

CHRIST, AN ALWAYS NEW WORD FOR THE CHURCH

**Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 18, 1979**

Isaiah 43:13-19, 21-22, 24-25

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

Mark 2:1-12

My beloved sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience.

As I return to this Cathedral that the Lord has entrusted to me in order to guide this Archdiocese spiritually, I want to express a special word of love and gratitude to all of you who do not follow these words and thoughts because they are the expression of a human person but who see in all of this God's revelation that has been shared with you even in the absence of the Archbishop¹. I received a letter that told me that many devout women and men participated in the celebrations in the Cathedral and that one could experience the presence of the Spirit. The letter concluded by saying: *at the end of our celebration we extend our hands to Father Fabian, just as we do with you and we do this with the same faith in Jesus who is proclaimed to us.* I feel exactly what Saint Paul speaks about today: *for the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was proclaimed to you by us, Silvanus and Timothy and me, was not "yes" and "no," but "yes" has been in him* (1) --- this is what is of interest to us. This is also what fills me with joy and I want to awaken in people a desire to follow and an admiration not of me, a poor, fragile, mortal person like all of you, but of the Immortal one, the Eternal one, the One who enables us to have a profound faith. I want to thank you for the cordial reception that you gave me Friday when I returned to the Archdiocese. I also want to express a special thanks to the authorities at the airport who pleasantly surprised me with a very kind deference. May God reward you!

With the help of many bishops I was in contact with communities from different parts of our Continent and because of the presence of other bishops who were special delegates in our meeting, I came to know about the Christian communities in Europe and Africa. Therefore, at this time, as I reflect on the Word of God in my community, I want to compare the life of the Church here with the life of the Church in those other countries. I want to place my words within the universal context of the gospel message that the bishops, gathered together in Puebla, proclaimed to all the people of Latin America, including people who might not share our Christian faith but who are people of good will. From the context of Latin America and with a voice that gives witness to the one living Church, a voice that speaks to the whole world.

It seem that today's readings are most opportune to create a Biblical framework for this message that without a doubt is being proclaimed today, Sunday, in many cathedrals of Latin America. The bishops who have now departed from Puebla to their dioceses are proclaiming, more or less, the same words that I want to share with you. These beautiful and incarnated readings that are inculturated in the Latin American reality and that are taken from the Sacred Scriptures provide us with the Biblical framework for the wonderful message² that I want to be a call to faith, hope, and charity. The first reflection that I want to share with you this

morning is the following: Christ is the always new Word of the Church. I do not want these sermons to become some sad remembrance because as Jesus said: *there are people who have ears but do not hear* (2). I rejoice when people have understood and captured what I always want to say here. I repeat here the words of Saint Paul: *I preach only Jesus Christ and him crucified* (3). This is the eternal message of the Church that was proclaimed in the first reading seven centuries before Christ when Isaiah said: *Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new* (4). Isaiah proclaimed a redemption from sin, a redemption that would be fulfilled in the fullness of time: in Christ. Today Christ appears in the gospel with power to forgive sins and lead people along the paths of true liberation. This is the Christ of Saint Paul with whom we are going to create this homily that leads us to the altar. This is our *Amen!* In Christ let us express our full confidence in God (5). God, in the person of Christ, becomes the “yes” of God’s love for us. Christ is the always new word of the Church: First, Christ is a Word who becomes incarnated in history (Message of Puebla); Second, Christ is the Word that illuminates history (the theology of history); Third, Christ is the Word who guarantees hope in our history.

Christ is the Word who becomes incarnated in history

If one desires to preach without any reference to the historical situation in which one lives, then one is not preaching the gospel. Many desire a preaching that is so spiritual that it would allow sinners to remain in their present state, a preaching that would not call people idolaters even though they bow down before the god of money and power. A preaching that does not denounce the sinful realities during the time of reflection on the gospel is not a proclamation of the gospel. There are many adulterers and false prophets. During these times of conflict there are many people who have sold their words and their pens and publish lies.

