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THE MISSION OF THE PROPHETS

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time
14 August 1977

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

Hebrews 12:1-4

Luke 12:49-53

... [we] share with you the concerns, joys, and hopes of the diocese, just as we also share in the problems of all of you.¹ May the word of God, the true path we must follow, shed light on this reality of our history.

Life of the church

Tomorrow is the great day of Mary's assumption in body and soul into heaven. This triumphal ascent of Mary after a life of commitment to God is in itself a message. Let us try to go to Holy Mass if we have time or at least spend some time in our homes reflecting on this our Mother. Even though being assumed into heaven and constituted Queen of the Universe, she still always has her eyes set on this earth. She is concerned about our life, and this should give us great reason for trust and hope, for Mary is crowned in heaven as a reward for her virtues.

At 11 o'clock in the morning we will have a Mass here during which Jorge Benavides, a young man who has completed his theological studies, will be ordained a deacon. On this occasion of the feast of the Assumption we want to congratulate the Catholics of the parish in Mejicanos where they celebrate the Virgin as their patroness. We also congratulate the Religious of the Assumption, who celebrate their principal feast on August 15.

I also want to communicate to you and ask you to pray for the priests and religious who are directly involved in the pastoral work in the villages. We are going to meet together on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday to study a document written by Pope Paul VI that I would like everyone to become familiar with. Like other church documents, this one receives its name from the first two words of the Latin version, since Latin is the official language of the church. The pope writes these documents in Latin, and they are then translated into other languages, but they continue to be known by their first two Latin words. This document is called *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and deals with evangelization in today's world. It brings together the results of a grand consultation that the pope made in 1974 with all the bishops of the world. The church is concerned to bring her eternal message to the modern-day world which can seem so complicated and difficult. We will examine these very wise guidelines set down by the

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

world's bishops and the pope as supreme teacher in the church, and we will deepen our knowledge of them so that our evangelization in the archdiocese corresponds to a whole series of wonderful initiatives. We hope, therefore, that all the priests and women religious doing direct pastoral work will unify their criteria and make known their difficulties so that no one feels that there are two churches here in the diocese. The impression is sometimes given that certain people criticize the attitudes and the criteria of the archbishop and the priests who are with him, as if they were part of some other church and were able to criticize the hierarchical church. This is not the time for such disunity. This is a time for dialogue, and now we have these three days to dialogue in depth. In those matters where we disagree, let us see if we are mistaken. It is not a matter of imposing anything capriciously but of carrying out our great evangelizing task with criteria which, even if not pleasing to the world, are pleasing to God and to the souls who want to be faithful to the plan of God.

I also announce to you joyfully that next week, God willing, I will have ready the pastoral letter that I announced to you on August 6. This letter deals with the church as the Body of Christ in history; that is, it explains how the church in every age simply does what Jesus himself would do at that time. If Jesus were a Salvadoran in 1977, what would he do? That is what the church asks, and that is what the church does.

I also want to share with you a concern of several Christian communities who are protesting what happened to the catechist Filomena Portillo Puerta, a young woman of twenty-one years who was captured on July 30 in Ciudad Delgado and found dead in Tejulta, Chalatenango. What is happening here? Are things getting better, or do they remain the same? Also, a catechist of Father Salvador Colorado in Ciudad Delgado was captured, tortured, and threatened with death along with Father Colorado. As a result, Father Colorado has suffered an emotional crisis and is being treated. This also is persecution.

We ask for any news about those who have been imprisoned and disappeared. The church cannot refrain from expressing her solidarity with human rights and with the suffering of families who see their loved ones disappear. The church cannot have confidence as long as there is no discussion of these deeds and no environment of greater trust.

I also want to announce to you that the documents of Medellín are now available. This effort of the Universidad José Simeón Cañas places the documents within reach of our people so that no Catholic today should be ignorant of them. Unfortunately, many people are learning about these documents through false lenses; they are distorted by biased publications which want the world to believe that the church is Marxist. Many people have knowledge of the Medellín documents only through these poisonous columns. I believe that we can count on mature Catholics to have their own criteria and not believe things to be dogmas of faith just because they are printed in the newspapers or heard on television or radio. Go to the sources. Use your critical sense of things. When you read a newspaper, including the editorial pages, you have to use your judgment to say, «This is a lie» or «This seems to be biased». This is how you reveal the maturity of your judgment when you read or go to the movies. No film is bad if you have your own criteria and know how to condemn immorality and everything objectionable. There is no need for someone to tell you, «This is permitted for such and such an age».

