

BAPTISM, EPIPHANY OF THE MESSIAH

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time
The Baptism of the Lord
January 14, 1979

Isaiah 42:1-4, -6-7

Acts 10:34-38

Mark 1:6-11

Note: Before the proclamation of the homily by the Archbishop, Plácido Erdozain and Rutilio Sánchez spoke to the people of El Salvador in the name of the priests in the Archdiocese and denounced the on-going campaign of defamation against the clergy. This week a flyer appeared which listed ten priests and *in a malicious way stated that these priests were part of the guerrillero movement in El Salvador*. In light of the death threats made on the life of the Archbishop, the priests also renewed their solidarity with the Archbishop of San Salvador, Bishop Oscar A. Romero.

My dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience.

I am proud and in union with the expression of fidelity of the beloved priests who are present here and who represent the pluralism that is permitted as long as people are in communion with the doctrine and the discipline of the Church. From this perspective the priests provide a faithful service to the people despite the many threats and difficulties that they must confront.

The words spoken by the priests are the fruit of a week of reflection on the theme of priestly identity. This gathering was the result of a questionnaire that was produced by the Priests Senate and given to all the priests who responded anonymously. This was done in order to allow the priests to feel completely free in expressing their thoughts and judgments about the bishop and the pastoral guidelines that are in place here in the Archdiocese. The results of this questionnaire were then analyzed. Sociology experts gave us a sociological interpretation and experts in theology studied the responses from a theological point of view while experts in pastoral ministry were able to draw some conclusions from the multiplicity of opinions. At this time I can tell you: Now that this work is completed I am once again proud of my clergy because with complete freedom it appears that the majority of the priests are in agreement with everything and even though there is a minority that is not in full agreement, I believe that the responses to this questionnaire were sincere. If there had been one hundred percent agreement, I would not have believed in the results but because there was a low percentage of people who dissented in some matters (no, I would not say they were in opposition). I believe in the sincerity of the responses that value and affirm the way in which our priests and the people whom they represent are exercising their ministry. My sisters and brothers, I sincerely exhort you to continue to walk on those paths that the Spirit has inspired in us, the Church here in the Archdiocese of San Salvador, on those paths where so many beautiful things are beginning to flower.

I greet the priests and want them to know that this gesture of concelebrating this Mass with me, despite their own obligations in their parishes, indicates that this past week of reflection was not a time of sentimentality or superficiality but rather a time in which they were able to deepen their union and solidarity with the Archbishop. Therefore I repeat to you what I have said many times: *Anyone who touches a priest, touches the Archbishop!*

We have here another document that supports the feeling of the people, the cries of the people. As the meeting of the priests was coming to a conclusion and mindful of the fact that various entities had asked for a general amnesty and the repeal of the Law of Public Order, that is, asking for greater freedom, and mindful also of situation of arbitrary arrests, disappearances, and abductions, the priests felt that they could not distance or separate themselves from these voices and cries. Therefore, I rejoice in another event that took place this week, namely, the celebration of the Day for World Peace which took place here in the Cathedral at 7:00pm on Friday. I am happy that at the conclusion of his message concerning peace, Bishop Rivera, the bishop of Santiago de María and the president of the National Commission for Justice and Peace, interpreting the feelings of the Commission that was present here with all its lay members, emphasized these requests that the people are demanding. The applause that was given after Bishop Rivera stated each one of these demands indicated that we are not dealing with priests and bishops who meddle in politics but rather here we have individuals who desire to live and interpret the feelings of anguish and pain of the people. Summarizing all of this the priests at the conclusion of this week of reflection wrote the following letter to the President of the Legislative Assembly.

The Archbishop of San Salvador, Bishop Oscar A. Romero, together with his Vicar-General, Msgr. Ricardo Urioste, and the clergy of the Archdiocese, after meeting together for one week and analyzing the present serious situation that confronts our nation and the ways in which we are called to collaborate in order to resolve this crisis, we have come to the conclusion of asking you to listen to the cries of the family members of the one hundred and eight persons who have disappeared and of the seventy-two political prisoners to accept the petition of General Amnesty granting freedom to those who have disappeared and to repeal the Law of Public Order. All of these requests have been made by the Archbishop, by innumerable national and international institutions and by popular organizations who are in solidarity with these families and who represent the feelings of our people.

We believe that accepting these petitions would be a clear sign of your willingness to listen to and channel the popular will of the people in legal and peaceful ways and would in no way show weakness on the part of the present government. Accepting these petitions is a necessary means for creating an atmosphere of greater trust and less tension and would ultimately create the possibility for dialogue and collaboration among all the levels of society. This would allow for the radical and bold transformation of the present economic, political and social structures of our country and make possible a greater justice and equality among us. These are indispensable conditions for an authentic development and a true peace.

