

55 RELIGIOUS LIFE

San José Villanueva, La Libertad
December 17, 1977

Isaiah 7:10-14

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

... San José Villanueva is now experiencing a time of salvation¹. The word of God that will be proclaimed in all the churches of the world this afternoon and tomorrow, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, announces to us the saving plan of God that is realized in Christ, who receives a name that fills us with hope: Emmanuel, God-with-us (Matt 1:23). Saint Paul wrote to the Romans many years after Christ died to tell them how that plan of God was reaching them (Rom 1:6). And now we can also say that this morning this saving plan of God is reaching you, inhabitants of San José Villanueva.

All of you have been kind enough to come out today to receive this community of Passionist Sisters who are going to do pastoral work in this town. You are blessed to be receiving this message of salvation so that you can carry this message to the whole town. I say the same to all of you who have come from other communities, and I greet you all. I feel that we are all participating in a missionary moment, a moment when the church becomes savior of our people.

This is all the more the case now that these sisters can say, as Saint Paul said in his letter, that they are servants of the people of God; they are apostles set apart from the very start to proclaim the good news of salvation (Rom 1:1). The Lord chose Paul just as he chooses vocations for religious life, for the priesthood, for teaching catechism—these are all true elections of God. That is why Saint Paul feels grateful and commits himself to proclaiming this word of salvation. Being a servant of Christ means announcing this saving plan of God that people find hard to understand. You have heard in the reading from the prophet Isaiah how King Ahaz, out of a false religious sense, refused to accept the sign that God sent him (Isa 7:13). You've also heard how poor Saint Joseph was disturbed and perplexed (Matt 1:19). When God realizes his plans, we humans become shockingly aware of our smallness and our lack of understanding. We should not be surprised, then, that the world cannot understand this saving plan of God or that persecution is often unleashed against the church. Above all, we must not become discouraged, for when the clouds seem darkest is when there must be more light.

It is in these circumstances that the Passionist Sisters come to San José Villanueva to become light in this corner of our nation. They come to announce in simple words their message as Passionists that God is saving the world. I was pleased to hear in today's prayer, which we will also pray tomorrow, how we Christians, having heard the angel announce the

¹ The greeting and opening words of this homily are not recorded on the tape.

incarnation of the Son, ask that we may reach the glory of his resurrection through his passion and cross². The passion and the cross are the charism of these religious sisters. That is why they are called Passionists, just like the Passionist Fathers, an order founded by a great saint in the church³. Their special charism is to proclaim the cross and announce that there is no salvation apart from the cross, apart from this sorrowful mission of Christ which continues to be the sorrowful mission of the church.

To use a comparison from the Council, sisters and brothers, I have the impression that today we are planting a seed or a sprout. The Council says that the practice of the evangelical counsels in religious life is like a seed that the Lord has planted in his church (LG 43). By carefully caring for this plant, the church has been strengthened by the many different communities and the different ways of living the evangelical counsels. In this way the tree keeps growing, new congregations and orders arise, and different ways of living the three vows are discovered. These women are consecrated to God by the three vows of religious life, the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Poverty

Through these three vows they have renounced possessions; they own nothing. Like Jesus they are able to say, «The Son of Man has no place to lay his head» (Luke 9:58). They want to imitate Jesus in their joyful freedom of detachment. Feeling no attachment to things, they are not intimidated by those who have wealth and financial power. Such people neither bother us nor distress us. We simply want to convert them; we want to save them with our vow of commitment to poverty

Here the sisters live their poverty authentically in the midst of poor folk of the town. They live among our poor people not to tell them they should be resentful or should engage in revolutionary struggles. No, nothing like that. They experience poverty with the same simplicity as it was experienced by Christ, the Virgin, Saint Joseph, the apostles, and all other good people of the church. It is simply detachment. They teach everyone that life is not a matter of becoming established here in this world. Life means walking with detachment toward the true riches of heaven. By their way of life the sisters show that those riches are already present here on earth. This is one of the missions of religious life: through the vow of poverty they show the world that the riches of earth have their value but are transitory. They have already the truly valuable things in their hearts by being detached through their vow of poverty. What a beautiful message! These heavenly riches are to be lived now. This is not a time for poverty to become a motive for revolution or distress or discouragement or resentment. To the contrary, poverty should be accepted with love just as Christ embraced his cross in order to save the world.

