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## **CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH OF THE CROSS**

**Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time  
4 September 1977**

*Wisdom 9:13-19*

*Philemon 9b-10, 12-17*

*Luke 14:25-33*

Near the altar today you see a group of children and young people. They are members of the Mountain Crusade that was founded ten years ago by Monsignor Alférez in the church of Candelaria. From there the movement spread out to other parishes where groups of children and young people combine their Christian education with healthy recreation. I want to congratulate them and hope they continue to flourish in the parishes. Today every form of pedagogy is necessary in order to lead children and young people to embrace the principles of austerity that we find expressed in today's gospel.

### **Life of the church**

This week we have regretted the publication of new defamations against the church,<sup>1</sup> some of them even caricaturing the bishop as a supporter of those who are spreading guerrilla warfare. This is a vile calumny. From the depths of my heart I forgive those who have done this, and I pray to the Lord that they be truly converted. No doubt they are listening to me now because our persecutors are the ones most interested in hearing our words. Please listen to me, then, but listen with good will like honest persons who want to find the truth; don't just look for an excuse for sowing evil and confusion. There has been much confusion during these days, but the church is serene in loving the truth and proclaiming it. More and more the people are finding in her that pillar of truth that Christ wants her to be.

Because of our desire to fill all the positions of the diocese with priests who are in communion with their bishop and carry out the true mission of the church, we are making new parish assignments: Father Arturo García Velis will work in Colonia Costa Rica, and the pastor of that church will go to Quezaltepeque. We will continue to study how we can cover other areas since the persecution of the church has left us with a deficit of twenty-five priests. I earnestly beg you to pray hard to the Lord of the harvest so that he will send out laborers to gather it in (Luke 10:2).

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<sup>1</sup> Organizations of the extreme right regularly accused Archbishop Romero, through paid advertisements and articles in the newspapers, of organizing terrorist acts. For example, *La Opinión* of April 1978 carried the following headline: «Archbishop Romero Prepares Acts of Terrorism».

The laity, for their part, are understanding better their role. My heart is filled with satisfaction when I see how the laity are developing: university students, professionals, young men and women, *campesinos*, workers. They are experiencing a church that is ever more authentic, a church that is asking her baptized members for their cooperation in these most difficult times. Base communities of the church are arising everywhere, and they are the true beehives for Christ's work. I am very pleased to receive the impressions of all the people who are becoming more active throughout the archdiocese. New communities of religious women are also beginning to work in direct pastoral ministry in the towns that don't have priests.

As I said in my first pastoral letter,<sup>2</sup> sisters and brothers, I believe we are living in a paschal period of the church, a paschal time rooted in the cross of Christ, a time that brings suffering but also fruitfulness. We are invited to reflect on this by the precious word of God that has been proclaimed today. I would like to reduce the message to two ideas that define the position and the nature of this church to which we fortunately belong. I ask all of you dear Catholics who belong to the church to be aware that she is not a product of human wisdom. This church that we possess is one that we have come to know by the grace of God, not by our own merits. We have the immense honor of serving her as the realization of God's ideals on earth. We will never fully understand these ideals on this earth, but we can at least try not to oppose this reality, for that is to sin against the Holy Spirit. Rather, we must try to enter more and more into this mystery each Sunday as the word of God describes for us with greater clarity what God wants of the church in the world, for God has set his church in the midst of the humanity he loves in order to save and enlighten all people. So then, the two ideas are these: first, the church of the Holy Spirit and second, the church of the cross and detachment. These are the points I would like to highlight from the readings we have just heard. The second reading, Saint Paul's short letter to Philemon, gives us a starting point in its portrayal of an authentic Christian and an authentic promoter of human liberation and social justice in the church.

### **The church of the Holy Spirit**

Today's first reading invites us to lift ourselves up toward the wisdom of God: «For the deliberations of mortals are timid and unsure are our plans. For what man knows God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends? When things are in heaven, who can search them out? Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given Wisdom and sent your Holy Spirit from on high?» (Wis 9:13-14). This is the church, a focal point of humanity where God pours out his Divine Spirit to illuminate all that surrounds that focal point which is the whole of humanity.