We have decided to present this request to you because as President of the Legislative Assembly we believe that it is within your competency to create a favorable atmosphere for the carrying out of these requests. Your action in face of the problem that occurred in the University gives us great hope for a positive response, a response that without a doubt would

bring joy to the families of the political prisoners and those who have disappeared and would also be a good step in achieving peace and order.

On our part, we appreciate everything that you are able to do in regard to general amnesty, the freedom of those who have disappeared and the repeal of the Law of Public Order. We will try to continue to foment a consciousness in Christians that all are children of God and as such, we all rejoice in the same rights and obligations, we are sisters and brothers, and we must all help one another to build a nation that is worthy of the name we bear, El Salvador. Sincerely."¹ The signature of the Archbishop and eighty-four pastors and priests of the Archdiocese follows.

My dear sisters and brothers, these gestures of our priests coincide with the message of this Sunday when we are celebrating the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is an echo of the Epiphany. God has come and wants to make known and present to the world the fact that his saving love is offered to everyone. As a star revealed the primacy of the Gentile people who came to adore him (we celebrated this reality last Sunday), so today a voice from heaven, a new revelation (epiphany) from the skies that open proclaims to us: *this is my beloved son and in him is my divine power of salvation. The world must know him because only in him is salvation* (1)

We understand the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism as an epiphany of the messianic reality. This idea will be presented with the following three ideas: first; baptism is a sacramental sign: second; in Christ baptism and this sacramental sign discover its messianic reality that is already present there: third; in Christians we see the sign of participation in the messianic reality.

We will try to develop these ideas and when we have completed our reflection on Jesus' baptism, a baptism that enabled him to participate in and share with his people, we will see the responsibility of people who are baptized here in El Salvador and in all other parts of the world --- a responsibility to be protagonists of the salvation of others. This responsibility arises from the fact that we are members of a people who participate in the messianic saving reality that Jesus brought to the world.

Baptism is a sacramental sign

Above all else I want everyone to have an idea about baptism because I believe that all people, as Christians, ought to know this. We begin with the words of John the Baptist as proclaimed in today's gospel: *I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (2). Saint Mark then states that Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee approached John the Baptist in order to be baptized in the river Jordan (3). Here we have sacramental gestures and at the same time we see the difference between one form of baptism and another. There is a third form of baptism that appears in the second reading. Peter is called to go to the house of the Roman centurion --- as such, a Gentile --- and asked to administer baptism (4). Thus we have the baptism of a person who is not the Christ, but rather one who belongs to the non-Jewish world. What is the significance of baptism?

There are two elements in every sacrament. Here we see visible things. The visible element is the matter of the sacrament. We see a man who approaches another man so that this person might pour water over his head and pronounce certain words. In the other case, a man approaches a Gentile family and pours water over their heads. This is the material part

of the sign. The content of the sign is an expression of the intention of the person who is the master of the content. Every sign has to signify something. If a sacrament is received only because of its visible reality, it will soon become insipid and lose its meaning. It is for this reason that many people feel as though the sacraments have lost their flavor. Thus we want the sacraments to recuperate that which is primary: the meaning of the sign. What does it matter if a child is brought to the baptismal font of a beautiful church, accompanied by elegantly dressed godparents who then participate in a party in which the baptism is the last thing that is considered and everything becomes focused on social relationships. This means that one remains focused on just one element of the sacrament as if today we could not discover in the Biblical readings the meaning of this man who draws near to another to be baptized in the Jordan River.

What is the meaning of this? The three forms of baptism that are presented to us today are distinct because even though they use the same exterior, visible sign, their content is different. There is a difference between John's baptism and Jesus' baptism. John the Baptist says: *I have baptized you with water* (5). Thus we have a baptism of penance, a call to conversion. It is as though John is saying: *I cannot baptize you in the Holy Spirit because I do not possess the messianic gifts. I am preparing the paths of the Messiah.* Those who approached John were not like the Christians who today present themselves or their children before our baptismal fonts. Thus our Protestant sisters and brothers are mistaken when they say that we should be baptized like Jesus, at the age of thirty. They forget that the baptism of John is very distinct from Jesus' baptism because Jesus gives a more profound meaning to this action.

John's baptism is a preparation for the second baptism that would come later. Then, Jesus arrives. He is not a sinner. He did not need to be baptized. Therefore, to compare our baptism with that of Christ and to want to wait until we have Jesus' age to be baptized is arrogance. To believe that we are free from the stain of sin like Jesus and that therefore from the time of our birth we have no need for redemption --- this is also arrogance. Christ didn't need to be baptized but accepted it to reveal a truth about himself.

