

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND GOD'S KINGDOM

The Nativity of John the Baptist
June 24, 1979

Isaiah 49:1-6

Acts 13:22-26

Luke 1:57-66, 80

My dear sisters and brothers.

I want to highlight the event that has moved us most profoundly during the past week and which we will use as the framework for our reflections: another of our priests has been assassinated. With the assassination of Father Rafael Palacios, riddled with bullets on the streets of Santa Tecla, there are now five priests who have fallen beneath the hands of criminals. The Church cannot cry out for vengeance or hatred against anyone but calls people to reflection, calls Catholics and her enemies to conversion and to seek the path that is pointed out to us today by the precursor of the Lord.

I say here that we as Catholics, also need to repent and be converted in the sense of entering into greater solidarity. Believe me when I say with complete sincerity and sorrow that I am concerned about the idea that I spoke about a few weeks ago: the danger of insensitivity. We can become so accustomed to seeing and receiving news like this, news about the assassination of a priest, that, like many people, we are not disturbed. I sadly tell you that I was pained to see so many people in the National Gymnasium, overflowing with high school students, many of whom were Catholics, all playing as though it were some kind of grand celebration while the body of a priest of their Church was in the chapel, burning and crying out for prayers and solidarity with all people.

The Liturgical Year is a celebration of the mystery of Christ incarnated in our reality, a participation of women and men in the celebration of the covenant. This demand that I am making with sincere kindness is not out of line because during the course of the Liturgical Year, Sunday after Sunday, we unfold the sublime mystery of Christ, the covenant that God established with humankind with the blood of his own Son, Jesus Christ. It is a covenant in which people not only receive something but also give something in return --- redemption is not only given to us but also awaits our active collaboration. It is for this reason that the Liturgical Year not only unfolds the mystery of Christ in the person of Jesus Christ but also, side by side, unfolds a concurrent cycle that is called the cycle of the saints. The saints are not in competition with the worship of Christ but rather should be seen as Jesus' crown, the wonderful realization of Jesus' redemption. The saints are women and men who have known how to enter into and be sensitive to the infinite love of God who came in the person of Jesus to save us. The saints have known how to respond to this love.

In this cycle of saints, June 24th coincides with a Sunday and so we honor the memory of the nativity of Saint John the Baptist, the precursor of the Lord. On this great feast day of the precursor of Jesus I want to take the opportunity to incarnate us deeper into this reality by not only reflecting on the sad event of the death of Father Palacios but also by greeting all women and men who dedicate themselves to the art of typography. As you know, Saint John is the patron of typographers and today they celebrate their patron feast and so during this reflection I want to keep

them before my mind. The Church loves progress but also fears the abuse of the advances in these great means of progress such as the press, typography.

We also unite ourselves with the many towns that have Saint John as their patron. Today I will go to Chalatenango and participate in their celebration and so before hand I extend my greeting to the people who celebrate this feast of their patron. There are many towns that celebrate this feast day because devotion to Saint John has spread among our people. I also extend my greetings to all those people who bear the name of John and Joan, those women and men who have been named for John the Baptist --- may God give you the grace that he abundantly poured forth upon your namesake, John the Baptist.

In order to frame all of these events and the many other events that we are going to enlighten this week during our liturgical reflection on the Word of God, I entitle our homily: John the Baptist, the paradigm of a man committed to the Kingdom of God. *Paradigm* means model or symbol, thus John the Baptist realized that which every person committed to the Kingdom of God ought to realize. I will develop the following points in my homily: One, the man; Two, the precursor; Three, the martyr.

The man

The readings bring us face to face with the birth of a man. The town of Ain Karim is very scenic and located in the mountains of Judea. This is the place where the elderly and sterile Elizabeth lived, where she was visited by her cousin, Mary,(1) and where Mary stayed for three months --- Mary, a young virgin who at the same time was privileged to be virgin and mother. As Elizabeth was made fertile by a miracle of God so too Mary is made fertile but God respected her virginity.

