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TO THE MOTHERS, FOR THEIR DISAPPEARED CHILDREN

1 December 1977

... the disappeared, in this Mass of Divine Providence, are at the center of our prayers¹. My dear brother priests concelebrating this Eucharist to beg for God's mercy and for consolation of so many hearts; and my beloved faithful who come in solidarity with the anguish of these families—let us meditate on this mystery of iniquity that makes people disappear from our society.

The three readings that we have heard were chosen because of the present circumstances. The first reading from Maccabees recounts the heroic example of the mother whose seven sons were offered as a holocaust before a tyrant who wanted to be adored as if he were a god (2 Macc 7:1-39). But the mother and her seven valiant sons, even the smallest one, confronted the tyrant boldly and defended the rights of God. They declared to the perpetrator of this crime that they willingly handed their lives over to the God who had given them existence. They trusted that God would restore life to all those who fearlessly surrendered their lives to defend his divine rights. Thus the seven brothers died professing the primacy of God and rebelling against those who wanted to trample on the rights of God and on the human beings who are the images of God.

The second reading is from the apostle Saint Paul, that brave Christian who knew human weakness but also experienced within himself the power of faith and hope that God gives to those who trust in him. In this reading Paul utters a beautiful phrase that I would like the mothers of those we are praying for today to engrave in their hearts as a motto for their life: «We know that all things work for good for those who love God» (Rom 8:28). There is no misfortune, no catastrophe, no pain, however grievous it might be, that cannot be converted into a crown of glory and hope if suffered for the love of God. The Spirit strengthens us in our weakness.

The third reading presents us with a woman whom I would like to be the model for all these afflicted mothers. It is Mary who presents her son in the temple and hears a prophet announce the bloody destiny of that son: «This child will be a sign of contradiction, and because of him a sword will pierce your own soul too» (Luke 3:34-35). I feel that these mothers are sorrowful mothers whose hearts have been pierced, and so during this ceremony we want to recall the Virgin Mary, especially in the mystery of the presentation.

The little image that will be devoutly venerated after Mass by these mothers and by all of you, dear faithful, is the first image of Mary that arrived in our country. It has been venerated as a great relic in the church of San José, and now it will be venerated in a new parish. This image is a great treasure—not the image itself, but our trust in this mother who can say to all

¹ The greeting was not completely registered on the tape of the homily.

mothers who suffer that no one has suffered as she has. None of you mothers has had to spend her whole life pondering a prophecy like the one Mary heard from the time that she cradled her son in her arms. None of you mothers heard, when your children were still infants, a prophet announcing a wretched and bloody end to their lives. If any mother hears in her child's infancy that the child will die tragically and that a sword will pierce her heart, then the whole life of that mother, sisters and brothers, will be a calvary of suffering.

Mary, then, is the model of mothers who suffer, because no other mother has had to carry during a lifetime the sword of uncertainty, waiting for the day when the tragedy would come in the harsh reality of Calvary. Therefore we are offering this Mass in a clearly religious sense—no one should give this Mass a profane meaning. We have not come here, as has been said in those slanderous campaigns, to celebrate Mass as a «meeting». Putting those two words together is pure cynicism. Going to Mass is not going to a meeting. The Mass is by nature thanksgiving, holy prayer, the sacrifice of Christ applied to a concrete intention. In this case the Mass is the suffering of Christ on Calvary, together with his blessed mother Mary who becomes a redemptive sign for the suffering of these mothers and these families.

Presence is denunciation

In the presence of these suffering families I want to see the three gestures of today's three readings. The first gesture is the heroism of that mother who lived during the time of the Maccabees. We see her courageous denunciation, for the presence of that woman before the tyrant was a denunciation. Her very presence as a mother encouraging her children to die rather than betray their devotion to God was a loud cry against all those who want to abolish the rights of God and set themselves up as gods of the earth and lords of people's lives. No one but a mother can understand the value of a human person, especially when that person is her own child. The very presence of a mother weeping over the disappearance of her child is a denunciation. It is a presence that cries out to heaven; it is a presence that cries out for the presence of the disappeared child: «Why have they tortured my child? Why have they disappeared my child?»

Like Mary at the foot of the cross, every mother who sees her child maltreated is a denunciation. Mary is the sorrowful mother standing against the power of Pontius Pilate who has unjustly killed her son. She is the voice of justice, love, and peace; she is the voice of what God desires standing against what God does not want, against abuse and all that should not exist.

This is the meaning of the presence of these mothers, my sisters and brothers, and this is not politics. It is the voice of justice; it is the voice of love. This is the cry of the church as she embraces so many forlorn wives and mothers and homes. And so we declare: This must not be! Return these children to the place that the rights of God and the law of the Lord demand! This is a cry against sin. And this is what the church is doing, crying out against the sin that has been enthroned in the history and life of our nation. We do not want the devil to reign. We do not want hatred to reign. We do not want violence or terrorism to reign. We want love to reign. We want peace to reign in our homes. We want the causes of turmoil to be peacefully resolved.

But when the church speaks with a tone of denunciation, she does so not with resentment but rather from the perspective of the Gospel, which calls for the conversion of

sinners. I have a very tranquil conscience and know that I have never incited anyone to violence. All those slanderous paid advertisements and all those voices on the radio crying against «the revolutionary bishop» are calumnies because my voice has never become stained with cries of resentment or rancor. I cry out strongly against injustice, but I do so to tell the unjust, «Be converted!» I cry out in the name of those who are suffering injustice, but my aim is to tell the criminals, «Be converted, and do not be evil!»