Thus we have the establishment or institution of Christian baptism. The baptism that Jesus received is not the same baptism that is administered to our children. Jesus commanded the Apostles to share, under the sign of water and prayers and the rite of baptism, the messianic wealth that he is going to give us. Today he approaches the River Jordan not as one who was in need of baptism but rather as one who gives the water the power to be a conductor of the seed of divine life that he brought to the world. He does not submerge himself in the waters of the Jordan to cleanse himself of sins --- he had no sin. He is able to face the world and say to everyone: *who can accuse me of sin?* He did not have original sin and therefore he did not need baptism. He had not committed any personal sin and therefore he did not have to beat his breast with all the sinners that John absolved with his baptism of penance. Jesus was the holy one who brought holiness to this earth and his baptism enriched this sign that was still void of its full meaning and was only a preparation for something more profound and only afterwards would become the baptism that John had spoken about: *a baptism in the Holy Spirit* (6).

My sisters and brothers, see how the sacrament of baptism contains a sign of a reality that our faith must discover. It is for this reason that we are insisting on a sacramental catechesis and we have present here in the Cathedral today the representatives of our beloved presbytery and so I want to ask all the people to support the priests who are fulfilling their obligation and

affirming the words that were spoken to them by my beloved predecessor, Bishop Chávez: *do not administer baptism without first cultivating the faith through catechesis*. Do not try to avoid this commitment! I know that some people say: *let's go to that parish because there they do not demand some form of preparation*. Neither the priests who do not provide this catechesis nor the faithful who are looking for something that is easier --- neither of these groups are fulfilling their obligation and are simply expressing their lack of faith. In this case the priests are more concerned about the offering that is given to them at the time of baptism or the social relationships of the sacramental sign. This, however, does not interest us. Even if people can make no offering --- this is not a tax but a free will offering and if people do not want to give anything, they do not have to. The poor are often unable to make this offering and therefore we must look at that which is primary in order to see what is given to us in baptism. In baptism we receive the messianic gift. How few people understand this and it is precisely because of this that we have so many people who have been baptized and are unaware of the serious commitment that they have made and unaware of the great dignity that God gave them on the day that they were held over the baptismal font and were born as new creatures. My dear sisters and brothers, let us now understand the gesture of those saints who do not celebrate the day of their birth when they were born as children of the flesh but rather celebrate the day of their baptism. On the day of their baptism they celebrate their new birth and go to the church to kiss the baptismal font where they were born again with water and the Spirit, born again with this reality that Christ revealed at the time of their baptism.

In Christ's baptism we discover the messianic reality that is contained there

This is my second consideration. What does Christ show? As I have told you, Christ does not receive something that he does not have. Therefore it is not true that one should wait until one is thirty years old to receive baptism. We do not have what Christ had. Christ goes to the waters of the Jordan as an epiphany moment, that is, in order to discover what he bears within himself. Therefore we have listened to the gospel of Saint Mark who wants to present to us the person of Jesus even though this person does not speak. Jesus is the eternal message of the Father and in the river Jordan he does not speak. Rather a voice from heaven speaks: *On coming out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"* (7). The revelation of the meaning of the baptism of Jesus is the fact that he is not made the Son of God but that he is the Son of God and his baptism is a revelation of who he is.

In order to understand these words that were proclaimed in the River Jordan we would have to speak about a long history that we do not have time to do but that is summarized by the prophet Isaiah in the first reading. In today's reading, Isaiah presents us with a summary of an historical person: Cyrus, the king of Persia. He is pressing the authorities for the release of the Jewish community from captivity in Babylon. Babylon will yield to the pressure of Cyrus and the exiled community views Cyrus as a king who has saving power: *When Babylon comes under the power of Cyrus, we will be given freedom, we will return to Jerusalem and this oppression will be removed*. Therefore the Bible views Cyrus as a Messiah figure.

This figure is transformed into a poetic figure that Isaiah calls the Servant of Yahweh, the servant of God. No longer is this person simply the king of Persia, a man with human, saving powers, rather he is someone mysterious and the prophet Isaiah says: *Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nation, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice*

heard in the street. A bruised reed he shall not break and a smoldering wick he shall not quench (8). What a beautiful figure in order to speak to us about the mercy of redemption.

Even though we might experience brokenness, even though we might feel like a candle that is about to be extinguished, even though we might experience a profound sense of frustration because of our sinfulness, because of the sins of the social classes, because of the abuses of political systems, even though we are unworthy of our name and God's mercy, yet the prophet Isaiah fills us with hope: *A bruised reed he shall not break and a smoldering wick he shall not quench* (9). In El Salvador there is still the possibility of making ourselves anew. We can still light the lamp of our faith and hope. Here then is our hope: the Servant of Yahweh, Christ, the Divine Cyrus who comes to free us from every form of slavery. He is our hope.