Two expectant mothers speak with one another during three months. They spoke about this beautiful chapter of Saint Luke's gospel that recounts for us the events surrounding the conception of John in Elizabeth's womb. The priest, Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, was offering incense at the altar when he had a vision of the Angel Gabriel who told him that his prayers had been heard, his prayers asking for a son.(2) Zechariah doubted and so God, who wants a complete commitment of faith punished his unbelief: *now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place* (3). As we celebrate the Eucharist today we commemorate the birth of John and as we heard in the gospel, when a name was to be given to him all the people wanted him to be named after his father, Zechariah, but Elizabeth said: *No, he will be called John* (4). But the people said: *There is no one among your relatives who has this name.* So they asked Zechariah who was unable to speak: *he asked for a tablet and wrote: "John is his name"*.

Thus a child who reveals God has been born and named, conceived by a miracle. From this event I want to derive other examples that appear in today's readings.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that the servant of God, mysteriously prophesizing events of the messianic era, the servant of Yahweh, is presented in the following way: *The Lord called me from birth; from my mother's womb he gave me my name* (5). Before Mary conceived Jesus in her womb the angel announced God's plan with regard to Jesus: *The child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God* (6). And St Paul, already converted to Christianity, as if in parenthesis says: *God chose me while I was still in my mother's womb.* (7)

This leads us to a profound reflection: each person is part of God's plan. I like the words that Pope John Paul II wrote in his first encyclical and we should all feel challenged by his words: the Pope says: *Man as "willed" by God, as "chosen" by him from eternity and called, destined for grace and glory-this is "each" man, "the most concrete" man, "the most real"; this is man in all the fullness of the mystery in which he has become a sharer in Jesus Christ, the mystery in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother* (8) ... *The Church cannot abandon man, for his "destiny", that is to say his election, calling, birth and death, salvation or perdition, is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ ... Man who in his reality has, because he is a "person", a history of his life that is his own* (9).

Among those of us who are here, no one is anonymous. All of us, even the most humble person, even the smallest child who has come most lovingly to this celebration, all of you listening to your radio, the most poor and infirm of you whom no one will speak about in our history books -- - each and every one of you has a history, your own proper history and God has loved you in a unique way. Each one of you is unrepeatable. God has not created the human person from some mold but has made us with a history that is unique to each person. If there were time we could each tell our history --- yours and mine --- and we would see how unique and different we are.

Let us be mindful of the fact that the Pope has placed before us different chapters of this history.(10) The eternal choosing: *before I formed you in the womb I knew you* (11). There is only one woman who is able to say: *He loved me before I was born*. It was in this way that God desired to make an image of creation: the fertile woman is the image of a God who conceives in his mind a plan of life, a plan for women and man who he is going to bring into history. Thus we are able to say: *I, despite my sins and my smallness, existed in the mind of God; I was chosen*.

The Pope also speaks about the call and says: *the first call of God is a call to life*.(12) It was not our fathers who gave us our being. There were instruments or means that God used to bring us to life. It is God who has called us to life.

The Pope also states that birth is not the beginning of life.(13) We have a history that begins nine months before our birth and even before our conception in our mother's womb we existed in the mind of God as a plan that if realized, would make us saints. A saint is someone who lives out their life according to the ways of God.

Then the Pope says that death follows.(14) How quickly we move from birth to death. Our life may last for forty, sixty, eighty or a hundred years. But what are a hundred, eighty or seventy years? They are but a drop in the immense ocean of history. How small we are, but at the same time how great we are!

Still our history continues beyond death: *salvation or perdition*. (15) Our lives will never be ended but rather we will live forever either singing a hymn of victory to the divine reality or crying forever because we misused our freedom and intelligence --- a failure that we are responsible for and not God.

This is the man: John the Baptist, a paradigm of every person who is born. I want each one of us and all of those who are listening to me, people of good will or people of ill-will --- I want all of us to reflect on the fact that we are women and men. We are living not just to act according to our whims but living according to a plan that has a destiny. Here I am not speaking about some blind destiny as many imagine because no one is born and destined for evil. We make ourselves evil

because we use our will in an evil way. God's plan is to create good people: *God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good* (16).

