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THE SERVICE OF THE WORD, OF FORGIVENESS, AND OF THE EUCHARIST

**Priestly ordination
10 December 1977**

Dear Bishop Luis Chávez y González, you honor us with your presence in this cathedral. Dear Jorge and Héctor, this morning you will be taken from among the people of God and be made their priestly servants. Dear brother priests who have received this gift which brings the people together to thank Christ the priest for the gift of priesthood he has bestowed on us. Beloved seminarians, heroic young people of our time, hope of the church and the priesthood. Dear sisters and dear brothers who fill the cathedral.

What a great consolation! It could be said that the cathedral this morning is a figure of the archdiocese. As we wipe away the tears we shed for our two priests assassinated, the church rejoices that her ever fertile womb will produce this morning two substitutes, two new priests for our ministry: Jorge Benavides and Héctor Figueroa.

Let us allow the word of God to illuminate us so that we will understand the sublime moment we are experiencing. Today we find ourselves on one of those high mountains where God dialogues with humanity. After being anointed by his dialogue with God, Moses then descended to guide the people. Each time someone is ordained a priest, the people participate in this grand event together with the bishop and the other priests, and a fruitful dialogue is in process. Like the prophet Jeremiah, those to be ordained have said, «From my mother's womb you called me. You formed me for this. You gave me priestly qualities. We have lived the years of childhood and youthful innocence with the desire to arrive at this height, and now, Lord, we feel dread». Like the prophet, the new priests almost want to say, «How difficult is this mission for which I was so eager! Look, Lord, I am a child!» But God continues the dialogue: «Do not say you are a child. I will anoint you and make you a participant in my wisdom, my revelation, and my power. Do not say that you cannot do this, because I will be with you» (Jer 1:5-8). Then the bishop, representing God's power, will impose his hands on them as if depositing on these men a tremendous weight, a weight that at the same time is a great honor.

Christ, the one and only eternal priest

This is an immense honor, sisters and brothers. The principal person in this ceremony is not the ones who are about to be ordained, nor is it the bishop and the priests who are presiding. The central figure is Christ, the one and only eternal priest. There is only one priest who has reconciled heaven and earth by dying on the cross and rising. He now lives eternally, singing God's glory and saving all humanity through his church in the world.

God sent his Son who became incarnate in the womb of a woman who was a virgin. God anointed him there at the first moment of his existence. Thus, the only woman who has given birth to a son who was a priest is Mary. Our mothers gave birth to us simply as children of the

flesh. Afterward came the priestly anointing that made these children of the flesh ministers of God. But Mary had the immense honor of seeing her son Jesus consecrated from the first moment of his life within her womb. This woman, who alone can say she gave birth to a priest, took care of him, nursed him, and watched him grow until the day that she stood beside his cross as he celebrated his Mass. The only Mass is Calvary, where Jesus was suspended on the cross in the agony of crucifixion and death. He hung there in an act of profound submission to the eternal Father to redeem a sinful humanity that had lost its way. There is no other eternal priest, but this eternal priest wanted to make those who were redeemed a priestly people.

This morning, sisters and brothers, the ones next in importance after the central figure of Christ, the one and only priest, are not our brothers who are going to be ordained nor those of us presiding at this ceremony. The next most important are you yourselves, the priestly people—or perhaps I should say «all of us» because I also am baptized. The greatest moment of our lives occurred at the moment when we children of the flesh were raised up and made members of this priestly people. All of us who are baptized, all of us who form the church, all of you lay folk and religious—we are the priestly people. The eternal priest has desired to make us participants in his dignity, and therefore the church lives in the world with a priestly history and priestly action. As we just heard from Saint Paul (Rom 12:4-5), all of us, rich and poor, experience a call in our hearts to live our different vocations—religious life, marriage, professional life. Yet despite our diverse callings and charisms, we all form one people who must integrate into our lives this priestly mission of Christ in history.