Messiah is the title that is given to Christ but both the word Messiah and the word Christ have the same meaning --- Messiah in Oriental languages, Aramaic or Hebrew and Christ in Greek mean the same: anointed. But what is anointing? In the second reading we heard the following words proclaimed: *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power* (10). This is what happened to this man from Nazareth who was not simply a man but was also the power of God and yet at the same time this Jesus of Nazareth, as the son of the carpenter, was also a man like anyone of us. Many times I have been impressed with the thought that if Christ lived today, in 1979, he would be thirty or thirty-three years old. He would be like anyone of you who are thirty-three years old and no one would be able to distinguish him. Perhaps he would have come from one of our villages and lived there with his mother, the Virgin. No one would know him and perhaps he would be here, in the Cathedral, among us. As the Sacred Scriptures tell us that as a man he is like all of us except for sin (11) because he bears within himself an opposite or an antagonistic attitude that absolutely rejects sin. This is what I refer to today as the messianic reality. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. This word became very common: the anointed one, Christ, the Messiah and so it made sense for us to simply use the name Jesus without adding on the title Christ. Jesus Christ is the full expression of the name that God pointed out: *You shall name him Jesus* (12). The other name that expressed the hope of the people was then added: the anointed one, the Messiah, Christ. All those persons who had been anointed by the power of God to carry on a mission in the world were considered Christ by the people.

The Old Testament presents us with groups of people who are anointed: kings, priests, prophets and the patriarchs. We are presented with wonderful gestures such as those of Samuel, the priest who is inspired by God to go to a family in Bethlehem where God will point out to him the person that should be anointed. (13) Samuel brings with him a jar of oil so that when God says: *this is the future king*, he might then anoint that individual. The young man David appears before him and Samuel anoints him. From that time on David's brothers, all of whom are older, respect him as the anointed one and history provides us with the reason for this: the greatest king of Judea, David! The title, Son of David, will be given to the Messiah because in David we find characteristics of the Savior King, the great king who unites the people, the king who raises up the people to sing the praises of God. From the descendents of this messiah king comes forth the Messiah King who is Christ and whose Kingdom will have no end. (14)

How wonderful when the lepers and those who were paralyzed cry out to Jesus as he passes by: *Jesus, son of David!* (15). It is as though they are saying: *Messiah, have pity on us!* How beautiful when the Samaritan woman, thirsting for some mysterious water, is asked by Jesus if she knows the Messiah. She responds: *I know that the Messiah is coming* (16).

This was the hope: that the Messiah would come. Jesus tells her: *I am he!* (17). What a beautiful epiphany when Jesus is presented as: *I am he! I possess those powers proclaimed by the prophets and the kings and the figures of the Old Testament.* Those persons who were anointed were only figures of Christ, the anointed one par excellence, the figure of Christ who bears within himself the fullness of wealth and power that God want to bring to the world in order to enrich people and save them from sin.

Jesus is very careful in being precise about the words he uses in his preaching as well as in his messianism. There had been many mistakes and the time when Jesus reveals himself in the midst of the people is very similar, my sisters and brothers, to the present time of 1979 in El Salvador. At that time there were popular movements that looked for the Messiah who would bring about a temporal, political salvation and they believed that the Christ who was to come would relieve the people of the yoke of the Roman Empire. There were other people who had a true concept of the Messiah and Jesus cultivated this true concept. We are told that when people tried to make him king based on the ideals of a political messianism, he fled to the mountain because this was not the salvation that he had come to proclaim. (18)

The Church is also careful to point out to those movements that are seeking salvation today and to those who want to slander the Church by saying that the Church is seeking power and stirring up guerilla movements --- the Church says that all of this is a lie! The Church is preaching the same messianism as Jesus who told the members of popular movements of his day that they should not look for him or view him as a king of this world or see him as a rival of Pontius Pilate or Herod. Indeed Pilate and Herod will be held accountable to the Divine King and judged on how they governed the people. The Lord will be severe in asking an account from these anointed ones who also have the obligation to respect the will of God in order to bring about that which is good for the people rather than oppress or abuse them. Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world (19). As Pope Pius XI explained when he decreed the feast of Christ the King (20): this does not mean that Christ is isolated from the power and wealth of the earth. It means that he will use a different basis, a religious basis, in order to judge the consciences of political leaders and of the rich (and of the poor also), judging them from the eschatological and transcendent perspective of God's reign. Jesus has said that all of this power will be judged by him because he is the Messiah and universal King of the nations.