Your own criteria tell you this. Therefore, when dealing with the Medellín documents, it is necessary to know them in their sources, and these sources are now available to you. I asked them to bring copies to the cathedral today, and I suppose they will be available at the end of Mass. If not, look for them in the Catholic bookstores or in the chancery offices.

There are more acts of violence, sisters and brothers, that have occurred during these days. The church cannot accept violence in any form. These crimes and these captures and these tortures are acts of violence, just like the bomb that exploded in San Salvador and the kidnapping of Dr. Carlos Emilio Alvarez.² The church cannot approve of any of these actions. Violence is inhuman. It does not build but destroys. It destroys above all our hopes for improvement. I beg you, then, with all the authority that the church gives me before my beloved people: let us think with God, the God of peace, the God who loves us, the God who forgives all sinners if they repent.

One of the most beautiful letters that arrived this week reads thus: «What most amazes me about the church during these days is that, despite all the attacks and even assassinations she has suffered, no words of hatred or vengeance have been heard from her, but always words of love and conversion». How well these humble souls grasp the church's intentions! I am happy that people feel this way, even while others persist in calling the church violent and saying she is the source of the wrongs being committed. Those who listen without prejudice and without selfish interests hear the church's true language: we say «no» to violence, and we call sinners to be converted. I repeat what I said here on the day of Father Grande's funeral: «Who knows if the assassins of this victim are listening to me on the radio? Know that we do not hate you and that we pray to God that you repent and join us one day to receive the bread that God gives with a kiss of love even to sinners, even to murderers». What joy the church would feel on the day when they are all converted: those who have written or paid others to write against the church, those who have used arms to humiliate villages, those who have tortured people in brutal ways. Would that they see how wrong their actions are and repent and ask pardon of God who still awaits them. God certainly gives life to sinners, and he does so because he is waiting for them. I hope, dear friends, that you are listening to me, perhaps feeling humiliated because of what you have done, because violence is never something to be proud of. Those who beat others always feel ashamed; they are more humiliated than those they have beaten. Realize that this is truly shameful, above all in a country that calls itself civilized. If we truly want to beautify the face of our country, then let us wash our inner conscience, especially you who are culpable, you who are sponsors, you who tolerate and enable this situation that cannot continue.

In what does peace consist?

And here we are now with the word of God, brothers and sisters. What I find in the message of the prophet Jeremiah and the letter to the Hebrews and above all in the divine words of Christ in his gospel, is the secret of happiness. Perhaps some of you are surprised by how Christ presents himself today, saying, «Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, but rather division» (Luke 12:51). Now don't go saying

² Carlos Emilio Álvarez Geoffroy was kidnapped on 11 August 1977 by the Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN) and freed eight days later, after their demands had been met. See *Prensa Gráfica* (13 August and 20 August 1977).

that Christ is preaching physical violence. He is indeed preaching violence, but it is the true violence that is needed for true peace. He tells people, «Don't think that I have come to bring a superficial peace».

This is the first point of today's message. In what does peace consist? Peace consists in being in harmony with the plan of God. When a life, a family, or a people is in harmony with the will of God, then there is true peace. In my pastoral letter I stress this concept. True peace occurs when the history of humankind faithfully reflects salvation history. There are not two histories. The history of human beings—of each person and of all those who form part of a nation—is not distinct from the history of salvation or the plan of God. That project that God proposes is similar to the plan that an architect presents for the construction of a building. As long as the contractor follows the architectural plans, the building will be solidly constructed. But if a foreman or some workers should happen to lay the foundation incorrectly or nail beams where they don't belong, then the plan of the architect is useless. The same can be said of God's plan for humankind and his history of salvation: if people decide to construct the world according to their selfish caprices and not according to the plan of God, then that plan is frustrated.