My sisters and brothers, in light of what we have said we can understand why the Church is involved in the struggle for the defense of human rights. Human rights are not some political vision but are at the very essence of the human person who demands this defense from the Church because of faith in God. Therefore the Church must respect and must make the human person be respected because on earth men and women are God's plan. Thus there are not first and second class persons but all people are called to life, grace and happiness. All people are part of God's plan. If there are differences and struggles then it is because of the evil of women and men.

What else can be deduced from all that we have said? It is a grave offense against the Creator to trample upon life. Here I refer to the life of adult women and men. I never tire of denouncing the abuse of human life by arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture. All of these acts humiliate and make more shameful the lot of those who commit these atrocities than those who suffer the consequences of these violent acts. Every act against embryonic life is also an abuse of life, an act that goes against God's plan, and a sin. It is horrible to hear that in El Salvador the number of abortions has increased and that suction machines have been brought here to destroy the life of the fetus in the mother's womb. This crime that abuses life in the womb of the mother is like some form of an authorized product.

We are able to go back even further because the Church has to denounce this irrational blindness to the source of life, massive sterilization --- as if we were dealing with animals --- of men and women in order to prevent procreation. This is not the way to resolve the demographic problem. We must educate people. In every relationship between woman and man people must be guided by a responsible parenthood, that is, people must know how to use their generative faculties to give life as the result of this relationship. Pope Paul VI said: *We should not solve this demographic problem by suppressing life but by preparing more bread to put on the table of those invited to participate in life.*¹ This means that we are facing a social, economic and political problem in which life must be transformed so that the gifts that God has given, sufficient to nourish the people of San Salvador, should not remain in the hands of just a few people while so many others are dying of hunger. Bread should be distributed as God wants so that all those with life might rejoice in this gift.

God is the giver of life. Perhaps you have heard of the wonderful letter, it is a literary work of a child who was not born and writes about what will be: *Today I would have been born. I would have been in school, in high school. Perhaps I would have been a doctor.* Who knows how many useful lives God prepared with the plans like John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, the Servant of Yahweh, and yet these persons were not born? Lives that were announced before coming into the world in the pages of the Bible, the revelation of God, the revelation of his thought. How many of these persons would be in our country if we were not so selfish, if we could only believe that there was room for others and did not prohibit others from coming into existence because we wanted to be more comfortable.

In front of the two fertile and holy women: Isabel, the elder and Mary, the young virgin, I want to look toward all the women of our country and speak to you the beautiful words of the Council: *You women have always had as your lot the protection of the home, the love of beginnings and an understanding of cradles. You are present in the mystery of a life beginning. You offer consolation in the departure of death. Our technology runs the risk of becoming inhuman. Reconcile men with life and above all, we beseech you, watch carefully over the future of our race. Hold back the hand*

*of man who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilization*². Dear mothers, wives, girlfriends, young women, young girls, on this Sunday when we commemorate the birth of the precursor, reflect on the model of these mothers who asked God for a son and God blessed them with a chosen son who would bless all of humanity. Ah! If women were holy, how many holy men would there be in the world.

The precursor

What is meaning of the word *precursor*? One who goes before, one who says: *the one who is coming after me*. When the king was arriving to a town or city he sent his heralds before him. What the Pope is going to participate in the great audiences, first appears those who announce him: *The Pope is going to come and we will proceed in the following way...* This is the role of John the Baptist. *The hour of the audience with God is drawing near! The immortal king of all ages has come!* We have said that each person has a vocation and John the Baptist lived out his very clear vocation of announcing the presence of Christ.

In the second reading it is clear how Paul, in one of his discourses in Antioquia, presented the person of John: *John heralded his [Jesus'] coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel and as John was completing his course, he would say, "What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me and I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet* (17). John the Baptist was so effective in his vocation that as he announced the coming of Jesus many people confused him with Christ. What a great honor for a preacher! Is this the Christ that is to come? John with his humility felt compelled to speak clearly and not deceive the people: *I am not the Christ or a prophet but I am a voice, a voice that cries out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord"* (18). This is what makes John so great!