Jesus wants to define authentic messianism so that in him we might always find the criteria for all political systems. Therefore it is ridiculous that people should say that the Church is putting forth a socialist system. The Church does not identify herself with any social system. Let us suppose that our democratic system tomorrow becomes a socialist system. The Church will always be the judge who criticizes the unjust attitudes of this socialist system just as today she encourages that which is good in the democratic system. The Church is always like a light that shines outside, a light that illuminates the reality. Christ wants to be the Messiah who illuminates the paths of history. People are free to create the regimes that they desire but they are not free to act according to their whims. The justice of God will judge them according to whatever political or social system they might have chosen. God is the judge of all social systems. The gospel, like the Church, cannot be monopolized by any social or political movement. No social or political organization can say that they are the Church and that therefore people must walk on that path. People are free to make concrete options. Please, we ask all official political organizations and popular movements to refrain from manipulating Christian Base Communities or any other Christian group for their political interests. Respect the freedom of every Christian! If people belong

to another group, respect their choice! If they do not want to belong to any group, respect their choice! Grow in your faith and prepare to give an account as to how you worked in the world and how you changed the world into a better place. This is what the Lord is going to ask us to give an accounting of!

For this reason we said in our Pastoral Letter: *When Christians are members of a political or popular organization they must always make the criteria of faith prevail. If at a given moment there is a conflict between their Christian faith and the organization then they must decide: either political with the organization or always Christian, with or without the organization.*²

Therefore, my dear sisters and brothers, Christ presents to us a messianic reality that we are able to make concrete in the following three categories of the anointed one: prophet, priest and king. This is Christ and this is the messianic reality of Christ. Christ is a true priest, the only priest. All of us as bishops and priests are simply small revelations or manifestations of the only priest who consecrates the world to God: Christ, the eternal priest. Christ is the prophet. Prophet refers to someone who speaks for another. *My doctrine is not mine but the one who sent me* (21). We, preaching in our pulpits, with our limitations and defects, are echoes of the Great Prophet who is Christ, our Lord. We must be careful in being a faithful echo of the voice of Christ, the only one who ought to speak to the people and to our conscience. Christ is the king. When Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire, the greatest civil power in the world, spoke to Jesus and said: *Then you are a king?* (22), Jesus responded and said: *Yes, I am a king. For this was I born and for this I came into the world but my kingdom is a kingdom of truth and not of lies and intrigue and oppression and abuse and hatred and slander. My kingdom is a kingdom of truth and therefore everyone who loves the truth belongs to my kingdom.* Christ the king, prophet, and priest established a means that enables us to share in this triple dignity.

The baptism of Christians is a sign of their participation in the messianic reality to Christ

And this is my third consideration: the baptism of Christians. As we celebrate the feast of Jesus' baptism this morning, I invite you to remember the place where you were baptized (perhaps many will not know this). What priest was the minister who gave you this grace? Where was the humble baptismal font? What village should you love not only because that was the place where you took your first steps playing with other children from the town but also because there, in the parish church, is located the baptismal font where you were brought by Christian parents to be incorporated into the Body of Christ. Your parents were accompanied by good Godparents whom you should remember kindly. It seems to me that this is the gesture of Christian parents who bring an empty golden vase so that the Lord might fill it with his blood and his hierarchical and charismatic gifts. On that day you became a member of Christ's body! On that day the messianic treasure of the Savior became yours! From that day forward you were a member of the People of God!

It is wonderful how in the second reading Saint Peter speaks about the events that led to the baptism of a gentile family. Read the entire book of the Acts of the Apostles and in the chapter that we read today you will see how God becomes visible in history (23). Peter was in Joppa praying on the roof terrace. Far from that place, in Caphernaum, near the Sea of Galilee, a centurion was praying in his own way. This man was a member of the Roman army and a gentile and while he was at prayer he was inspired to send for Peter. At the same

time Peter was at prayer and he had a different inspiration which led him to get up and go to meet Cornelius. This meeting between Peter and Cornelius was the result of God's inspiration. A gentile family wanted to receive Christian baptism, wanted to receive the messianic treasure.

In Peter's conversation with the family of Cornelius we see that he prepared them for baptism. In fact, Peter's discourse seems to be a baptism homily. What would have been the purpose of Peter pouring water over the head of Cornelius and his wife and family and servants, if he did not first explain the meaning of this sacrament? Thus the second reading offers us a baptismal preparation scene: *I see that God shows no partiality. Rather in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him. Therefore, in the name of God whom you feel is calling you, I am going to incorporate your entire family into the new people of God. You will no longer be gentiles because there is no difference between gentiles and Jews. There is only one difference: to have faith and be baptized or to lack faith and remain outside the People of God* (24).