When the Second Vatican Council analyzed the complex and profound nature of the human person, it referred to human intelligence, saying, «Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe. By relentlessly employing his talents through the ages, he has indeed made progress in the practical sciences, technology, and the liberal arts. In our times he has won superlative victories, especially in his probing of the material world and in subjecting it to himself, but people run the risk of

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<sup>2</sup> *The Church of Easter*, first pastoral letter of Oscar A. Romero, archbishop of San Salvador (10 April 1977).

remaining in the phenomena that they have been able to dominate with mathematics, science and technology» (GS 15). What great precision, for example, is needed in order to make a trip to the moon! What precise technology! Nevertheless, the Council goes on to state, «Our era needs such wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by man are to be further humanized. It is, finally, through the gift of the Holy Spirit that man comes by faith to the contemplation and appreciation of the divine plan» (GS 15).

Let all of us, dear sisters and brothers, make our abilities available to others. The more scientific knowledge you have, the more I invite you to do so, and I challenge you to find any real opposition between the boasting of science and the humble faith of our God who has revealed to us his plan for eternal salvation. Science is not authentic as long as it is not harmonized with this humble faith. The truly wise person is the one who achieves this wisdom for the sake of science. The humble achieve this with their prayer and simplicity. Both the learned and the simple, if they are people of faith, will have to meet up with God and will have to abide humbly by the plans of the divine wisdom that wishes to save us, not through human science but through the wisdom of humility, the cross, austerity, and sacrifice.

When Pope Paul VI closed the Second Vatican Council, he challenged modern civilization with these words, «The modern mind, accustomed to accessing everything in terms of usefulness, will readily admit that the Council's value is great, if only because everything has been referred to human usefulness. Hence no one should ever say that a religion like the Catholic religion is without use, seeing that when it has its greatest self-awareness and effectiveness, as it has in council, it declares itself entirely on the side of man in his service. In this way the Catholic religion and human life reaffirm their alliance with one another, the fact that they converge on one single human reality: the Catholic religion is for mankind».<sup>3</sup> The pope referred to a famous prayer of Saint Catherine of Siena: «In your nature, Eternal God, I shall know my own». He then went on to say, «The Council has taken place during a time of almost universal atheism, a time which everyone admits is oriented toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than that of heaven. Yet the Council has had the courage to preach a religion that proclaims the fact that God exists and is intelligent and is Creator, and that only in God can humankind understand their nature and their mystery. Even when humankind with all its science concludes its investigation, humankind continues to remain a mystery».<sup>4</sup> Why did God make me? What is the reason for my struggles here on earth? Why work so hard when evil people seem to live better than good people? Why make an effort to live honorably? The Council, like the psalmist, responds that those who serve God are the truly happy ones. In the light of God and the infinite wisdom of the Lord, we come to discover that it is worth the effort to struggle and to maintain hope even when the world seems to have lost it. That is why the glory of the church of San Salvador right now is that she has maintained her hope while many have despaired. The church speaks of hope for a better country when everything seems to conspire against the nation and its true well-being, when so much hypocrisy and so much madness disfigure her appearance.

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<sup>3</sup> PAUL VI, «The Religious Value of the Council», Allocution on the closure of the Second Vatican Council (December 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

In this situation the church has maintained her serenity despite the many slanders against her. She has maintained her doctrine of faith and hope—never violence and never vengeance. Despite the many offenses committed against her, she always forgives and calls people to conversion because she knows that her support is not to be found in the flux of the political and social affairs of earth. Rather, she goes on discovering God's wisdom, and she trusts ever more completely in that. In the same discourse the pope stated, «At a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual and in which it appears anachronistic and ridiculous to speak of God and invite people to pray to him. . . . the theocentric and theological concept of man and the universe. . . . has been given a new prominence by the Council. . . . God will be recognized as our Creator, our truth, our happiness; so much so that the effort to look on him and to center our heart in him, which we call contemplation, is the highest, the most perfect act of the spirit, the act which even today can and must be at the apex of all human activity».<sup>5</sup>