It is for this reason that on one occasion when Jesus spoke of John he used these unforgettable words: *of those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist* (19). Then Jesus added: *yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*. What is the meaning of these words? Here Jesus is outlining the mission of John in history. He is like the link that joins together two pieces of a chain: on one side is the Old Testament with the patriarchs, prophets and promises and on the other side is Christ who is coming to fulfill these promises and prophecies --- and John announces the promises and the coming of Jesus.

In other words, what the first reading says, announcing the role of precursor, the Lord says to the servant of Yahweh: *Is it not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*(20) This is John the Baptist: not only does he call out to the people who had received these promises but he tells them to use this time and dispose themselves by doing penance because the promises of God will be fulfilled in the Redeemer who has been born. Therefore he preaches to this privileged people about penance so that they are not blind when the time of the fulfillment of this great promise arrives. He announced the Redeemer unto the ends of the world.

John the Baptist included the gains of the earlier promises, saying to the people: *Be worthy of these promises we have*. And he looked towards the future, saying: *The promises of the Old Testament have become alive in Christ and should be announced to all*. John was between the old covenant and the new covenant, very close to Christ. *He was not the light, only a witness to speak for the light* (21). *I am not Christ, but the voice which announces Christ*.

Thus today we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist and even though he was a man, a son of barren and sterile parents, yet he was the greater of those born of women because he was given a wonderful vocation and he knew how to fulfill this vocation. My sisters and brothers, what a beautiful lesson! Every person has a vocation and those who us who are participating in this reflection have our own proper vocation, a truly great vocation. Because of our Baptism we have a prophetic mission in the world. The Second Vatican Council states: *Christ, the Eternal Prophet, continues to proclaim the Kingdom of God on earth, not only by the ministry of the hierarchy and priests and bishops who have an obligation to preach, but also through the ministry of lay people who because of their baptism have received the grace of faith and the grace of the word.*(22) You are able to speak much better than I and you are better able to give witness through your holy lives than I. A holy witness is being John the Baptist in our home, being a holy lawyer, a holy professional, a holy doctor, a holy engineer, a holy worker, a holy woman --- you are Saint John the Baptist, those who God uses to proclaim the fact that the Kingdom of God is near.

How do we experience the holiness of these worthy people? How many times have we seen the following happen in the corridors of our work place? People are telling off-color jokes or engaged in obscene comments. Suddenly a worthy person draws near and everyone becomes quiet because they respect the person who is arriving: in front of this person we cannot joke in this way. I was touched when a young man told me one night that he was going to leave with his friends carousing and partying. As he raised his eyes and saw the picture of his deceased father over the doorway of the house, he was ashamed and said: *My father always gave us good example, I am not going to go!* Look at the how the life of holy people continues to preach even after they die. This is what we need at this time in our history, not just demagogy that makes claims against people butt holiness of life that makes claims against the demagogy that we experience. Before a saint the clouds flee, injustice becomes angry.

Violence takes its own life. Remember that we are reflecting here within a concrete framework, the life of Father Palacios. I am not going to say that he was a saint but I am going to say that in his preaching and during his lifetime he gave witness to the truth that offended those people who walked on twisting and winding paths --- and I would say the same of the other four priests who have been assassinated. I remember the rectitude of Father Grande and Father Navarro, their great love for the poor and the way in which they identified themselves with the needs of those persons who suffered as a result of institutionalized injustice. They cried out on their behalf! If we ask at this time why they kill our priests and those Christians who are committed to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, then there is no doubt that this is done for the same reason that caused the death of John the Baptist --- they denounce sin!

My sisters and brothers, let us have a little patience and listen to the gospel of Saint Luke where the preaching of John the Baptist is revealed and compare his preaching with today's preaching and then see who is right: those who cry out against the injustices and the abuses of the world or those who preach a doctrine that makes no demands, a doctrine that is beautiful to follow and therefore it becomes easy to practice those religions that proclaim a gospel that makes no claims.