In this other example we see the meaning of baptism when John the Baptist speaks about Jesus who asks to be baptized and then he turns toward the penitents and says: *I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (25). Here John is speaking about the function of Christian baptism. Baptism allows us to participate in the anointing of Christ. Christ was not anointed in the River Jordan but at the moment of his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Thus the angel tells Mary that she is going to conceive a mysterious being and tells her: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. The Holy Spirit has performed this miracle and made you mother and still a virgin and the fruit of your womb is not simply a man, but the anointed one, the heavenly king wrapped in human flesh, the Messiah* (26). Therefore, the Church is compared to Mary because as Mary gives birth to a man who is at the same time God, so too our Mother Church is always fruitful and gives birth in the sacrament of baptism. For this reason I told you that the mystery of the baptismal font is found in the place where our Mother Church gives birth to us, where we become children of God and share in the anointing that Christ brought us and that enables us to be priests, prophets, and kings.

After a child has been baptized, the priest anoints him/her with an oil that is called chrism, which means Christ or anointing. Olive oil is mixed with balm perfume, a precious oil that signifies the messianic reality that this creature has received. As this oil is placed on the child's forehead the priest says: *God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.*³ Therefore, we are children of God, a priestly, prophetic and holy people. My sisters and brothers, what is the result of all of this? The result is that the Cathedral is filled with Christians. The result is a Diocese and many communities that are listening to me at this time. I think of all of you, my beloved Christians, including those persons who live in the most distant corner of the Diocese because the result of baptism is you. The Christian communities are able to truly say: *we are anointed to participate in Christ as prophet, priest and king.* Therefore the Church is the bishop, priests, religious, Catholic schools and organizations and families. The Church is priestly, prophetic and royal. We are a family of kings, descendants of the anointed one and participants in the Christ's priesthood. Our mission as a people is to root these three realities in our family, our work, our offices, our

politics, in our sociology and our profession and in the marketplace. Wherever baptized persons go they must be the presence of the messianic reality that Christ brings to this situation and, like Christ, this means that we must live out the commitment of making present the saving dignity that Jesus brought to the world. How beautiful to be able to depend on a people, a Church that each day is becoming more conscious of this baptismal anointing!

Life of the Church

My dear sisters and brothers, it is here that we experience ourselves as the People of God, as an anointed people, a priestly people and so we turn our eyes toward Christ who though he had no need was nevertheless baptized to give us the beginning of a baptism that we would need in order to incorporate ourselves with him, the head of this body. As members of his body we bear within ourselves the presence, the life, the message and the courage that he had as he proclaimed the Kingdom of God and denounced the injustices that surrounded him. Therefore I want to explain the function of this Church that as Father Plácido said at the beginning: *a Church that experiences the movement of the Holy Spirit*. My sisters and brothers, the Church is being born in order to live out her baptism, not in some cowardly, anonymous and ambiguous way nor in some way in which people are lacking any understanding of the significance of this action. Rather we are asked to become aware of the fact that this baptism is alive in our midst and demands a greater commitment to the people who surround us.

From the perspective of the Church that attempts to be faithful to her message, I want to announce to you that in an effort to be faithful to this unity we are going to celebrate the Octave of Christian Unity in our Archdiocese. This celebration is being prepared for Protestants and Catholics and will take from January 18th to January 25th. We will begin this celebration next Thursday, January 18th, in the First Baptist Church. All the other Catholic and Protestant Churches will gather there to ask the Lord for the realization of the words that he prayed before he died: *that they may be one just as we are one, that they may follow the gospel and be one body* (27).

I remind you that tomorrow in different parts of the Archdiocese we will celebrate the feast of Christ of Esquipulas. These celebrations will take place in San Bartolomé, Colón, Aguilares and also in the Central Market. I want to remind you that we take part in these processions as true Christians and not because of some propaganda or some false sense of piety that desires to receive some financial benefit or gives priority to some other interest. It is only Christ whom we love and follow in spirit and truth because through baptism we have made a commitment to him.

I want to thank you for the many expressions of solidarity that have come to my office as a result of what I said last Sunday: the news of threats against my life. I do not want to give much importance to this matter because we are in the hands of God. I also want to thank the President of the Republic for the attention that he gives to my homilies. It has been said that when reporters asked him if he was aware of these threats he said that he became aware of this news because he had listened to my homily. Thank you very much, Mr. President, for listening to me. I am also grateful for the offer that he made to me of providing me with protection if I asked for such protection. Yes, I am grateful for this offer but I also want to repeat my position here: I do not seek any advantage and the only thing that I desire is the good of my priests and my people. I would be willing to accept this offer if this would eliminate the slanders made against the priests that I spoke about before and if this would

eliminate the campaigns of slander in our media where reporters are so confident to speak about such horrible things that there is no doubt there is some kind of a plot behind all of this, a plot that is very easy to figure out. I believe, however, that you yourself are able to transform and change this reality of slander.