Contemplatives are those persons who put aside worldly tasks in order to dedicate themselves to the great work of contemplating the beauty of God and communicating that beauty for the enchantment of humanity. They are at work even now in the church. Who would imagine that today, in this age of activism, there are monasteries of men and women contemplatives and that whole religious communities put aside their daily work and spend hours in profound prayer? We priests, if we want to be faithful to our mission, know that we cannot just preach and work; we recognize that our best hours are those that are spent on our knees before the Lord in contemplative prayer. From this contemplation, from this experience of joy and profound satisfaction, we discover the words that we must speak. That is what the church calls us to today, sisters and brothers.

Cardinal Pironio, the great promoter of authentic liberation in Latin America, has said that if this longing for liberation among oppressed peoples—those marginalized in their poverty and hunger and illiteracy—is a cry for a liberation that is theirs by right, then it is the Holy Spirit who is crying out from these hungry masses, and the church cannot be deaf to the voice of the Spirit who cries out in these people.<sup>6</sup>

Why then is the church called subversive and otherwise maligned when she is led by the voice of the Spirit who cries out from the midst of the misery of our world, when she calls for greater justice and for fraternal solidarity among people? It is the voice of the Spirit that cries out. In order to hear the Spirit's voice and respond, the church must place herself in prayer before this Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God, there is also much prayer in our church. That balance between the voice of the Spirit crying out from our people's misery and the voice of the Spirit crying out from contemplation and prayer is what makes the church the authentic liberator of Latin America. She is a liberator without demagogic, without hatred, without class struggle; she liberates by the force of God's wisdom and the Holy Spirit.

My sisters and brothers, this is the church of the Holy Spirit; this is our church. As we heard in the first reading, we will never understand this church if we regard her

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> PIRONIO E., *Escritos pastorales*, 71.

with human criteria. That is why she will never be understood in terms of political language, because politics ties up everything in human intrigues, and the church stays away from such intrigues. The church preaches the truth from the light of the Spirit, not because she is subversive. Rather, those who provoke subversion do so with their intrigue, their malevolence, and their pride, and in so doing they are tempting the Spirit of God.

The church desires to proceed with sincerity and by the light of the Spirit. If we want to honor this church, then I invite all of us who are reflecting now on the word of divine wisdom to be people of prayer. That is what we have most insisted on, sisters and brothers, this need for prayer. When I spoke about this before, I said that some people see prayer as an antiquated practice, but I assure you that prayer continues to be valid. I repeat what I have said before: pretend that you are the greatest person you can imagine being. Everything is small for those created in the image of God. Who are you? You are the image of God; you contain much that is infinite, much that is immeasurable. You are great, no doubt about it. Prayer will not diminish your greatness. Prayer asks of you only one thing: that you analyze and sincerely recognize your qualities. Those who are truly humble do not hide their qualities. A humble person is one who says with Mary, «The mighty One has done great things for me» (Luke 1:49). Each one of us possesses greatness. God would not be my Author if I were something useless. I am worth a lot, you are worth a lot, we are all worth a lot because we are creatures of God, and God has poured out his gifts on each person.

That is why the church values human beings and fights for their rights, for their freedom, for their dignity. That is an authentic struggle of the church. As long as human rights are violated, as long as there are arbitrary arrests, as long as there are tortures, then the church considers herself persecuted as well. She feels distressed because she values human beings and cannot bear to see the image of God trampled upon by those who become brutish themselves by brutalizing others. The church wants to make that image of God more beautiful still, and so I tell you: however great your intellectual ability, your organizational skills, your willpower, your beauty, etc., there comes a moment when you realize that all of this will come to an end. At the moment you acknowledge your limitations, when you realize that there is something or someone beyond you, then you are already praying. You recognize that, as great as you may be, you are not God. There is a boundary beyond which you begin to feel the need for God. You need God and begin to pray «Lord, help me in my limitations and in my smallness!» That is when I begin to see, in my limited greatness, the infinite greatness of God, and then begins my contemplation, my prayer, my petitions, my asking for pardon because I have offended God, and above all my giving of thanks: «Without you I am nothing».