In the third chapter of Saint Luke's gospel we read: *He [John] went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God* (23). What is the meaning of these Eastern images? All these images are exhorting people to turn away from sin.

John spoke to the multitudes who came to be baptized by him in the following way: *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."* And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" He said to them in reply: "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise" (24).

Publicans (people who collected taxes and used many different schemes) came to be baptized and John told them: *Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.* Today the same could be said to many organizations who develop projects worth millions of dollars and the people only receive the benefits from a fourth or a fifth of this investment that is meant to benefit all people. The same words could be said to those who falsify document. There are so many schemes in our present situation, but here the very words of John serve as a denunciation of all of this.

Some soldiers asked John: *And what is it that we should do?* (25). He told them: *Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.* And to the tax collectors he replied: *Exact no more than your rate*(26).

Seeing that the people were anguished and confused him with the Messiah, John told them: *I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire* (27). John presented Christ as a winnowing fan that is used when coffee or wheat is harvested. In order to separate the seed or grain from the chaff, everything is thrown into the air and the good seed falls into the bucket while the chaff is blown aside. This is the person of John: Jesus is a winnowing fan, the instrument that will be used to separate the good seed from the chaff --- the only ones who will remain are those who act justly and do good works, everything else is rubbish and chaff and will be carried off by the wind and then burned.

The gospel concludes with the words: *Exhorting them in many others ways, he preached good news to the people* (Luke 3:18). John was tireless in preaching about repentance and pointing out sin and unmasking disorder.

The martyr

Now Herod the tetrarch, who had been censured by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife and because of all the other deeds Herod had committed (29) --- Herod's sin was that of adultery and incest, living with the wife of his brother. John confronted him directly and told him that *such an act was not licit* (30) but the gospel goes on to say that he was denounced *because of all the evil deeds that he had committed* (31). It is never just one sin but there are always other injustices and crimes and other things. Yes, our people are breathing the air of sin and we, like John, see here all forms of evil. We could add to all the evils of Herod the fact that he sent people to arrest John and later, kill him.(32) We are well aware of this sad history of how power became an ally of the libertinage of the world and with the sins of the world and because of this the prophet was beheaded.

The wife of Herod hated the precursor and so when her daughter danced so beautifully during a birthday celebration Herod applauded her performance and said: *I will grant you whatever you ask, even to half of my kingdom* (33). She turned toward her mother and asked: *What shall I ask for?*. It is clear that the mouth proclaims what is in one's heart: *Ask for the head of John the Baptist because it is worth more than half the kingdom*. It is true that the head of the Baptist is worth more than half the kingdom; in fact, it is worth more than the whole world. It is worth more than all of the powers and all the dances and all the wealth and all forms of luxury. Herod descends into ignominy in history and John the Baptist is exalted as martyr, as one who gave his life for the Lord. *The disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb*.

Life of the Church

My beloved sisters and brothers, I told you that this week the person that is in my heart is the priest who was assassinated. I can still see him, fallen in his own blood, fallen in the streets of Santa Tecla where pious hands gathered up his body and prepared him for burial. Then he was brought to Santa Tecla where a very beautiful Mass was celebrated on the same night as his assassination. The following day, in a very impressive procession of silence, we brought his body to the Cathedral. There, with the presence of the bishop from Santiago de María, with all the clergy of the Archdiocese and many priests from other dioceses and representatives from so many different communities of our Diocese, we celebrated the funeral rites. We then brought his body to Suchitoto, his adopted people, where he was viewed in the Sacred Heart Chapel in the church of Santa Lucía. There another very impressive Mass was celebrated and his body was carried around the park in Suchitoto.