When I claimed my briefcase in the customs area at the airport the day before yesterday, someone said: *there goes the truth!* These few words filled me with optimism because I did not carry contraband or lies in my suitcase, rather I carried the truth. I traveled to Puebla in order to learn more about the truth. A news reporter asked me: *People say that after Puebla you are going to change your style of preaching, what do you say about that?* I told him: *The truth does not have to change. The truth is perhaps refined and always spoken with our limitations. The truth is the particular words of a human person who has a certain style and way of being but who is always an instrument of God in the events of history.*

My beloved sisters and brothers, today’s readings offer us an example of all of this. The first reading is Isaiah’s reflection on the history of his time. The Israelites were prisoners after their exile in Babylon. In the beautiful chapter of Isaiah God says that he is going to release all the prisoners from their chains and give them freedom. Isaiah sings of this return and extends an invitation to all people with this beautiful hymn: *Remember not the events of the pasts, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new* (6). With the image of rivers that spring up in the desert the prophet tells us that God is able to do that which is impossible when people place their trust in God. He speaks about a return. In Babylon, the Israelites felt as though everything had been destroyed and many lost hope, but there was a consciousness among the remnant of Israel. There is always this awareness and it is like a remnant of hope. This is the consciousness that the prophets nourished.

The historical times are different but God is always the living God. For this reason, my sisters and brothers, the history of Israel which is nostalgically remembered --- the history of God freeing people from slavery in Egypt and leading them through the desert under the

leadership of Moses --- this history was a history of great illusions but the people said: *everything has been destroyed and once again we find ourselves in captivity and there is no hope*. Isaiah said: *those wonderful acts are things of the past --- forget about them. Even greater acts will come about* (7). The God of the history in Babylon is not the God of the history in Egypt. This is another chapter but the same living God. This is a community reflection. It is beautiful to see a people, like the people I see here in the Cathedral and that I know are listening to me on their radios, reflecting together on their hope. It is the God of Egypt, the God of Babylon, the God of the first Christians, the God who arrived in the fullness of time, Christ, who also experiences the pain of his people.

These chapters in Saint Mark's gospel, chapters two and three, describe an ideological struggle between Christ, who proclaims a new salvation prefigured in the time of Isaiah and guaranteed in the curing of the paralytic as a sign, a sacrament of the true salvation from sin, and the religious practices of his time. *Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Yours sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'* (8). Since the forgiveness of sins cannot be observed with the naked eye, God desired to give a sign to the sick man: *Rise* (9). Thus, God can heal just as easily as forgive sins and the argument as related in the gospel is no longer valid and it becomes clear that forgiveness is the correct response to the question that Jesus poses. Indeed Jesus offers the paralytic the gift of salvation and this man experienced a clean conscience and this gave him greater joy than having his body cured of the physical pain and deformities.

The gospel of Saint Mark was not written as a biography of Christ but was written as the Church's reflection which Saint Peter preached in Rome and then, Saint Mark, Peter's secretary, put this reflection into writing. Thus the present Pope, John Paul II, when he took possession of the Lateran Cathedral, stated: *The Bishop of Rome today is the successor of the bishop of Rome who came from Galilee*³. Those who comment on the gospel of Saint Peter, written by Saint Mark, discover that the gospel was not written in an orderly way but rather it contains an application of the life and the doctrine of the Savior to particular events of that community. We see, then, that the gospel is a concrete reflection of the community and this occurs in such a way, my sisters and brothers, that the life of Christ is not written down as biography but is reflected upon by the primitive Church in order to communicate this later to the universal Church. This is a beautiful thought to reflect on. Today if we read the four gospels, let us be mindful of the fact that we are doing the same thing: reflecting on the life and the presence of Christ in the world. This was done by the primitive communities and is also done by the Ecclesial Base Communities and is done here during the proclamation of the homily when people who gather in the Cathedral are attentive to and reflect upon the Word of God. I am the first one who is moved by this attention and reflection on the Word of God.

We are reflecting on the life of a divine presence among us. Therefore, the gospels do not simply describe the events that are narrated. For example, here the gospel is not only the narration of the healing of the paralytic but we also find here a human community, a community that called themselves Christians --- and this community reflected upon the healing of the paralytic. When Saint Mark says: *But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth ...* (10), without a doubt these words of Jesus were not only spoken to his enemies, the Pharisees, but were also reflected on by the Christian community and enabled them to see how the miraculous healing from illness could also be a sign of a divine presence among them, a divine presence that forgives.

Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians describes a particular situation. Saint Paul could not go there on a second visit and so he writes them this second letter which has many

characteristics of a true letter: familiar, simple and a little disordered. He speaks about his feelings and defends himself against certain murmurings that were being whispered in Corinth: *he said he was going to come but now he is not coming*. Therefore he responds: *As God is faithful, our word to you is not "yes" and "no," ... but "yes" has been in him (11)*.