I also want to say that aside from my own personal security I want security and serenity for the 108 families of those persons who have disappeared and for all people who suffer. Personal well-being and the security of my own life is of no interest to me as long as I see in my people an economic, political and social system that tends more and more to widen the differences between the social classes of our nation. What I desire from the Supreme Court is an effort to guarantee true peace that all people desire but that can never be obtained through repression and abuse but only through social justice. This is a most urgent need among all the people of this land. I want to tell you that in the statement of the President there is something that greatly concerns me. The President said: *What has happened is that certain members of the clergy have been surprised by the authorities because they were in places where they should not have been. This has also occurred in other parts of the world where some sick minds that appear to be healthy allow themselves to be taken in by doctrines and principles that are not Christian.* I believe that there is a danger here because things are assumed to be certain that have not been proven. Many priests have been expelled and arrested and tortured. When Bishop Chávez and his unworthy successor have asked for explanations and reasons, no response has been given and events appear to be over and done. The most ambiguous case is that of our beloved brother Father Neto Barrera and here we are unable to do anything more than what we have done: highlight the fact that the Security Forces assassinated the only witness who could have explained this situation. How are we going to know whether or not the statement of the President is true when he accuses the clergy of being in places where they should not be?

Events of the week

We are also concerned about the situation that surrounds the abduction of the gentlemen from England and Japan. Thanks be to God that we have received information that Dr. Bonilla has been freed⁴. I have acted as a mediator in this matter and as human beings we are all trying to resolve the painful situation of those persons who have been abducted. I take this opportunity once again to call for the release of these poor brothers of ours who have been abducted.

The Chamber of Commerce has also asked for a climate of security and calmness because management has had to confront a series of pressures of diverse nature⁵. I want to say that it is just to recognize these pressures but also it is necessary to look for just solutions that do not favor only one side of these conflicts. What does management offer in order to establish a true peace based on social justice? True peace is dynamic and involves progress and well-being and has a price and this price necessitates mutual sacrifice. Just as I ask the workers to avoid unjust pressure, so I ask management to seek just solutions and that there be a sense of justice in these interactions that are so vital and important in our country.

In regard to the Year of the Child we express our solidarity with those ideas and initiatives that sincerely seek the better well-being of the child and above all we demand responsibility from adults. It is incredible to read in a study that was published in the United States that 40% of the world's populations is deprived of basic human rights.

Family members and friends have denounced the arrest of Mr. Rigoberto Jovel that was carried out by the National Guard last Friday. I am concerned about this event because I know that Mr. Jovel has had his right hand amputated and is unable to move his left hand. He has undergone several abdominal operations and at this time has a hernia which makes any mistreatment of him in this situation very dangerous. In the name of humanity and charity I ask that he be promptly brought before the courts or released.

I also unite myself with the pain and sorrow that I saw during recent days as the wife of Professor Efraín Arévalo continues to seek the whereabouts of her husband. He disappeared on November 5, 1977 when he came to San Salvador looking for his son, José Efraín who, after being tortured, was left in the emergency room of El Hospital Rosales. I believe that the National Guard, entering into a new more human phase, has knowledge of these sufferings.

Various labor problems have been brought to the attention of our Legal Aid group and you are able to listen to this news on our radio program on Thursday at 5:30pm. I only want to mention here that a problem had arisen in the Archdiocesan Office of Caritas and that it was resolved with the proper legal compensation. I want to state that there was no pressure from the union that now seeks to take credit for this solution⁶. The Labor Department is a witness to the legality and the spontaneity in which the Archdiocesan Office of Caritas has resolved this problem.

I want to announce that in order to serve our community in a better way we have opened an office here in the Cathedral that will distribute pastoral publications at a low cost. Here you are able to acquire the literature that we are offering (included in this material will be the publication of the homilies that are proclaimed here in the Cathedral). I want to thank those persons who are interested in making the message proclaimed here more widely known. I have no other intention than to make known the true message of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Pope is the object of an unusual enthusiasm here in America and this homily that makes reference to us as a prophetic, priestly and royal people gives us pleasure to see the head of the People of God, the Pontiff, come to America. He opens for us the doors of hope and joy and enthusiasm. This week his teaching has been most fruitful: he reminded women that maternity is the vocation that distinguishes them⁷. It is admirable to see the Pope when he met with a group of street cleaners before entering the Vatican and he said: *I am happier to be here with the street cleaners than there inside the Vatican.*