All these injustices will work for your good

The second reading, dear sisters and brothers, is from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. I have already mentioned the phrase that should be the motto of these dear suffering mothers. This is what Saint Paul tells us today: for those who seek God, for those who love God, all things work out for good (Rom 8:28). My dear mothers, don't allow yourselves to be seduced by the voice of violence. Don't allow the serpent of rancor to find a nest in your hearts. There is no greater misfortune than a heart filled with rancor, even if it is rancor against those who tortured your children or against those criminal hands that have disappeared them. Do not hate. Listen to Saint Paul and to God. They tell you this morning that if there is the love of God in your hearts, then all these injustices will work for your good.

At this time when the cause of liberation is proclaimed by many voices, the church also proclaims liberation, but not with a tone of hatred or vengeance or class struggle, for these are not constructive. We agree that there should be a struggle against terrorism. Terrorism should not take root in our country. But one type of terrorism is not removed by another type of terrorism. One type of malice is not destroyed by another type of malice. Hatred sows nothing that is good. Therefore, the church is in agreement with the campaigns against terrorism as long as those campaigns are carried out with love and seek the conversion of those who are evil. The criminals, whoever they are, should be punished, even if part of the military. If they have committed crimes, they should be tried; punishment should be meted out to those who have done evil and refuse to convert to what is good.

But from the Christian point of view, the voice of the church speaks to the oppressed, the anguished, the tortured, the disappeared, and those cruelly killed. The church speaks to the mothers and homes who are suffering, to those who live on the margins of society, to those who suffer injustice. To all these people the church speaks these words: «Love God. Love God because for those who love God even this oppression works for good!» Look at the crucified Christ, the most oppressed of all humans. He suffered the most criminal injustice on earth—an innocent man dying on the cross and seeing his own mother crushed by the sorrow of injustice. From the cross he cried out, «Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do» (Luke 23:24). It is out of this unjustly inflicted suffering that he becomes the Redeemer of humankind.

At this time, sisters and brothers, Christ the Redeemer needs human suffering; he needs the pain of these holy mothers who suffer; he needs the anguish of those prisons where there is torture. Blessed are those chosen to suffer on earth the great injustice of Christ that continues to save the world. Let us transform this suffering into redemption. For me this time is a blessed time, sisters and brothers, because it is as though I were injecting the pain of these mothers into the life of the church. This offering of bread and wine represents the affliction, the anguish, and the pain of mothers who have gone so many months without knowing the whereabouts of their children. Their anguish and pain will become Christ's pain on the Calvary of our altar. I

assure you that today this holy pain of so many homes that have been unjustly orphaned is a nourishing pain that injects life and the love of God into this church that proclaims hope and urges us not to be discouraged. The days of justice must come, the days when God will triumph over human iniquity, over the infernal iniquity of human beings.

Mary, symbol of a suffering people

Thus we have the third reading, sisters and brothers, where the prophet tells Mary, «You will be the victim of injustice. You will suffer greatly, but this child will be the salvation of the world» (Luke 2:35). Here is the secret, sisters and brothers: pain is useless when endured without Christ, but when human pain continues the pain of Christ, then it is a suffering that continues to save the world—it is a suffering like Mary's. She was calm and full of hope even when all were despairing at the moment of Christ's death on the cross. Mary remained calm, waiting for the hour of the resurrection. My sisters and brothers, Mary is the symbol of the people who suffer oppression and injustice because hers is the calm suffering that waits patiently for the hour of the resurrection. This is Christian suffering, the suffering of the church that opposes the present injustices but does so without resentment because we await the hour when the risen One will return to give us the redemption we long for.

My sisters and brothers, the church is not deluded; the church awaits with confidence the hour of redemption. Those disappeared will reappear, and the suffering of these mothers will be changed into the joy of Easter. The anguish of our people who amid so much confusion do not know where they are going will become a new Easter if we unite ourselves to Christ and hope in him. We human beings cannot bring about the liberation of our land. With our own human efforts we Salvadorans are incapable of saving our nation, but we *do* hope for liberation from Christ the Redeemer. Yes, that is the hope of the church, and that is why I preach much faith in Christ, sisters and brothers. We must have great faith in Jesus Christ who died to pay for all our injustices and rose to bury in his tomb all evil. He has become redemption for all those who suffer; he has become our hope for eternal life.

Blessed be this hour when holy mother church, together with these afflicted mothers, seeks to sow hope, tranquility and serenity in the hearts of her children. This is the voice of the church, sisters and brothers. I am not pessimistic. I exhort all the children of the church to put aside their pessimism and become optimists. But place this optimism in Christ, the only one who can save us. Place this optimism in our Divine Savior and in his Blessed Mother for they together are the agents of the world's redemption. Then without a doubt there will be redemption, and joy will return to the homes and hearts that are now afflicted.

We are now going to celebrate Mass with this spirit of optimism, serenity, and faith. Let us put aside all resentment and rancor. Let us love God with our whole heart even as we pass through the worst phase of our history. Let us love God because we know that all things work for good for those who love God. Christ, as love became victim on the altar, will give us the gift of himself once again this morning in this Mass of Divine Providence. The Mass will be offered for the holy intentions of these loving mothers who weep for their disappeared children and for the intentions of the homes that have been orphaned by so many victims of the ongoing injustice. We pray together with these holy victims because suffering sanctifies. Pain sanctifies and brings us close to God, but that does not mean that it is ever right to torture another person, even a criminal. As sinful as we feel ourselves to be, sisters and brothers, let us draw

St Oscar Romero, To the Mothers, for their Disappeared Children, 1 December 1977

near to the Divine Victim of Calvary who becomes present on our altar. Let us ask that his blood fall as a rain of blessing and consolation on the many great needs of our country.

Now let us stand and offer prayers for the intentions of this moment. One of the mothers is going to offer this prayer.