My sisters and brothers, we follow this line of God's presence that began in Egypt and continued during the Babylonian captivity and the time of Jesus and the apostles and is continued in our time in our present day communities. We open our hearts to receive a message that is applied to our history in Latin America, a message that was written by the bishops who gathered together in Puebla. The bishops stated: *On our continent, sealed with the sign of Christian hope and overburdened with problems, "God shed an immense light that shines on the rejuvenated face of his Church"*. The bishops cited these words from Medellin to say later that Puebla is another event of the Church and those who want to find a contradiction between Puebla and Medellin have forgotten that the same God of history who ten years ago inspired the Message of Medellin is now, in 1979, inspiring the Message of Puebla.

It is the same God of our history who is revealed in this beautiful message that is made more specific by certain beloved brother bishops who desired to enter into a deeper solidarity with the Diocese of San Salvador. They gave me this message to communicate to you: *Through you we wish to direct our words to all the People of God in your Archdiocese and to all the poor persons of your country to whom you proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in their present situation. As you wrote in your Second Pastoral Letter, they are the Body of Christ in history. Through your voice they have been present here in Puebla (you, my sisters and brothers, were present there!). We know that they are worthy people, dignified through honorable work that enables them to maintain their lives. We also know that this is a people who have suffered oppression and repression and as a Christian you have continued to say, "Enough!" "This cannot be!" We know that this is a people, whether they are aware of this or not is not important, who are the living and suffering Servant of Yahweh today. With their pain and as they hand over their lives because of their commitment to human dignity, they make real the unity that bears within it the seeds of new life for today and tomorrow.*⁴

Events of the week

This is our history and the presence of God in our history. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, as I return from Puebla I am very interested in the reality of our particular history. Indeed the history of our people in El Salvador is very tense. There has not been time to deepen my knowledge about the events that have occurred during these days. As I read our newspaper, *Orientación*⁵, I have seen that the Human Rights Commission and our Legal Aide Association has taken up the case of Manuel Antonio Rodas, 29 years old, a businessman who was arrested in Usulután and then brought to the Hospital in Usulután where it was obvious that he had been beaten. Thanks to God his case has been brought before the courts but there is still reason to fear for his life.

I also read in our Archdiocesan newspaper⁶ that José Macario Miranda Mejía was arrested by the National Guard while he was driving on the road that leads to Zacatecoluca. His family has said that he is not connected with any political organization. He is simply a worker doing construction work and now he has become involved in the case of some mysterious house close to the place where he was arrested.

Our Archdiocesan newspaper provides us with information about some labor conflicts.

People in the community of San Miguel have lived a week of terror. Professor Oliverio Gómez and José Leocardio Umanzor Guevara, an employee at Hospital San Juan de Dios --- both of these men were arrested and assassinated. This has created an atmosphere of fear in the community. Many people have spoken to us about the indiscriminate searches and arrests that have occurred as a result of different military operations.

We are also aware of the fact that the terror has not ceased in Tecoluca. Even though San Miguel and San Vicente are not part of my diocese, but a human and patriotic feeling leads me to experience as my own the pain of these citizens for their loved ones.

I was pleased to see reference in the February 12th edition of *El Diario de Hoy* to the indiscriminate searches because many young people are unjustly arrested and the way they are treated by the Security Forces creates in them an image of repression. These situations of terror do more harm than good.

My attention was called to the fact that two bodies were discovered on the shores of Lake Ilopango. In the February 15th edition of the newspaper *El Mundo* it was reported: *the judge said that both bodies were undressed in order to examine the bodies and establish the fact that there were wounds on their bodies. No one lives near the place where these bodies were found and in order to bury these men handcuffs had to be removed from their wrists. These handcuffs were removed with keys that were held by several members of the National Guard. What a coincidence that the keys of the National Guard were able to open the handcuffs on the wrists of the deceased!*

It is painful to have to read about the discovery of the body of a student on the beach of San Diego. The forensic report states that this student did not die as a result of drowning.

Two news items that I read about in this week's newspapers filled with me with a little hope. In light of the violence that has been unleashed in our midst, the Legislative Assembly has asked that the Defense Ministry be questioned about these matters, that is, questioned about what happened in El Despertar and other specific cases⁷. It seems to me that that is to call someone to justice and thus so many abuses and crimes will not continue to go unpunished. Even though the people who commit these crimes might be dressed in military uniforms they have an obligation to give an accounting of their actions and if they have committed these crimes then they should be duly punished.