The Pope also rejected religion as an opium of the people⁸. Here our newspapers⁹ have naturally published this news with much pleasure because they believe that the Pope was referring only to Communism. Communism has said that religion is the opium of the people and we have continually said that this is a lie. The most beautiful testimony to this fact can be seen here in the Archdiocese where we experience that as the Church becomes more Christian and committed she becomes less the opium of the people but more awake and precisely because the Church is more awake she suffers persecution. It is good to remember here that among the many documents that the bishops are receiving as preparation material for the meeting in Puebla, there is a letter from the Guaranies who praise the Christian religion that they have come to know because they no longer hear preaching about conformity as before and also there is no talk about revolution. Rather a critical conscience has been awakened in them and from the perspective of the gospel they know that tremendous social inequalities, situations in which some people have everything and others should conform themselves with having nothing --- they know that this situation cannot be

God's will. Thus we say that both communism and capitalism want religion to be an opium of the people because they want people to be asleep. When the Pope says that religion should not be the opium of the people he is denouncing both communism that wants to separate religious meaning from the life of the people as well as capitalism that desires to manipulate the Church for her.

We are happy to see that the Pope, through his efforts at mediation between Chile and Argentina, has been able to avoid war. This fact gives us hope that God will not allow the awakened Church to fail. Let us trust in the Church! Let us gather around this Church that is in solidarity with the people! Bolivia is also considering asking for the mediation of the Pope to obtain an entrance to the sea.

My sisters and brothers, I want to ask for your prayers during these days when Puebla becomes the center of the pastoral activity of Latin America. On January 27th this meeting will be inaugurated. Many people are already arriving there. I want to remind you that this event in Puebla is not something that is unique in the history of Latin America. In 1582, in the sixteenth century, the first Provincial Council took place in Lima, Peru; again in 1585 the pastors of Latin America met in Mexico and naturally those times were very distinct from today. In our time, Pope Leo XIII at the end of the last century called all the bishops of Latin America to Rome to celebrate the First Plenary Council of Latin America. The objective of this meeting was to transmit to the bishops the doctrine and the discipline of the First Vatican Council that was celebrated in the year 1870. More recently, in 1958 in Rio de Janeiro, the First General Conference of Latin America was held (this meeting was convoked by what today is known as CELAM – the Episcopal Conference of Latin America). As all of you might remember the second meeting took place in 1968 in Medellin. It is a shame that ten years have passed since that meeting and still many people are unaware of the teaching of this assembly. Today we are at the doors of the third meeting that will take place in Puebla. All of our history, from the beginning of the evangelization process here in Latin America to the present moment will be the theme of our gathering, evangelization in the present and the future of Latin America. This should lead us to give thanks to God for the fact that there have always been pastors concerned about an evangelization that is attuned to the needs of our time.

Among the documents that arrived we have received a very interesting document from the bishops of Ecuador. Because of a lack of time I am not going to read this document but I want you to know that they refer to the danger of the doctrine of National Security that is supported by the military regimes. They also say that the members of the military have become a new privileged caste among our people and that Puebla cannot neglect this problem but must give this serious consideration as one of the serious problems that the process of evangelization must confront. Here in our country we want to make this warning in time so that the members of the military do not form a privileged caste here but are mindful of the situation of the majority of people and remember that the majority of them come from the poorer social class of people in our country and therefore they should be concerned about placing their prestige, power, and intelligence at the service of a society formed according to the heart of God.

We move toward the altar with the understanding that we are a baptized people and that through this baptism Christ has made us participants in his messianic dignity and wants this dignity to shine forth in the midst of the great social problems of our nation. So be it.

¹ This letter of 12 January 1979, signed by Mons. Romero and 84 priests of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, was published in the section “Solidaridad” of *Orientación*, 21 January 1979.

² See *La Iglesia y las organizaciones políticas populares*, (6 August 1978), p. 32.

³ *The ritual for Baptism*, anointing with chrism.

⁴ Dr Manuel Antonio Bonilla was freed 12 January 1979.

⁵ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 12 January 1979.

⁶ See *El Mundo*, 10 January 1979.

⁷ See John Paul II in the General Audience of 10 January 1979, *Osservatore Romano*, 14 January 1979.

⁸ See Allocution of John Paul II on the Feast of the Epiphany (7 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 14 January 1979.

⁹ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Diario de Hoy*, 8 January 1979.

Marginal References (1) Mk 1,13; (2) Mk 1,8; (3) Mk 1,9; (4) Ac 10,34-48; (5) Mk 1,8; (6) Mk 1,8; (7) Mk 1,10-11; (8) Is 42,3; (9) Is 42,3; (10) Ac 10,38; (11) Heb 4,15; (12) Lk 1,31; (13) 1S 16,1-13; (14) Lk 1,33; (15) Mk 10,47; (16) Jn 4,25; (17) Jn 4,26; (18) Jn 6,15; (19) Jn 18,36; (20) QP 11; (21) Jn 7,16; (22) Jn 18,37; (23) Ac 10; (24) Heb 10,34; (25) Mk 1,8; (26) Lk 1,35; (27) Jn 17,21.