Peace, then, consists of knowing what God wants of this society, what God wants of my life, what God wants of the republic. And that should be the vision of government officials and all those who build up our society. The people who can change the destiny of the country with their money, their technology, and their political ability should follow God's plan and not just trust in their own impulses. As good builders they should be continually extending God's architectural plan for this nation and should build accordingly. Then there will be peace. As for the rest, it is as the Council says, «Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies» (GS 78). Above all, peace is not the sign of death in a repressive atmosphere where no one can speak; it is not the peace of cemeteries. True peace is based on justice, on equality, on the plan of God who has created us in his image and likeness and has given us all the ability to contribute to the common good of the republic. This ability is given not to some small group that God has chosen, but to all Salvadorans. We all have the right to participate in forging our own destiny and our own common good. This is our right as humans, and no one should be excluded.

When history is developed in this way, it is magnificent. When it coincides with the history of salvation, then there is peace. This is a very profound reality and not everyone understands it. That is why Christ says division will arise as a result of this doctrine. «A household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three», says Christ. Even among family members, a daughter and a mother will be in disagreement because one understands true peace and the other wants a false peace (Luke 12:52-53). One person understands the meaning of true peace and another wants a superficial peace. In any society there will be division as long as certain people, stubbornly determined to have their own way, seek to establish peace on the basis of injustices, self-interests, repression, and violation of rights. Peace is not built that way. There will be a false peace, not the peace that Christ gives us. «My peace I give you», says the risen Christ, «but not as the world gives it» (John 14:27). The world is falsely irenic when there is the mere appearance of peace: we shake hands, but we know that we have very different ideas. In former times there were greater social sanctions so that

people behaved differently. They had such a sense of their nobility that if a murderer or a thief arrived, even if he were a great lord, they would not shake his hand because to shake hands meant that one was in full accord with the other. Would that this noble sense of social sanction were restored in our society so that we could make claims against those who are not in agreement with the plan of God. Yes, we must respect their way of thinking, but we must also understand that they are not establishing true peace, and this is where conflicts arise.

The prophets announce God's plan

The role of the prophets is the second consideration of this homily, and we can understand the prophet's role by looking at the central figure of the first reading, Jeremiah, and the central figure of the second reading, Jesus Christ. Jeremiah was one of the finest figures foreshadowing the mission of Christ. Just as Christ, for preaching true peace that went against the selfish caprices of the powerful, died crucified on a cross, so Jeremiah was also a man of sorrows. For about fifty years his prophetic mission was nothing but pain and tribulation, and it reached its peak in the reading we heard today. His enemies obtained authorization from the king to throw Jeremiah into a cistern, a deep well. Another man, however, had influence with the weak king, Zedekiah, and he got a countervailing order to remove the prophet from the well. Jeremiah trusted in God, and God saved his life (Jer 38:10). Those of you who like to read the Bible, I recommend that you read the book of Jeremiah this week. A very interesting book! But read it above all in its historical context. For a while, during the reign of Josiah, Jeremiah was happy because the king and the prophet worked together, trying to restore the true image of God among the people of God. This was the king's duty. When the prophet saw the king's good will and his positive attitudes in defending the rights of God, he gave his approval to the king and supported him.

The church is not fighting with the government. She is only saying that, like King Josiah, the government should look to God and do what God wants. This is the role of the prophets in the Old and the New Testaments: to announce the plan of God. When people accept this plan, there are no conflicts; there is rather joy. The prophet Jeremiah hoped that it would be that way always, but when King Josiah died, Jehoiakim became king and then Zedekiah, who appears in today's reading. That was when the conflicts began, because the kings allowed the people to prostitute themselves with their idolatry. They drew away from God and worshipped false gods. Even the temple priests were condemned. At that time the prophets were distinct from the priestly class and could therefore criticize the priests for being servants of the powerful and too secure in their religion. They told the priests, «Don't rely on having the temple of God. If you do not conduct yourselves according to the will of God, you are offending your Lord, and this temple will be destroyed, and the armies of Babylon will come and destroy Jerusalem, and the leaders of the people will be led into exile for a second time» (Jer 7:1-15). These words disturbed the idolaters because here was a man who wanted to purify the history of God in the people. A prophet is bound to disturb a society when the society is not in accord with God and the prophet calls it to account. That is what happened with Jeremiah: he became estranged from the people. They did not like him, as you heard in today's first reading: «This Jeremiah should die! He is demoralizing the soldiers and all the people with his discourses. He is not interested in the welfare of the people, but in their ruin» (Jer 38:4). See how the accusations against the prophets of