I was also very pleased when I read in the newspaper that the government was about to undertake an action that was social in nature. The government announced that 37,561 parcels of land would be distributed by ISTA. The President said: *I want to make it very clear that the focus that we are giving to the agrarian problem does not consist in simply distributing land. We are aware of the fact that the solution to this problem does not reside in such a simple response. We want to elevate the life of the families who live in the rural area in an integral way. We want to better this sector of our society in their human conditions*⁸. Blessed be God! This is also what the Church asks for and she offers her full collaboration from her evangelical perspective. John Paul II told the bishops in Puebla: *you must always make the social doctrine of the Church actual*⁹. Even though the Church cannot resolve these problems with any technical expertise, she is able to share the light of the gospel and comment on the human promotion that has begun: *Hopefully the distribution of land will not simply favor those who belong to some political party. We hope that this will be an act of true justice and promotion of the campesinos and that political affiliation will not have any*

bearing on this matter. We hope that the distribution of land will be done in such a way that it shows respect to the people of El Salvador who are so noble, especially in the rural areas.

Life of the Church

The Church that gathers together to reflect on the Word of God is also mindful of her intimate joys. Here I wish to speak about an event that gives me great joy and that I will celebrate this afternoon. Here I speak about the very unique form of human promotion that Mother Juanita has developed among the *campesinos*. She has prepared a group of people to bring communion to their communities and this afternoon at 12:00pm in Telnique I am going to affirm this group in their ministry. I hope that people there are listening to me because I have heard that threats have been made against the people who come together for this celebration. I have been told that perhaps it would be better not to go there since something might occur there. If the Church is free to develop her ministers, her servants of the people, then why would we not go there? I am not going to do anything evil there and I invite those who have denounced this ceremony to participate in this celebration in Telnique. You will see that this is dealing with a noble service of the Church that desires to bring the Bread of Life to those communities where it is difficult for the priest to celebrate the Eucharist on a regular basis. I congratulate Mother Juanita and her catechists for this human promotion that perfectly corresponds to the liturgical renewal and the renewal of the life of our Church.

I have had the pleasure of greeting the Superior General of the Congregation of the Assumption. She, together with her Council, is spending some time among us and I have had the pleasure of speaking with her about the good ministry that the Sisters do here in our Diocese.

This afternoon, I will have the pleasure of seeing the Superior General of the Belgian Sisters who work with us here. I will speak with her about the work of Mother Chepita. She is a religious woman who has given her life and her heart to the community of San Antonio Abad --- a community where many tragic events have occurred, events which have unjustly involved her¹⁰. She deserves the full support of the Archdiocese and I beg Mother General to allow her to continue to minister here because this community would be orphaned if she were to go to some other place.

There will be a celebration in Tontacatepeque where the people will celebrate the centennial of the establishment of this city. I have asked Father Casares to represent the Archbishop. I want to congratulate the people of this city and I ask Father Casares to extend the Lord's blessings to the people who gather together for this celebration.

When I arrived home from Puebla I discovered that many false interpretations had been given to our meeting in Puebla and the Pope's discourses. I am happy that I told you before I left that you should have recourse to your sense of discernment and maturity which you are acquiring and that therefore you should not believe everything that you read in the newspapers or see on television or listen to on the radio. The media is very much manipulated and expresses a certain point of view --- even the Pope's discourses and the sincere gathering of the Bishops in Puebla, even these events are distorted in order to support the injustices and the disorders that neither the Pope nor Puebla could ever tolerate.

As we gather together in this Archdiocese and as I communicate to you the message of the sacred Word, I want to remind you of the words that the bishops proclaimed in Puebla: *If we focus our gaze on our Latin American region, what do we see? No deep scrutiny is*

necessary. *The truth is that there is an ever increasing distance between the many who have little and the few who have much.* These words refer to Pontifical documents that define perfectly our reality here in El Salvador. The bishops stated: *The truth is that there is an ever increasing distance between the many who have little and the few who have much.* In El Salvador we could say that there is an ever increasing distance between the many who have nothing and the few who have everything. This is not communism but these are the words of Puebla and the Popes, the words that John Paul proclaimed in Santo Domingo, Oaxaca, Monterrey and Guadalajara: *A duty of the present Church is to serve humankind and their human rights.* In Santo Domingo the Holy Father stated: *By rights we understand the right of the campesino to own land, the right of workers to organize themselves and their right to have these organizations respected as well as their right to a just salary*¹¹.

When we listen to the Pope's words that were not published here in our country, we can think: the Pope has suffered the same lot as the Archbishop of San Salvador --- they have tried to silence him and marginalize him when he speaks about the Church's duty. But the Bishops in Puebla have given us great support when they say that Christianity still has to take great strides and that it is correct for the Church to confront this reality: *The values of our culture are threatened. Fundamental human rights are being violated* . These are words from the Message of Puebla.