Often by doing this, sisters and brothers, by living in this way, we are responding to the word we hear at the end of today's reading: «Thus were the paths of those on earth made straight, and men learned what was your pleasure and were saved by Wisdom» (Wis 9:18). How easy it is to be pleasing to God! We have only to recognize his infinite wisdom and allow ourselves to be inspired by this wisdom to develop all our abilities, while always recognizing our need for God. This is the service that the church offers to humankind. But because the church desires to separate this wisdom of God from all crudeness, because she wants to make this wisdom of God the wisdom of humankind, because she calls people to conversion, and because she criticizes those

who sin against divine wisdom by putting their hope in false idols, she is persecuted. She undergoes persecution for the wisdom of God because she knows in her heart that it is not worthwhile trying to please human beings, especially when they are proud and idolatrous and when they make us all lose sight of the simplicity of divine wisdom.

When John XXIII was the representative of the Holy See to the Middle East, he wrote this wonderful prayer: «Lord, grant me the grace to preserve this simplicity that I learned in my home. May I never lose this simplicity that is often lost in these diplomatic and political environments. O Lord, preserve in me the simplicity of your wisdom». This is what we also should pray to the Lord: «Lord, preserve us in the simplicity of your wisdom». Let us never lose this simplicity, sisters and brothers, by getting involved in intrigues, by trying to win social or political favor, or by seeking to advance on earth. Jesus says, «Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it» (Luke 9:24). There are many such people in our archdiocese, men and women who are risking their lives. Even though some will lose their lives, as many of our beloved priests and catechists have lost them and will continue to lose them, yet they have remained faithful to their mission of preaching God's wisdom. It matters not that they are detested and persecuted by human wisdom and die in cruel ways, as we have seen during these last few days.

My brothers and sisters, this is the church of the Holy Spirit. As the Council says, this is the church that cries out, «Come», to Jesus, her Divine Spouse who is waiting for her and watching her struggle (LG 4). He wants to give her a warm embrace of eternal happiness in that place where wisdom overflows in total success. This is why it is worthwhile to live. When we catch a glimpse of this on earth, we walk in the light of this wisdom without giving importance to plots and persecutions. May we be Christians whose daily lives are illumined by the wisdom of God in the Holy Spirit. May we be a devout church of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray hard for this, sisters and brothers.

I want to take advantage of this moment to express my thanks for the many letters that tell me, «We ask the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom, light, and strength». I want to note here especially the beautiful letters from the children of the Escuela San Luis which have been entered in a competition. Truly God speaks through children. These young children express beautiful things that truly encourage me as pastor. Such encouragement I do not often receive from important people, but I receive it from children and from the humble, simple folk. Many thanks to you, dear children of Escuela San Luis, and to all you beloved sisters and brothers who remember me in your prayers. Let us pray for one another so that all of us—bishops, priests, religious, and faithful—might form the authentic church of the Holy Spirit, a circle of light that illuminates the republic. May the light of heaven illuminate the paths of our country and beautify the face of this land that we sincerely love and that we want to see happy and illuminated with the light of God.

### **The church of the cross and detachment**

The gospel reading, in which Jesus invites us to follow him, appears to be a lesson in madness. The original language says, «If anyone comes to me without hating...» (Luke 14:26-27). A more friendly translation proposes: «If anyone comes to me without subordinating...» Naturally, in his original language Christ understood these words in

an eastern sense: «If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple». Jesus then places before us two examples of precipitous action: one of a person who wants to build a tower but does not consider the cost, and the other of a king who wants to go to war but does not calculate whether victory can be won (Luke 14:25). Jesus invites us to become his followers. Look at the beginning of the passage: «Great crowds were traveling with Jesus». In this part of the Gospel, Saint Luke describes Jesus as he journeys to Jerusalem, and we know how this journey ended. Many people followed him, but Jesus does not want to deceive anyone. He speaks clearly and tells people they can follow him, but they must ask themselves, «What are the conditions for being a follower of Jesus?» One who builds a house must first ask, «Do I have enough money to finish it?» Or a king who is planning to go to war must ask, «Do I have sufficient forces to achieve victory?» If they don't, they will become objects of ridicule. In the same way Jesus Christ says, «Meditate on your capacity for detachment, on your ability to accept the cross. I am not offering you a crown of roses with social and political privileges. I offer you only the cross. Those who follow me have to be so detached that their love for their mothers or their wives or even themselves will not prevent them from following me».