Chastity

These sisters also take a second vow, a vow of chastity. In other words, they do not marry. They renounce marriage, and they renounce having a family here on this earth. They do not pass their name on to another generation. But what a beautiful contrast! In exchange for this

² The Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

³ Saint Paul of the Cross.

renunciation they receive a name from all people: they are mothers, sisters, a member of every family, like Charles de Foucauld, the little brother of humanity.

That is what religious women are. They make a vow of chastity, but they know that marriage is holy and that it is necessary for men and women to marry with God's blessing so that they can produce children for the country and for heaven and so that the world becomes more populated. But they also know that marriage can become a source of attachment and of love for the things of this world. They invite married people and all families of the earth to live with the great loving heart of our heavenly Father. May all families truly experience this divine relationship and understand the message that these sisters are proclaiming with their vow of chastity. It is the same message that Christ proclaimed, that in heaven matrimony will no longer exist (Luke 20:34-36).

By renouncing the pleasures of matrimony and the flesh, the celibate person here on earth bears witness to that heaven where all of us will live like angels of God. Celibacy announces to those who are married: your marriage is holy, but be careful; do not lose your way by not knowing how to handle this value you possess. For many married people marriage becomes a source of sin. For many men and women the attractions of the flesh are dangerous; they can become sinful and soiled. Be careful, young people. This is a beautiful message that the sisters are giving to the innocent children and the young people who are struggling against the vile passions of the world. They give testimony of celibacy, virginity, and chastity. That does not mean, of course, that marriage is bad or that people should not marry. Rather, it means that marriage is good but must be maintained with the angelic ideals of God.

Obedience

In the third place, dear sisters and brothers, these religious women are living a vow of obedience. We live in times of much rebellion and also in times when obedience is abused by those who wish to impose unjust laws. In these times when both rebellion and authority are falsified, it is necessary to have clear concepts. These religious women by their vow of obedience have renounced their own will in order to follow the lead of a superior. We spoke with their superior to see whether she wanted to set up a mission here in San José Villanueva. The way of obedience is not one of simply, «You, go there!» but is based rather on dialogue.

Today obedience is understood more and more as co-responsibility. The superior calls her congregation together and says, «The Archdiocese of San Salvador has asked us to establish a mission in San José Villanueva. Who would like to go there? What advantages do you see in this decision? Should we accept or not?» There is a profound dialogue, and after the dialogue some sisters make a commitment. In this case, you have already heard the sisters give the readings; they are Sister Teresa Tario and Sister Rosa Lilian Castaneda. They are going to say a few words later, but I want to explain to you that they have come here happily, not just under orders.

Authority in the church is a good thing. Authority in the church is agreeable because it allows people to develop their personality and to live freely wherever obedience sends them. When the sisters encounter difficulties, they speak with their superior, who understands their situation and helps them know what to do. There are various religious communities in our

diocese. There are some other sisters also present here in La Libertad⁴. These sisters love our country so much that they left their homes in North America to come and live here without many conveniences. They share the distresses of our poverty with the spirit of Christ who, obedient to the will of his Father, came to save this world, a very rebellious world that will not be saved except through obedience. These sisters provide us the precious witness that is so necessary at this time.

The practice of holy freedom in obedience also places the church in a position to speak to those who abuse authority. We must obey God rather than men because authority comes from God and must be exercised according to God's will (Acts 5:29). If some authority becomes abusive and godlike—«You must do what I say!»—then the church says, «Be careful! You can command only what God commands. If you exceed those limits, then there is no obligation to obey you because you are simply a human being trampling on the law of the Lord and the laws of human rights».

Obedience, then, sisters and brothers, is really a holy rebelliousness, but a rebelliousness that proceeds from the will of God. No one is as free as the person who is truly obedient. That is why these sisters give us these three great testimonies and incorporate themselves into the life of the church. The diocese promotes these great missions among us.

Now I am going to give the word to Monsignor Urioste, who is in charge of the pastoral ministry of the diocese. He will tell you about these charisms, these gifts, these vows, this precious seed of religious life that is being planted in so many parishes and towns where there are no priests. What is the reason for this? Monsignor Urioste is going to explain this project to you now.

⁴ Reference to the Ursuline Sisters from Cleveland.