This is a brief description of the last visible phase of Rafael Palacios' life. I believe, however, that these events lead us a deeper reflection. Several priests have been assassinated and this leads us to ask the question: why have these priests and so many other Christians who attempt to be faithful to their vocation, why have these persons been assassinated? I believe, and I am proud to say this, the reason is that the Archdiocese of San Salvador does not want to be indifferent or an accomplice of the situation of sin and the structural violence that exists in our country. For several years now the Archdiocese has felt obliged, because of her evangelical mission, to denounce the injustices from a Christian perspective. Doing this has cost the Church the loss of some of its very beloved members. This persecution of the Church was denounced by an impartial commission. I want to remind you of the statement of the Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States that was called together by the President of Republic to examine the situation of our country.³ Among its conclusions it stated: *As a result of the activities that are undertaken by the Catholic Church and because these activities are an integral part of her mission, priests, men and women religious, and lay people who cooperate in an active way with the Church have been the object of systematic persecution by the authorities and by those organizations that are officially recognized*.

General Romero has said that his hands are clean and that he had nothing to do with this assassination, but I say this should be proven with an investigation. Promises are not enough. We need to see those responsible for this crime punished. It is not enough to say: *I am innocent*. It should be proven that the White Warriors Union that threatened Father Palacio and that undoubtedly carried out this threat --- it should be proven that this is not one of those organizations that the Organization of American States referred to when it spoke about *organizations that are officially recognized*. Again I remind you that when this same organization threatened the Jesuits, the voice of the President warded off this threat and there was no further mention of the White Warriors Union for a long time. It is only now that this organization has returned with greater

ferocity. At the time of the death of Father Palacios I told the President that if he was able to detain that organization before then why not do the same thing now. It is urgent to do this because there are many priests, professors and other people who are being threatened by this ill-fated organization.

The meeting of the clergy that took place on the day after the assassination of Father Palacios made the following demands. The clergy committed themselves to a more profound reflection on the events that are occurring in our country and in our Church. More immediately, in order to honor the memory of Father Palacios, the bells of our churches will be rung every night at 8:00pm. If some parish is not doing this I hope that you are listening to my voice and will begin to do this. Not only will the bells be rung, but at the same time the community will gather together to reflect, from the perspective of Christian justice, on this situation that is suffocating our nation. Finally, on Saturday, June 30 at noon, we will celebrate just one Mass here in the Cathedral. Through this action we want to be the voice of the Church that in all the parishes, at least those in the capital, demonstrates in a clear way what we feel when the life of a priest is taken from us and what we feel when this priest can no longer celebrate the Eucharist with us. In this way all of us, as one body, will pray together for our beloved brother. Therefore, at this time I extend a warm invitation to all of you to be with us here in the Cathedral on Saturday at noon.

Within this framework of the martyrdom of John the Baptist I want to announce the violent death of a Marist brother in Nicaragua, Brother Mariano Blanco. He was from San Miguel and we ask you to pray for him. We also express our condolences to the Marist Community. May the death of Brother Blanco, instead of intimidating us, may it help us to realize that he and so many others are the victims who are paying the price of this institutionalized violence. This institutionalized violence respects no one but is leveled against everyone and anyone who is part of the Church. It is for this reason that it is urgent that we all follow the same line of defense on behalf of justice and faith.

There is some news that causes me great joy. Last Sunday, during the afternoon celebration of the Mass of Corpus Christi we are able to communicate with you by radio YSAX, the Pan American Voice. The applause on that Sunday was unforgettable and I want to express my gratitude and admiration to all those who work at this radio station and who made it possible to overcome the obstacles that we faced. I want to tell you that we will continue to work to better this service of social communication.

On June 19th, the day before his death, Father Palacios had animated and coordinated a meeting of the Vicariate of Mejicanos: priests, religious and lay people engaged in a process of reflection to evaluate and plan the work of this Vicariate. The day of Father Palacios' death there was a meeting of the Priests Senate, a representative body of the priests. The agenda was transformed into a reflection on the death of Father Palacios and this marked the beginning of the reflection that I spoke about before.

On June 21st, while we buried Father Palacios, we also honored Bishop Chávez on his name day. Thus we see how the feasts of the Church are celebrated: with the blood of martyrs and with Christian hope.

On the same day I celebrated the sacrament of Confirmation in the village of San Luis de Mariona in the parish of Cuscatancingo. I want to thank and congratulate the people for their devotion.