Some of you will object: «Have you not preached countless times that love is the church's power? And here Jesus preaches hatred for one's father and mother and spouse». I tell you, this must be understood in the sense that Christ spoke it, and the gospel that was read did well in translating the word as «subordinate». The love of Jesus is so absolute, and the light of the divine wisdom that Christ brought to the world is so clear that if we want to follow Jesus, we cannot do so half-heartedly. Yes, we can love mother and spouse and children and country and all the things of the earth, but we must do so in a hierarchical sense, under the hierarchy of absolute love, with a readiness to surrender everything when Christ calls us to abandon all we have.

I believe that, when faced with this invitation, the large crowd that was following Jesus was reduced to a small group. Then Christ also asked this group, «Do you also want to leave?» And Peter gave the response of the brave: «Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life» (John 6:67-68). Then the crowd dispersed, seeking their happiness in earthly loves, in security and protection, in everything except the cross. How ready we are to seek protection here on earth even though it is detachment that our faith asks of us. How little confidence we seem to have in the cross, but the cross of Christ is the key to true liberation. Today there is much talk of liberation, and there are many false liberators. Christian liberators must embrace the cross of Christ as a key part of their practice. The Council speaks beautifully in this regard: «The church, like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the cross and death of the Lord until He comes» (LG 8). Therefore, when the cross blossoms into Easter, when the cross Christ bore on Good Friday blooms in resurrection, it gives us an idea about the meaning of life: it is cross and martyrdom, but then resurrection and eternal life. Only the friends of the cross, only those who embrace the cross without fear of losing earthly loves, only those who commit themselves to following the Absolute—only these will be the courageous ones on whom Christ relies.

This is the church that we are trying to forge, sisters and brothers, and therefore I say to you once again: I am happy to live in a church that does not find support in the powers of the earth. Rather, these powers must be converted to the church in order to be saved. The church does not enjoy conflict, but she accepts conflict when the powers of the earth despise her and place no trust in her. When the world is drawn to the cross and that saying of Jesus proves true, «When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself» (John 12:32), then the church will lovingly accept whoever embraces the cross, even the greatest sinners, for the cross is salvation. The cross does not need to rely on the things of the world, for it contains the wisdom and the power of God. The cross offers protection and does not ask for or need earthly protection. The cross offers protection to those who are willing to accept it, a protection that is eternal and absolute. When our witness of the cross is despised and persecuted, even though loved by God, and when earthly powers make the church's credibility less eloquent, then she must be ready, says the Council, to renounce all her earthly advantages so as to walk totally exposed and vulnerable, for this is the meaning of the authentic cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (LG 8).

My brothers and sisters, this is the cross that the gospel offers us today. This is how our Divine Redeemer and Savior invites us to follow him. This is the wisdom that should enlighten the minds of all men and women so that they will be truly happy and loyal to their God. As the book of Wisdom tells us today, this is language that the people of the world cannot understand. May our Lord allow us to understand it by faith and the Holy Spirit. In the Eucharist that we are going to celebrate today, this Sunday in September of 1977, our Lord will remind us that his love and his cross and his wisdom continue to be his offering to the world. From the Calvary of each altar of the Sunday Mass, the Lord keeps telling us, «This is the bread that becomes my Body; this is the cup of my Blood which is given for the pardon of sins. It is only through the forgiveness of the cross that there is hope for the liberation of Latin America and all people. Who wants to collaborate with me? Who will embrace this cross and bring it to the world and plant it as the only sign of salvation?» My sisters and brothers, I hope that all of us reflecting on this message will from the depths of our hearts tell the Lord that we embrace his cross completely and that we want to live as a church that is truly a sign and a sacrament of salvation for our country and for our time.