Among the different realities the Message mentions: *For the most obvious and self-evident arguments, human beings demand an end to acts of physical and moral violence, the abuses of power, the manipulation of money, and the abuse of sex. In short, they demand compliance with the Lord's precepts because all that infringes upon human dignity somehow wounds God too: "All things are yours ... and you are Christ's and Christ is God's"*.

In their Message, the bishops were mindful of the following: *Our pastoral preoccupations on behalf of the most lowly, impregnated with human realism, do not propose to exclude the other representatives of the social corpus in which we live from our thoughts or our hearts. On the contrary, they are serious and timely warnings designed to make sure that the distances do not grow greater, that the sins do not multiply, and that the Spirit of God does not withdraw from the Latin American family. And because we believe that the re-examination and revision of people's religious and moral behavior should be reflected in the political and economic processes of our countries, we invite all, regardless of class, to accept and take up the cause of the poor as if they were accepting and taking up their own cause, the cause of Christ himself: "I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least sisters or brothers, you did it for me". (12)*

Here we have the best answer that in this collegial document of Puebla is offered to people who do not understand our option for the poor. When we speak about this option we do not exclude the rich, rather we call upon the rich to experience as their own the problems of those persons who are poor. We call upon them to study with the government and in dialogue with experts and other persons the way to escape this dead end street in which the people of El Salvador find themselves. They have an obligation to study and use all the means at their disposal in order to resolve these problems and they should do this as though they were resolving their own personal problems. These problems will not be resolved by sending all our money to other countries, rather our capital must function with a true social meaning. The Pope has spoken some beautiful words about this matter: *There is a social mortgage on all private property.*¹² We can now see how the message of Puebla is the history of our people.

This history needs a theology, a theology of history

Our history needs a theology and this theology of history must enable people to find God, even in the trivial and specific events of our lives, even in the criminal acts that occur in our midst. After speaking about our reality, the second thought that today's Biblical readings and the Episcopal Message of Puebla extend to us this morning is a theological reflection. The theology of history is a science that opens up many areas to us. Pope John Paul II said: *We must look at the signs of the time in the light of the gospel*. God speaks to us in history. God cries out in the mist of all that is good and beautiful in the human person and cries out in the midst of all that is ugly and evil in society and the human person.

What do we discover in today's Biblical readings? In the first reading God invites us not to seek glory in the joys of the past but to trust in the One who can make things new. We are told that God does not repeat things. It is truly marvelous to ponder: what is the new thing that God has planned for the history of El Salvador? Let us believe God in the same way that the people who were exiled in Babylon believed the prophet who spoke to them about freedom that seemed impossible at the time but that became a reality because God is true to his word.

God judged the people who were exiled in Babylon. In today's first reading God denounced sin. There is a powerful dialogue in the first reading in which God, through the prophet Isaiah, speaks to the people of Israel: *You burdened me with yours sins and wearied me with your crimes. You are trying to make me your servant because you want me to do your will and you do not do my will. Therefore I have called you to judgment* (13). The love of God is more powerful than the ungratefulness of his people. In the first reading we are presented with a judgment, a trial in which God judges his people and says: *Would you have me remember, have us come to trial? I forgive you --- look at my good will and love* (14). This reality enables us to trust in God.

Lord, our society here in El Salvador is guilty of many sins. We have desired to make you our servant. We have desired to make your Church despicable. When I returned from Puebla I became aware of so many abuses that if I were more sensitive to these things I might say: *How ungrateful! I proclaim the liberation of God and people respond to me with paid propaganda campaigns and offensive words and vulgar commentaries*. Yet none of this is important because God lifts up his voice before the people and cries out (15): *You are wearying me! But know that I forgive you because I also love you, because my cause and the salvation that I proclaim are so noble that you should not focus on the trash in the street when before you there is a whole new history*.

What other things do we find in today's readings? Here we find ourselves in the very heart of the gospel. When this reflection on the healing of the paralytic becomes the reflection of the Christian community, we find the following words on Jesus' lips: *I have seen your faith; your sins are forgiven* (16)

Here we can sum up the message of the Bishops of Latin America: faith and conversion. God needs people to change their ways and it is for this reason that we have preached to the rich and the poor. We neither conceal the sins of the poor nor are we unmindful of the virtues of the rich. Both rich and poor are sinners and need to change their ways. But the poor, in their indigent situation, are more open to conversion and more easily experience the need for God. Therefore, if we really want to learn the meaning of conversion and faith, if we want to learn what it means to trust other people, then it is necessary to become poor or, at the very

least, it is necessary to make the cause of the poor our own. When we are poor in spirit, when we realize that money and politics and power are of no use, then we can experience that we are nothing without God. When we experience this need for God then we can also come to understand the meaning of conversion and faith.