every age are the same. When the prophet disturbs the selfish consciences of those who are not building according to God's plans, then he is a nuisance and must be eliminated, murdered, thrown into a pit. He must be persecuted and not allowed to speak his bothersome words. But the prophet could not speak otherwise. Read in the Bible, and you will see how often Jeremiah prayed to God, «Lord, take this cross from me. I do not want to be a prophet. I feel my insides burning because I have to say things even I don't like to say» (Jer 20:9).

The prophets call people to conversion

It's always the same, sisters and brothers: the prophet has to denounce society's sin and call people to conversion, just as the church is doing today in San Salvador. She denounces everything that would enthroned sin in El Salvador's history, and she calls sinners to be converted, just as Jeremiah did: «Reform your ways and your deeds! If you do not, this temple in which you trust will be destroyed. Reform your ways and your deeds! The armies from the north are coming and will carry us off into exile» (Jer 26:1-13). This was the political situation. Palestine wanted to seek support from Egypt, but God had another plan. How terrible are God's plans when people do not want to obey God of their own accord! There are men in world history who are sadly famous because they were chosen by God to be the scourges of sinful society. Could this not be our own situation? Are our overseers the scourges of our society? God needs such people, unfortunately, because people do not want to be converted of their own accord. But God hopes, as does the prophet, that with the people's conversion happiness will once again arrive. God hopes even when he knows that misfortune will come, and come it did. They destroyed the temple, and its walls are still there as testimony.

Now that the Israelis are in possession of Jerusalem, Jewish people from all over the world return to weep on those walls of Jerusalem for they recall this passage from Jeremiah. The people did not want to obey. As a result they had to perish and go into exile in Babylon. They lived humiliated under foreign rule through their own fault, because of their social sin and their idolatry. They suffered because of the failure of their authorities to call the people to order and because of the sins of injustice that Jeremiah denounced. The people felt secure in their old religious traditions and did not renew them. They did not pay heed to the will of God until their priests were deported, and the priests themselves were servile and flattering toward the king, the army, and the people who wanted to continue their idolatry.

God also punishes priests when they do not fulfill their obligations. We have said before that this denunciation of sin also includes us priests. We also are sinners, and we ask God's forgiveness. In my pastoral letter I say that the church has come to a better understanding of the world in order to question the world about its sins, but at the same time the church must question herself about her own ecclesiastical sins. We are human and capable of sin, and we have need of conversion. We call the people to turn not toward us but toward God, for we must all be converted toward God. God's plan can also be disrupted by us, the bishops and priests. What the kingdom of God demands of the church and the world is universal transformation.

The prophets also announce hope

But there is always hope—and here I end my humble commentary on today's word. The prophets announced disasters, and the disasters came, but they also proclaimed a time of hope. In the midst of his lamentations, Jeremiah announces that this people, once reformed, will return to their land. In fact, he says something very beautiful about those being persecuted. Jeremiah places his hope especially in those who are exiled; he says this remnant of Israel will set an example in Palestine because they were faithful to the God's word (Jer 31:1-7). They offer hope that this message will not fall on deaf ears.

I have great hope, my sisters and brothers, because I know that the words of these Sunday homilies touch many hearts. I hope that people understand the intention of my words: they are a denunciation of sin that the church can never tolerate, not even in her members, and they are a call to conversion from sin. We all have to examine our lives in depth—priests, religious, Catholic schools, church institutions, pious associations—all of us, beginning with the archbishop, have to examine our lives to see we if we are living in accord with God's will. We must then confront the world with a witness of holiness, as did Jeremiah who backed up his witness with his life. That is how we must live even when living this way brings outrages upon us.

I congratulate all those catechists and preachers of the word of God who despite the persecution remain faithful like Jeremiah. There is hope, and Jeremiah revealed this hope with a dramatic gesture, for like all the prophets he spoke not only with words but also with gestures. . .³

³ The final words are not recorded on the tape of this homily.