But many, perhaps most, have already left, and so the second phase of the prodigal son begins. This phase can be divided into two parts: first, when he has money; second, when he is hungry and disgraced. This is our world today, a world of social inequality where wealth makes many people feel the euphoria of the prodigal son. There is no need of the father or the father's house. Now there are friends and banquets and celebrations—money opens all doors. What a sad illusion! That is why Christ pronounced his severest warnings against wealth. It is not that wealth is evil, but that human beings, like the prodigal son, find all their pleasure, all their power, all their joy in money. Look at how God spoke to Moses. In the first reading the Lord clearly defines the situation where wealth becomes an idol: «I see how stiff-necked this people is. They have turned away from the way I pointed out to them, making for themselves a molten calf and worshiping it» (Exod 32:8a).

When one no longer thinks of God, can money be anything but an idol? Yes, it is an idol of gold, a golden calf, and the people are adoring it and prostrating themselves before it and offering sacrifices to it. What incredible sacrifices are made to this idol of money, and not only sacrifices but even iniquities. People are paid to kill; sin is bought and sold; everything is commercialized; with money everything is licit. They proclaim, «This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt» (Exod 32:8b). You owe nothing to this false religion. Such words disturb our tranquility, and some will say, «The church is communist! She has strayed from her mission; she ought to be preaching a spirituality that reassures us and allows us to rest secure in prosperous bliss». So

speaks the idolatry of money denounced by the very word of God, a God who is distressed because he is jealous: «I want no other gods besides me» (Exod 20:3).

Because the church desires to remain faithful to her only God and speaks like Moses against the false gods that people idolize, the church must suffer. Her prophetic mission is painful but necessary. She prays as Moses prayed to God, «Lord, have compassion on this people. Make them aware of the vanity of their earthly things. Do not condemn them, Lord» (Exod 32:11). Dear sisters and brothers, we have never preached with resentment or hatred. We preach with sadness, with love, with pain because the idolatry of money is leading many of our people to perdition; the human heart is turning into metal. The president himself has stated that «it is necessary to humanize capital». Capital must be humanized because when it appears as a golden calf, as in today's reading from Exodus, it enslaves human beings.

While the prodigal son had money, his happiness was deceitful. This is shown in the sad life he lived far from his father when he no longer had money: he became hungry, so hungry that he had to look for work. The only work he found was tending swine, and he was so hungry that he envied the swine the food they had—«he longed to eat his fill of the husks on which the swine fed» (Luke 15:15-16)—but even these the master took away from him. It seems impossible to describe a bitterer situation for the sinner than that of caring for swine and longing to eat their swill.

My sisters and brothers, the gospel is harsh. I wish we ourselves did not have the sad, bitter, painful experience of realizing that the husks of swine can never satisfy human happiness. I tell you, young people listening to me, happiness is not found in drugs, in alcohol, in prostitution, in robbery, in crime, in violence. These are only the husks of swine, and you will never feel satisfied with these. Realize that there is a sinful poverty. The poverty of the prodigal son was the result of his wayward mind. When the church calls herself the church of the poor, it is not because she condones this sinful poverty. The church draws near to sinners in poverty to tell them, «Be converted! Develop yourselves! Do not remain asleep! You must recognize your own dignity!» This mission of promoting human dignity which the church carries out upsets many people who prefer to keep the masses of people asleep. They want the people to remain submissive, passive, conformist, satisfied with the husks of swine.

The church is not in agreement with this sinful poverty. Yes, she loves poverty, but the honest poverty that results from injustice and needs to be overcome. It is the honest poverty of the home of Nazareth. Joseph and Mary were poor, but their poverty was holy and dignified. Thanks be to God, we have poor persons of that type among us, and it is of the honest poor, these holy poor, that Christ proclaims, «Blessed are those who hunger; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who thirst for justice» (Matt 5:1-12). Following the example of Jesus, the church also proclaims that this is the poverty that will save the world. Both the rich and the poor have to become evangelically poor, not poor as a result of disorder and vice. They must become poor through detachment, which means hoping for everything from God, turning their backs on the golden calf in order to adore the one true God. This worship of God means sharing the happiness of having with those who have not—this is the happiness of loving. We pray that the poor sinner, in the depths of his misery, feels the lure of love.

Third phase of the parable of the Prodigal Son: conversion and return

My sisters and brothers, we have said many times that the church calls for conversion. When the church speaks out against sin, against violence, against so many other forms of evil in our midst, she does not do so arrogantly, as if feeling herself superior. Rather, she does so as a sinner herself, but feeling the call of love and conversion, the call to return to the house of the father who awaits me.