In our Message we spoke about the theme of conversion in words, in which we, as pastors, accused ourselves. In our message we state: *We not only want to help others to self-conversion, but also to be converted along with them, so that our dioceses, parishes, institutions, communities, and religious congregations will provide an incentive for living the Gospel rather than being an obstacle to it ... But we recognize that we are still far from living all that we preach. For all our faults and limitations we pastors, too, ask pardon of God, our brothers and sisters in the faith, and humanity.*

We believe that we have spoken these words with total sincerity. My sisters and brothers, the person who denounces must be willing to be denounced. From the beginning I have said that I willingly accept constructive criticism that ultimately makes me a better person. Therefore, I also ask forgiveness of all those persons to whom I have not been able to communicate the Christian message as I should. But I want you to know that this is not the result of pride or ill will or any distortion of the gospel that I am commanded to preach to this Archdiocese that has been entrusted to me.

From the moment that Christ appeared in history, from the time that the prophets proclaimed the reality of conversion, from the time that this reality was lived out in the Church (just as we have lived this reality in Puebla) --- this need for conversion which the Pastor lives and proclaims as his personal need and the need of all those who together with him wish to build up the authentic Church of Jesus Christ --- this is the core of the message of the Word of God that was proclaimed in our midst. The word of the Church and the attitude of authentic pastors can be nothing else but that. We are not God but fragile human beings, with limitations and we also have a need to change our ways. My sisters and brothers, believe me I want to go in front of everyone in this procession of conversion that is being undertaken by the people of our Diocese. My heart was filled with joy when I was in Mexico and spoke with people from El Salvador who were now living in different parts of that country. These people were very interested in the history of their people and they were filled with greater confidence and love for their Church, and had greater faith in the Church and the gospel that is proclaimed here in El Salvador. For this reason I cannot change my style of preaching but rather seek a greater union with the gospel so that I can more perfectly call out to all people: *Change your ways so that Christ might behold our faith and have mercy on us!*

This civilization of love is a process of conversion that cries out to the concrete events of our history and speaks with words that appear violent but are in reality words of the Church that call sinners to conversion. For example, the bishops proclaim in Puebla: *We invite you to be self-sacrificing constructors of the civilization of love.* There follows a lengthy commentary on these words that are the focal point of our message. Therefore let us all be constructors of this civilization of love! This phrase was first used by Paul VI and his words are so brilliant! What is this civilization of love? The civilization of love means that we all take seriously the command of Jesus: *In this will people know that you are my disciples if you love one another as I have loved you* (11).

The civilization of love rejects subjugation and any dependence prejudicial to the dignity of Latin America. Look at how the Church is holy in her desire to change her ways and proud to proclaim the dignity of the human person because she knows that this treasure is not hers,

but rather because men and women reflect the image of God. As a result of this the Church must defend the image of God as reflected in all women and men. In Puebla the bishops stated: *We do not accept the status of satellite to any country in the world, or to any country's ideology. We wish to live fraternally with all nations because we repudiate any sort of narrow, irreducible nationalism. It is time that Latin America advised the developed nations not to immobilize us, not to put obstacles in the way of our progress and not to exploit us. Instead they would do well to help us magnanimously to overcome the barriers of our underdevelopment, while respecting our culture, our principles, our sovereignty, our identity, and our natural resources.* This is the spirit of the Church. When we are denounced as people who defame our country, people forget that we are reflecting on the reality of our country so that others will respect the values of our people. Let us grow together as sisters and brothers in this spirit! Let us grow together as members of this universal family!

When we speak about the civilization of love we want to proclaim the fact that *love repudiates violence, egotism, wastefulness, exploitation and moral follies.* To those who do not believe in love and instead have placed their trust in violence and terrorism, the bishops in Puebla cry out: *At first glance the civilization of love seems to be an expression lacking the strength needed to confront the grave problems of our age. But we can assure you that no stronger word exists in the Christian lexicon. It is one with the very force of Christ. If we do not believe in love, then neither do we believe in HIM who says, "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you." (18) The civilization of love proposes to all the evangelical treasure of national and international reconciliation. There is no gesture more sublime than pardon. The person who does not know how to pardon will not be pardoned.*

This is the call that the Church proclaims from Puebla: all people are invited to build the civilization of love to make our history, viewed with an evangelical meaning, a forward movement that no one can take away from us and an optimism that can never be diminished. My sisters and brothers, like the prophet's words proclaiming to Babylon's captives times of joy and freedom, the Church's word calling to love, reconciliation and pardon can seem like a mockery when others hold to violence, kidnapping and terrorism. But the Church will never take that path, and whatever is said to that effect is false. It is a slander that only enhances the glory of the Church's persecution.

