Sermon for the Ordination Ceremony of Pastors Keila Cuesta and Alma Betancourt

By Rev. Eduardo Gonzalez

Iglesia Bautista Enmanuel, Ciego de Avila, Cuba

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Isaiah 6:1-8; Acts 2:17-18; John 21:15-17

Brothers and sisters, today we do not gather to inaugurate something new. We gather to acknowledge—openly and before this congregation—what God has already been doing in silence: shaping two women to shepherd His people.

We are living through times when everything seems to tell us that it is not the moment to build anything: the power goes out, bread is scarce, children pack their bags and say goodbye at the airport, and the church remains standing with fewer hands than we would like. Yet, in the midst of this scenario, God continues to call. And today, that call bears specific names: Alma and Keila.

Scripture tells us that Isaiah saw the Lord "in the year that King Uzziah died"—that is, during a time of national crisis and political uncertainty, when no one knew what or who would come next. It is no coincidence that Isaiah's call came precisely then, rather than during a time of stability.

When Isaiah beheld the holiness of God, his initial reaction was not enthusiasm, but fear: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips... and my eyes have seen the King." Isaiah looked at himself and saw limitation, inadequacy, and "unclean lips." And God did not dispute that. God did not say, "Don't exaggerate; you are capable." Instead, God sent a burning coal from the altar and purified him. God's response to human limitation is never a denial of that limitation—it is the provision of grace that covers it.

Alma, Keila: you know better than this examining council how much you still lack. You are aware of your own "unclean lips"—the weariness, the doubts, the times you have felt unequal to the task. That feeling does not disqualify you; it is the very raw material God has always used in His calling. No one in the Bible was called because they were already complete. Isaiah was called with unclean lips; Moses, with a stutter; Jeremiah, while still practically a child; Paul, with a thorn... Where did Paul have his thorn? Ah, "in the flesh." You are called today—not *despite* the fact that the Cuban church is enduring blackouts, shortages, and constant farewells, but *in the midst* of it all—because that is how God has always called: in times of crisis, calling people who know their own insufficiency. For God does not choose the qualified; God qualifies the chosen.

And when the coal touches Isaiah's lips, God's question is not directed at him specifically:

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" It is an open question, cast into the air of the throne room. Isaiah could have waited for someone else to answer. Instead, he says: "Here I am; send me." That "send me" is the same one the two of you uttered the day I first made this proposal to you in your living rooms, and it is the same "send me" you are uttering today before this congregation.

Peter, standing at Pentecost, is not inventing a theological novelty; ...he is reading the fulfillment of an ancient promise from Joel: "And in the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all humanity; your sons and daughters will prophesy... And indeed, upon my servants—men and women—I will pour out my Spirit, and they will prophesy."

Note the structure of the text: "sons and daughters." This is neither a rhetorical oversight nor a mere courtesy. It is the way the Holy Spirit, upon descending, redraws the boundaries of who may speak in God's name. Before Pentecost, public prophecy was, in practice, an almost exclusively male domain. After Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out "upon all humanity"—and the text takes care to explicitly name women, ensuring no one can claim they were excluded from this outpouring.

This is not a biblical technicality used to win a debate. It is the very foundation of what is happening in this sanctuary today. If the Spirit who empowers people to prophesy, to speak on God's behalf, and to shepherd is the same Spirit poured out "upon men and women" without distinction, then the ordination of Alma and Keila is neither a cultural concession nor an adaptation to modern times. It is Pentecost being fulfilled, once again, in this "little piece of Heaven" in Ciego de Ávila.

And we arrive at the text that defines what all of this is really about. Jesus does not ask Peter, "Do you know how to administer?" nor "Do you have a clear grasp of all the doctrine?" He asks him the same thing three times: "Do you love me?" And every time Peter answers "yes," Jesus does not give him a title; He gives him sheep: "Tend my sheep... Shepherd my sheep... Feed my sheep."

Pastoral ministry, according to the biblical tradition, does not begin with management skills or pulpit eloquence. It begins with a love for Jesus that translates, in very concrete terms, into caring for specific individuals. Alma, Keila: today you are not receiving a position of authority to be served; you are receiving sheep to serve. Sheep who sometimes arrive weary from standing in a line where they failed to buy bread, or indignant at the price of cooking oil; sheep who weep because a child has left and they do not know if they will ever embrace them again; sheep who come to church by the light of a single rechargeable lamp because the power has gone out once more. Those sheep are tended not with theological discourses, but with the very question Jesus asked Peter—turned into a daily practice: Do you truly love them?

And there is something else in this passage that we cannot overlook: Jesus restores Peter precisely at the place of his failure. Peter had denied Him three times beside a campfire;

now Jesus affirms him three times beside another campfire. The pastoral calling does not wait for us to overcome our falls; it is built upon the grace that lifts us up after them. That is also a word for you at this moment: no one comes to this altar, to this pulpit, without a history, without wounds, without a "rooster that crowed" in their own life. God does not ordain perfect people; He ordains restored people.

Isaiah teaches us that the call comes in times of crisis—not in spite of our inadequacy, but purifying it. Acts teaches us that the Spirit makes no distinction of gender when empowering people to speak in God's name. And John teaches us that, in the end, all pastoral ministry comes down to a question that must be answered every day: "Do you love me more than these things?"

Alma, Keila: this congregation has seen you serve and has seen you persevere through the experiences we have all shared; today, through this ordination, it declares what was already known in heaven: "Here I am, Lord; here they are—send them." Go and shepherd His sheep, for the Spirit poured out upon men and women is the same Spirit that stands with you today through this congregation. Amen.