Only in third place—after Christ the eternal priest, and after the priestly people anointed by Christ in baptism—come we who are priests and ministers. We have been chosen from among the people and called from families whose surnames we bear. Whether we come from a town of El Salvador or from some other part of the world, we fulfill that biblical condition: «Every priest is chosen from among mortals» (Heb 5:1). Priests are chosen from among the priestly people precisely to be servants. That is the meaning of «minister», serving the priestly people. This is our mission, my dear Héctor and Jorge. Now bearing the surname of your family, chosen from among others, you are called to represent this priestly people. Christ has chosen you and me and my brother priests and the seminarians who desire to serve in this way. We have been called to provide this service to the people, the service of the word, the service of forgiveness, and above all the service of the Eucharist.

The service of the word

We have a message to communicate to the world, and we are the ones responsible for this message. When Christ chose twelve men to receive his divine wisdom, he told them finally, «I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now (John 16:12-13). The deposit of divine revelation that I offer you is so great that my divine Spirit will be with you. You are chosen from the people and will have God's special assistance so that in every moment throughout history you will preach my word according to the needs of the times. You must incarnate my word in the needs and the sins and the virtues of the people you have in your charge». This is the great ministry of the word. It is so difficult and so incomprehensible that often the dialogue that the church wishes to establish to enlighten the world turns into persecution. Sometimes the offenses against the ministry of the word become as terrible as the ones we are suffering at the present time. «He came to his own», we can say, «and the light shone, but the darkness did not want to receive it» (John 1:5,11). This is the mystery of iniquity, the mystery of sin which

the church attempts to root out from the world and from history, even as history and the world attempt to suffocate the word of God.

Therefore, my brother priests, you have arrived at the height of priestly ordination in order to proclaim this word which, like the prophets, you feel burning deep within you, a devouring flame from which we would just as soon flee. I speak of this ministry not as an honor but as a prophetic duty, for we are called to go forth and proclaim the authentic revelation to the people.

Dear brothers, do not betray your service to this ministry of God's word. It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world in any way. We can spiritualize our words so that they lack any commitment to history. We can speak words that sound good in any part of the world because they say nothing about the world. Such words create no problems; they give rise to no conflicts. The word that characterizes the authentic church is the word that causes conflicts and persecutions. It is the searing word of the prophets that announces and denounces: it announces the marvelous works of God so that people will believe and worship God, and it denounces the sins of those who oppose God's kingdom. The true word denounces sins so that they will be uprooted from people's hearts, from their societies, from their laws, and from all those organizations that oppress and imprison and trample upon the rights of God and humankind.

This is the difficult service of the word, but the Spirit of God accompanies the prophet and the preacher because it is through them that Christ himself continues to proclaim his kingdom to men and women of every era.

The service of forgiveness

I tell you also, my brothers, that like myself and my beloved brother priests, you are going to be servants of the people in forgiving their sins. No one else among the people has the power that you are going to receive, the same power that Christ gave to his disciples on Easter: «Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them» (John 20:22-23). What time is more solemn than that moment of silence in the confessional? The soul, weighed down by sins it can no longer bear, hears the priest proclaim the words that Christ spoke to Magdalene: «Rise up! You are forgiven! I forgive you» (Luke 7:47). The priest himself needs the consolation of confession. We priests must also confess our sins; we need another priest to exercise this service of forgiveness for us. The pope goes to confession; the bishop goes to confession; we all go to confession because we need that service of consolation that no earthly wisdom can give. There are no words so consoling and healing as those pronounced by the priest: «I forgive you in the name of Christ, the forgiver».