You heard the son's cry of anguish that is also full of confidence: «How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I dying from hunger. I shall go up to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son"» (Luke 15:17-19). This is the hour of conversion. How I wish, sisters and brothers, that you would hear the voice of your own conscience rather than my words. There in the den of your sin, whether adoring the golden calf or as a victim of your own sick mind, you should lament your sinful situation and realize that God calls you, his love awaits you, and his love triumphs. There at the other extreme, in the ancestral house, the poor old man is going out every day to observe the roads to see if his disgraced son will return. And one day he makes out in the distance a squalid, emaciated, ragged figure, and his heart leaps: «It is my son!» And he runs to meet him.

Blessed is that moment. The gospel describes it for us with incomparable words: «While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him» (Luke 15:20). This is the vengeance of God. When his son tries to beg pardon—«Father, I have sinned» (Luke 15:21)—he does not let him speak. He calls his servants to come and clothe his son in the finest garments, for the lad, who was dead, has come to life again. There is great joy, as Christ says in the parables of this chapter, «There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance» (Luke 15:7). The church is there for sinners. As Saint Paul said, «Christ has come for sinners, and for me first of all» (1 Tim 1:15).

Thus we now have the prodigal son in the third phase, which is the one I desire for all of you and for myself, dear sisters and brothers. It is the return home where love awaits us with open arms. He will not reject me, no matter how great my sins. I repeat this, sisters and brothers, because during these days some sinners have confided in me and asked, «Will the Lord forgive me if my sins are so great?» And I have told them what I here tell you in public: «Of course he will forgive you. If your sins are great, greater still is God's goodness», as the missionaries sing. No sin can extinguish the fire of God's love. To the contrary, this love of God is like a fire that will burn away all the underbrush of sin that exists in the world.

As the fruit of this reflection on the eve of our nation's birthday, dear sisters and brothers, I want to remind you that the church teaches that we must change the social structures and the institutional sin in which we live. All of this has to change. Things cannot continue this way—all that violence I mentioned at the start. The names of the victims change, but the root cause remains the same. We live in a situation of inequality and injustice and sin. The solution is not to repress through the force of arms or to pay others to kill any voice that speaks out. This remedies nothing but makes matters worse.

It arouses the church's prophetic cry. The solution will come when everyone—government, capital, laborer, hired hand, landowner—works together for more justice and more love.

But changing structures is not enough, as Medellín says. As long as we do not have new men and women, we will not have a new continent (M 1,3). As long as we do not have new Salvadorans, we will not have a better country, a land that is free and truly independent, because the real slavery is there in the hearts of Salvadorans. Those attached to sin cannot be agents of liberation. They must break the bonds of sin. They must imitate the prodigal son and realize that the unjust situation of our nation cannot be satisfied with the husks of swine. We cannot just patch things up and try to mend the situation by lashing out and repressing and torturing—these are the husks of swine. We must turn to God with sincerity of heart and ask for pardon, both as a repentant people, as when Moses led Israel back to God, and as individuals, each of us responsible for our own destiny, for all of us together are responsible for the reality of our nation. Let each Salvadoran enter into the intimacy of his or her heart and truly say, «Am I an agent of liberation for my country? Have I first of all freed myself from my own sins? As long as I remain a sinful slave of Satan, then all my organizing and crying out for liberation are in vain. I am not an agent of liberation».

That is why the church, at this time when our people are in need of liberation, offers her mystique of liberation from sin. Out of the depths of her love for the prodigal son—and how many prodigal sons we have in El Salvador!—she invites them to return in all sincerity. It does not matter what we have been in the past. In the embrace of the father, the prodigal son is no longer sinner but becomes once again the good son. And Paul, who was once a violent and blaspheming persecutor as he himself reminds us, is now only the apostle who has loved Christ and let himself be flooded with love (1 Tim 1:13). Let us believe in love, sisters and brothers, in the love that awaits us, in the love that seeks a happier nation, in the love that wants every Salvadoran to be more worthy, in the love that waits for the prodigal son who is still feeding on the husks of swine, in the love that desires to give others the true bread of human dignity, in the love that inspires the true awakening of our consciousness of dignity. I pray, then, that September 15 will truly be a day when the prodigal son and our sinful nation encounter the loving God who forgives us and desires our happiness.