Christ and his Spirit guarantees our hope in history

I conclude with this thought that is also one of the ideas expressed in the Word of God today: Christ and the Spirit of God, infused in the people of God, is the guarantee of our hope. We said that we were going to put some final brushstrokes on our reflection on the second reading.

Saint Paul suffered in a way that was common to all the apostles: he endured criticism, just as Jesus did. The gospel passage that recounts the healing of the paralytic is part of chapters two and three that describe the ideological struggle between Jesus and the Pharisees. In the third chapter the outcome of this struggle is proclaimed with the following words: *The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death (19).* If someone ran the risk of having an attempt made on their life, it was Jesus. Yet Jesus remained faithful and was able to say from the cross: *It is finished (20).* Jesus experienced attempts against his life and attempts to eliminate him --- attempts which eventually became a reality.

Saint Paul had to experience difficult times when he was ridiculed in Corinth and accused of making his plans in accordance with human considerations: *Today “yes”, tomorrow “no”! We proclaim Christ who is the eternal “yes” of God* (21). What a beautiful name for Christ: the *yes* of God’s promises! The *yes* in whom God has promised such unheard-of things as a new salvation, forgiveness of sins, a call to all persons to form one people, to live together in one love. God does not repent of his promises but fulfills these promises in Christ even when this Son of his love is nailed to the cross because if this is a necessary condition to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promises, then Christ is willing to be crucified. Sacrifice is the sign of God’s great promises and it is for this reason that Saint Paul says: *For however many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him* (22). This morning, my beloved sisters and brothers, let us value anew this word that is used so frequently that perhaps it has lost its meaning. For when we say *Amen* in our liturgy we are making an act of faith. How beautiful to say: *For however many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him; therefore, the Amen from us also goes through him to God for glory.*

Christ is the *amen* of humanity to God. In Christ the hopes of all people become an *Amen* because in Christ the promise of God becomes *yes*. Christ is the person who stands with people who are sinful and in need and stands with societies that are discouraged and without hope --- these groups look for the hope of a God who still loves us. Indeed, this is the definition that Saint Paul gives to Christ: *Christ continues being YES* (an adaptation of 2 Corinthians 1:19). This is a Greek grammatical construction that refers to a verb form that does not exist in the Spanish language --- what occurred in the past continues to be a reality forever --- Christ lives and lives in his Church and lives in Latin America.

The Message of the Bishops reflects this attitude of Saint Paul: placing all their trust in Christ they want to awaken in people the same hope. They say: *Our contribution ... but what do we have to offer you in the face of the grave and complicated questions of our epoch?* Many times I have been asked here in El Salvador: *What can we do? Is there no solution to our present situation?* Filled with hope and faith (not only a divine faith but also a human faith), believing in women and men, I say: *Yes, there is a way to leave this situation and be careful not to cut off these exits.* What is the way to escape this situation? In Puebla we as bishops stated: *How can we collaborate in fostering the well-being of our Latin American peoples when some persist in maintaining their privileges at any price, others feel downtrodden and beaten, and the rest are initiating actions to promote their survival and the clear affirmation of their rights.* My sisters and brothers, this is a grave situation for it is as though the hearts of people become hardened and defend only selfish positions.

The Church has a contribution to offer. *What do we have to offer you? Like Peter, when he was approached at the gate of the temple by a cripple, we note the magnitude of the structural challenges in our real-life situation and say: We have neither silver nor gold, but what we have we give you! In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise and walk!* (23). In our message we state: *Here the poverty of Peter becomes wealth, and his wealth is called Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was put to death and rose again, and through his divine Spirit he is ever present in the apostolic college and the nascent communities formed under his guidance ... What do we have to offer you? In the inaugural address of his pontificate, John Paul II offers us an incisive and admirable response, presenting Christ as the answer of universal salvation. Speaking in Saint Peter’s Square, he said: “Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors to Jesus Christ! Open up to his saving power the doors of States, economic and political systems, the broad fields of culture, civilization, and development!”¹³* This is what we have to offer.