The service of the Eucharist

Above all else, dear brothers, is the service of the Eucharist. As priests we call the people with the word, we purify them by denouncing their defects, and we forgive them as we lead them to penance. We ourselves are part of this sinful people in need of penance. We know that the church is holy because she is the spouse of Christ, but she is also sinful because she is made up of human beings. We ourselves, her ministers, need to make every effort to become better day by day so as to be able to approach the altar and offer ourselves in the bread and wine as an

immaculate host to God the Father. The priest makes a solemn gesture when he receives the hosts and the chalice from the people and says to the Father, «We offer this fruit to you. It is the fruit of the work of my brothers and sisters, those who are working in the world and traveling the highways of earth. They are married folk, people of my own home, my sisters and brothers, my companions at work before I was a priest, this whole people, Lord. I must sanctify them with my example and with my words. I offer you this on the altar of the Mass». It is at that moment, my brothers, that the whole community that believes in Christ finds its priestly expression. That is why the church obliges us to come to Mass at least on Sundays—so that we feel ourselves united to the origins of our priestly identity through the ministry of the priest who raises the hosts and converts them into the Body and Blood of the Lord, which he then shares with the faithful as food for eternal life. As he says, «The Body of Christ», the people say, «Amen».

Do you see how the priesthood is a continual dialogue between the infinite mercy of God and the infinite misery of humanity? What a great position for the priest, in between these two great abysses! On one side is the abyss of infinite mercy that desires to forgive those who repent of their wrongs, and on the other is the abyss of human misery. The shadows that bring misfortune on society must be proclaimed so that people will be converted and receive God's forgiveness.

Today's second reading from Sacred Scripture tells us that all these people who have been formed through the ministry of priests will be brought to their fulfillment. One day there will no longer be any Masses; there will be no need for mortal priests because all of us will be incorporated into Christ. All of us—through the ministry of the priests, bishops, catechists, celebrators of the word, and the whole priestly people of God—will be incorporated into Christ in his historical and eternal fullness. And Christ will be the one and only priest, made up of all of us who were born in history and have become one priesthood with him. We will form with him one priesthood, one offertory, one Mass that will continue to sing God's glory eternally. This is the destiny and the objective of our priestly ministry in history. So there in eternal glory, brothers, we priests together with all our glorified people will have the great satisfaction of having collaborated with Christ in making humanity the living temple of God, the living image of the Spirit of God in eternity.

Let us allow ourselves to be led by the priests. Let us make ourselves every day more faithful members of the priestly people. Each day let us become more holy, and let us make our priests holy through our example, our encouragement, and our demands. May they be truly holy, as the people need them to be and as God wants them to be. My sisters and brothers, this is the objective toward which these two young lives have been called. Now, together with my beloved predecessor Bishop Chávez y González and with my dear brother priests, we give thanks to God for the gift of our vocation and our priestly mission, and we impose our hands on these two new heirs, sharing with them this weighty inheritance. We are going to bestow on them the priestly spirit and the character that anoints them as priests forever, and we share with them our joy, our confidence, and our gratitude as we incorporate them into the priesthood of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

Here as pastor of all the priests, I extend an affectionate greeting to all those who belong to the priesthood even though they're unable to be here physically since they are scattered about the diocese. They are working hard and following the same vocation. I thank you for your

hard work and sense of solidarity. May we continue to work together for the glory of God and Christ. I greet also the men who have sadly left this priestly communion because they discovered that their vocation was not this but something different. May you be happy in your new life, but do not forget that you are marked forever. Even if you have married or chosen to live as laymen, you carry the mark of the priesthood forever. I also greet those poor souls who have not only separated themselves because they felt the call of holiness in another vocation, but have also drawn apart out of a sense of rebellious inconformity. The church still loves you. You are her priests, and she continues to wait for you so that you will become part of this priestly people, this great family of God that walks toward the glorification of Christ's eternal priesthood. Don't hold yourselves apart from unity. Don't give the sad testimony of Judas who betrayed the communion.

May all of us be truly called brothers and sisters, and may the Lord, as he receives this prayer of the people and these new priests, have mercy on our ecclesial unity. May that unity grow ever stronger, and may all of us in our own vocations be faithful followers of Christ the eternal priest. Let it be so.