On Friday, June 22nd, we celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart in the Basilica here in San Salvador. I invited the community that filled the large church to reflect on the fact that the feast of the Sacred Heart is not simply a remembrance of some past events but rather this heart of Jesus is alive in our Church and anyone who does not respect the Church does not appreciate the love of Jesus Christ.

On that same day, Friday, the parish of Corazón de María celebrated the fifth anniversary of nocturnal adoration. We marked this occasion with the spiritual gathering and I want to greet the Vicar in Asunción, Flor Blanca, because he was working there as part of a team and people experience the voice of the Church in his message.

We celebrated a Mass for the teachers on the day which the nation dedicates to them. We know that in the Catholic centers of education, instead of a festive celebration, we offered a Mass for those teachers who have been assassinated. I also published a message to the teachers and you can read this in our newspaper, *Orientación*.⁴

Events of the week

Today, one month after the events of May 22nd, I want to speak about those deaths that occurred in front of the Venezuelan Embassy and that saddened all of us. I do this in a special way because I have experienced up close their pain and I remember the student, Manuel Alfonso Girón Roque. I want to speak to his parents who are inconsolable and to all the families who weep over the violent deaths that occurred during this time. I tell all of you please do not lose hope and if you are already losing hope then ask the Lord to accept the pain and sorrow of your loss and all of these injustices -- lift up your hearts and like Jesus who was oppressed on the cross because of injustice, ask the Lord to change this situation into a prayer for the freedom of our people.

As pastor and not as a technician I must also speak about the problem at the university⁵. I had many hopes for the present rector and his collaborators because they were very aware of the cultural paths along which the university had to travel. If they have to renounce their position then I ask the protagonists of this problem to realize that the problems of the university will not be resolved by manipulation on the part of those persons who have no understanding of the university or the country but are only interested in sectarianism and who want to see their own selfish concerns prevail rather than the greater good of the university which is an echo and a reflection of the life of our whole nation. They think that in the university they can play with the well-being or the malaise of our nation. I call out to them, not as a technician but as a pastor and as a Salvadorian to allow the university to function so that it might be the true voice of our culture and advance the true liberation of our country.

With the kindness of a pastor I want to address the medical students and interns and medical residents and ask them to resolve their conflict as professionals. Without a doubt they have pointed out the injustices that must be corrected, but all of this must be done in a constructive way so that this does not become another event in an irrational struggle which we have become so accustomed to living and seeing.

Once again I ask for your moral, spiritual and material support for our sisters and brothers in Nicaragua. With much success, the Archdiocesan office of Caritas has initiated a collection for the churches in Nicaragua. I ask you to make use of the different offices of Caritas or you pastors so that we can quickly and very soon send this offering to Nicaragua where the need is so urgent. You might have already noticed that the only countries who are members of the Organization of

American States and who have supported Somoza are El Salvador, Guatemala and Paraguay⁶. How sad to see the refusal of these governments to give support to the desires of the people of Nicaragua.

I am going to conclude with a list that began with John the Baptist and that now includes Father Rafael Palacios, a list that now includes the names of five priests and many other people who have been unjustly treated and assassinated: two *campesinos* from San Carlos Lempa, Rosalío Martínez and Santiago Merino; from Las Pampas Tecoluca, the elderly Esther Durán⁷ and the young woman, Delmy Dúran, these people are connected with the denunciations that were made against the Security Forces as a result of other family members having suffered abuse at their hands. Santiago Merino and other people like him have complained and now have received their answer --- they have been assassinated. Here it seems to be a case of either being quiet and watching in silence as family members are assassinated or denouncing these situations and then waiting for the same fate. This is a very sad situation!