Once again we are mindful of this Message in which the bishops affirm that the task of the Church is not to offer technical solutions. The Church cannot therefore identify herself with any political solution. Politicians can study political solutions; sociologists can study sociological solutions and economists have material that will allow them to study in El Salvador economic solutions. The Church contributes one value to this process: hope in women and men. The Church speaks to politicians, technicians, and sociologists; the Church speaks to all the rich and all those who have in their hands the keys to these solutions: *Do not become discouraged! Open all these areas to the doctrine of Christ! The Church does not seek some form of hegemony but wants to serve and inspire. Keep this in mind!* For this reason we ask forgiveness especially of those who are not mindful of us because we realize that our human mediation has been defective. But do not focus on us but rather look to Christ, the One whom you and I have to look to as our hope. Thus, Saint Paul concludes today's reading with the words: *But the one who gives us security with you in Christ and who anointed us is God; he has also put his seal upon us and placed his Spirit in our hearts, a spirit that has made us capable of having thoughts about God and has given us the dignity of being able to call God, Father* (24). A father is not pleased when one of his children becomes lost.

This is the great hope that the Church nourishes and that in this Sunday's Biblical readings has provided the framework that, in the name of all the bishops who gathered together in Puebla, has allowed me to present you with the call to hope. We are now going to draw near to that Life which from the altar gives us the witness of an undying love. That eternal *Amen* of women and men and the eternal *Yes* of God is alive on our altars. The soul of our Church is alive in our people.

In the Message to the Peoples of Latin America there is a beautiful phrase: *The wealth of men and women in Latin America is their hope and Christian faith.* Let us not waste these gifts! Indeed if my words can serve any purpose then let it be for this objective, for this would make me extremely proud, namely, that the treasure that we have inherited as a result of the evangelization process of centuries past should not paralyze us or make us invalids. We should not lose hope in our Church!

The Church is a living organism and you are baptized and anointed by the Spirit of God. You, Christian politicians, you who have money and are also Christian, you the sociologists, the technicians and professionals, you who have the key to the solutions --- to all of you the Church gives that which you do not have: hope, optimism to struggle, joy in knowing that there is a solution, joy in knowing that God is your Father and that God moves you forward. In order to heal the paralytic, people were needed to carry him to the house, open the roof and place him before Jesus (25). Yes, it is true that God and Christ could have brought about our salvation by themselves, but they wanted to have stretcher bearers, people who would help carry the paralytic (today the paralytic could be called the Republic or society) so that by the hands and the solutions and the ideas of women and men the paralytic is placed before Christ who is the only one who can say: *I have seen your faith! Rise, pick up your mat and walk!* (26). I believe that our people will rise up and walk!

¹ Mons. Romero didn't preach in his Cathedral on Sundays 28 January and 4 & 11 February 1979 since he was in Puebla (Mexico) attending the Third General Assembly of Latin American Bishops.

² See *Mensaje a los pueblos de América Latina*, from the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla. Passages in inverted commas in this homily are textual quotations from this message on which Mons. Romero comments at length.

³ See Homily of John Paul II in the Basilica of St John Lateran (12 November 1978), *Osservatore Romano*, 19 November 1979.

⁴ Letter of Mons. Cámara, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, Mons. Leonidas Proaño and twenty other bishops to Mons. Romero (10 February 1979), *Orientación*, 25 February 1979.

⁵ See “Solidaridad”, *Orientación*, 18 February 1979.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 14 February 1979.

⁸ *El Diario de Hoy*, 10 February 1979.

⁹ See Discourse of John Paul II at the inauguration of the Third General Council of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (28 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 February 1979.

¹⁰ Sister María José Forrier, known as Mother Chepita, was captured by the National Guard in the retreat house *El Despertar* when Fr Octavio and four youths were assassinated on 20 January 1979.

¹¹ See Homily of John Paul II in the concelebrated Mass in the Independence Square of Santo Domingo (25 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 February 1979.

¹² Discourse of John Paul II at the inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (28 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 February 1979.

¹³ Homily of John Paul II at the inauguration of his pontificate (22 October 1978), *Osservatore Romano*, 29 October 1978.

Marginal References (1) 2Cor 1,19; (2) Mt 13,13; (3) 1Cor 2,2; (4) Is 43,18-19; (5) 2Cor 1,20; (6) Is 43,18-19; (7) Is 43,18; (8) Mk 2,9; (9) Mk 2,11; (10) Mk 2,10; (11) 2Cor 1,18-19; (12) Mt 25,40; (13) Is 43,24.26; (14) Is 43,25; (15) Is 43,24-25; (16) Mk 2,5; (17) Jn 13,35; (18) Jn 13,35; (19) Mk 3,6; (20) Jn 19,30; (21) 2Cor 1,18-20; (22) 2Cor 1,20; (23) Ac 3,6; (24) 2Cor 1,21-22; (25) Mk 2,2-4; (26) Mk 2,5.