Because this voice can provide a little assistance, I want to speak on behalf of those who have been arbitrarily arrested and not brought before the courts. So many of these people begin to appear on the list of those who have disappeared and this week six people have been arrested: José Vitelio Guzmán, José Arturo Salinas, José David Ayala Morales, Fidián Cruz González⁸, Nicolás Surio, Alfredo Rivas Guzmán,

A mother who finds herself in this situation presented a writ of *habeas corpus* to the Supreme Court of Justice and wrote: *our country is setting disastrous precedents which contradict the essence of state of rights and considering the fact that you, the Supreme Tribunal of the Administration of Justice, have a constitutional mandate (Article 89, #7 of the Constitution), and the obligation to put order into the arbitrariness carried out by public order or at least, given those political conditions, you are able to influence these people so that they do not continue to commit these crimes.* It is a courageous statement, especially since it was written by the trembling hand of a mother searching for her captured son.

Saint John the Baptist knows how to understand all of this and on this his feast day, as we gather up all the blood and mistreatment of our people, we draw near to the altar. John the Baptist had one concern: he did not want to be confused with Christ but wanted to guide men to Christ. My sisters and brothers, the Church is concerned about the same thing: she does not want people to be concerned only about the just demands of people on this earth or to trust in the prophets of flesh who die or even in a courageous priest who might defend his faith even to death --- none of these should be the motive for continuing the work of justice and seeking just demands. Above all else we must place our trust in the great Liberator: only Jesus makes us free. John the Baptist, even though he captured the attention of all Israel who hoped that he would be the liberator of the people, knew how to say: *Be careful! Not me! I am also a fragile man and all I can do is bow my head and allow people to cut it off. Look at him! I must decrease and he must increase!*(34) *I am not worthy to untie his sandal strap! He is the one who must be followed!*(35)

My sisters and brothers, let us not put our trust in earthly liberation movements. Yes, they are providential, but only if they remember that all the liberating force in the world comes from Christ! Therefore we conclude this memorial of John the Baptist, man, precursor, and martyr by repeating the words that he spoke as he firmly pointed toward Jesus and said: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, Jesus Christ, follow him!** (36).

¹ See *Message for Humanity*, 6. Discourse of Paul VI to the United Nations General Assembly (4 October 1965).

² 2nd Vatican Council, Messages to Humanity (8 December 1965), *To women*, 5.

³ The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights of the OEA visited El Salvador from January 11 to 18 1978. A year later it published its report. See *Orientación*, 28 January 1979.

⁴ See “Ser maestros a pesar de la violencia”, Message of the Archbishop of San Salvador to teachers (22 June 1979), *Orientación*, 24 June 1979.

⁵ On 19 June 1979 members of the Frente Universitario de Estudiantes Revolucionarios Salvador Allende (FUERSA) held for several hours the rector and other university authorities who resigned a few days later. See *La Crónica del Pueblo*, 20 & 23 June 1979.

⁶ On 22 June 1979 in the XVII meeting of the OAS foreign ministers, 14 countries presented a resolution demanding the resignation of Anastasio Somoza, president of Nicaragua. Initially Guatemala and El Salvador rejected the resolution but abstained in the final vote. See *El Diario de Hoy*, 23 & 25 July 1979.

⁷ Esther Escobar. See *Orientación*, 8 July 1979.

⁸ Fidias Cruz González. See *Orientación*, 1 July 1979.

Marginal References (1) Lk 1,56; (2) Lk 1,5-13; (3) Lk 1,20; (4) Lk 1,59-63; (5) Is 49,1; (6) Lk 1,31; (7) Gal 1,15; (8) RH 13; (9) RH 14; (10) RH 14; (11) Jr 1,5; (12) RH 14; (13) RH 14; (14) RH 14; (15) RH 14; (16) Gn 1,31; (17) Ac 13,24-25; (18) Jn 1,19-27; (19) Mt 11,11; (20) Is 49,6; (21) Jn 1,8; (22) LG 35; (23) Lk 3,3-6; (24) Lk 3,7-13; (25) Lk 3,14; (26) Lk 3,13; (27) Lk 3,15-17; (28) Lk 3,18; (29) Lk 3,19; (30) Mt 14,4; (31) Lk 3,19; (32) Lk 3,20; (33) Mk 6,21-29; (34) Jn 3,30; (35) Jn 1,27; (36) Jn 1,29.