

THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN A CRISIS

**Patronal Feast of the Divine Savior of the World
August 6, 1979**

Daniel 7, 9-10. 13-14

2 Peter 1, 16-19

Mark 9, 1-9

In the midst of the priests who have come together to express their profound sense of ecclesial communion, I want us to experience the presence of a beloved priest who died prematurely at the hands of assassins in the parish of San Esteban Catarina, Father Alírio Napoleón Macías. He is present with us today as he was on so many other occasions*.

My dear sisters and brothers.

It is a true privilege for us to call ourselves the Republic of the Saviour (Republica de El Salvador) and each year to celebrate, as our titular feast, the mystery of the Transfiguration of our Lord. As the servant of God, Pope Pius XII, reminded us in his address to our Eucharistic Congress in 1942, *it was not only through the piety of Don Pedro Alvarado that we were baptized with so majestic a title, but it was also the providence of God that baptized us --- the same providence that gives each people its own name, its own place, and its own mission*¹. To hear each August 6th the voice of the Father in our Church's liturgy proclaiming that our patron is none other than my Son, the beloved,(1) and that our duty is to listen to him, constitute our most precious historical and religious legacy and the most effective motivation for our hopes as Christian in El Salvador.

This is why I feel it one of my most important pastoral duties to make real here and now, for the Archdiocese that the Lord has placed under my charge, this legacy and to revitalize that motivation in line with the new circumstances in which, each August 6th, we find ourselves. This is the beginning of the Fourth Pastoral Letter* that I bring here and present to our Divine Patron and to you, my sisters and brothers, as a service to the people of El Salvador. I have entitled this letter: *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the National Crisis*.*

Each year, he, the Divine Transfigured One, presents himself to us with a challenge: *What have you done with this mystery? Is it not I who am provoking the transfiguration of this nation?* The mystery remains the same as it was last year and as it has been for centuries: the divine Transfiguration. The circumstances, however, in which each year we celebrate this feast --- these change. There are new situations in our Church and in our country.

When speaking about the people of El Salvador who are one part of the great Latin American population, we could proclaim the words that Puebla spoke with regard to all of our countries: *The people of Latin America are journeying amid anxieties and hopes, frustrations and expectation.*(2) *If we view those anxieties and frustrations in the light of faith, we see that they have been caused by sin which has very broad personal and social dimensions. The hopes and expectations of our people arise from their deeply religious sense and their richness as human beings* (3). I greet you, this beloved multitude that has filled the park in front of the Cathedral, our people who have a deep religious sense and a richness as human beings. I also greet you for despite the fact that as a people

you are privileged to experience the love of God, yet you bear within yourselves so many anxieties and frustrations that have been caused by sin.

Also in the Church we see new situations. In order to encourage that which is good and to remove that which is sinful the Church presents herself this year with a new richness and also with new sins because the Church is composed of women and men who are sinners. This year I see rising from the tomb of Paul VI, who died one year ago today, the rich inheritance that has been passed on to John Paul I and John Paul II. This inheritance was synthesized by John Paul II when he referred to the truth about Christ, the truth about the Church and, above all, the truth concerning the human person². This is the treasure and inheritance that has been passed on to us by the last two Popes, the Popes of the Second Vatican Council³. This treasure and inheritance has been enriched by the maturity of the people of our Archdiocese who were consulted in writing this Pastoral Letter⁴. I thank you for your maturity, your boldness, your preferential option for the poor and for the wealth of ideas that you gave me during this consultation. The Council states: *The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office*(4). . You and I have written this Fourth Pastoral Letter with the treasures of the universal Church and especially with the treasures of Puebla.

This is the purpose of our celebration this year and of the pastoral letter. The Pope has recommended that within a short period of time our communities should be *informed about and suffused with the Spirit of Puebla and the guidelines of this historic conference*⁵. With the light of Puebla and the expression of the experiences of our Church we will become a light that illuminates the crisis of our nation. We thus fulfill the duty which today is incumbent on all the people of El Salvador, all the organizations and all the different sectors of the nation. No one can be passive. Today the Church is offering that which she is able to contribute: all the richness of the Church, the maturity of the Diocese, and the experiences of the priests and bishops and people and from our identity as Church we say what we think and what we are able to contribute at this time in our nation's history.

The title of this homily is same as that of the Pastoral Letter: The Church's mission in the midst of the national crisis. I will present the four parts of this letter: First, the nation's crisis according to the pastoral vision of Puebla; Second, the Church's contribution; Third, ecclesial illumination of some specific problems; Fourth, Puebla's pastoral approach applied to the Archdiocese.

The nation's crisis according to the pastoral vision of Puebla

Our vision is not one of political or sociological or economic experts. This is not the role of the Church. Rather we present a pastoral vision. Many would have liked Puebla to speak out more concretely on certain particular situations in Latin American countries. But in its analysis of, and evangelical judgment on, the situation in Latin America, there is enough to be found to allow each country or each pastor to draw on material relevant to their own situation, and hence to speak with the collective voice of all the pastors of Latin America. This is not an exhaustive exposition but we have kept in mind the points that you spoke about in your responses to our questionnaire.

First, social injustice. Puebla states: A little more than ten years ago, the Medellin Conference noted this fact when it pointed out: *A muted cry wells up from millions of human beings, pleading with their pastors for a liberation that is nowhere to be found in their case.*(5) The cry might well have seemed muted back then. Today it is loud and clear, increasing in volume and intensity, and at times full of menace. And Puebla calls *the most devastating and humbling scourge the situation of human poverty* (6). The human situation is composed of the long line of faces (7), faces that I see in

this multitude gathered here today: children who at a tender age must earn a living, young women and men who do not have an opportunity to develop themselves, *campesinos* who lack the most basic necessities, workers whose rights are not respected, the underemployed, people living on the margins of society, and the elderly who feel useless in society. All of this is aggravating our crisis because this is a situation of grave social injustice.

Secondly, there is the deterioration of the political situation which has institutionalized the injustice mentioned above. Puebla uses words that could have been written just for the people of El Salvador: *governments look askance at the organizing efforts of laborers, peasants, and the common people and they adopt repressive measures to prevent such organizing. But this type of control over or limitation on activity is not applied to employer organizations which can exercise their full power to protect their interests* (8). This discrimination appears very clear in the events that have occurred during the past year. From the beginning of this year here in El Salvador there have been 406 assassinations, 107 of these *campesinos* and not one of them a large land owner. During the same period there have been 307 arrests, 127 of these *campesinos*, and again not one of them a large land owner. What does it mean when there is such deterioration among those who have been entrusted to seek out the common good of people that they become concerned about the interests of only one sector of society?*

Thirdly, Puebla and the Archdiocese have pointed out these defects in the government. There appears to be a certain inability to detain the wave of violence and it is suspected that this is tolerated because during the State of Siege, which was meant to defend the rights of all people, only one sector was protected*. There appears to be a contradictory attitude in the state's emphatic denunciations of violence. Puebla denounces this situation with the following words: *countries ... where there is frequently no respect for such fundamental human rights ... are in a position of permanently violating the dignity of persons and abusing their power which is typical of regimes based on force* (9). Because of her authentic gospel commitment, this obliges the Church *to raise her voice to denounce and condemn these situations, particularly when the responsible officials or rulers call themselves Christians* (10). In this section we put forth the economic and ideological foundations for these injustices and repression.

Fourthly, to note the moral deterioration of the country. The responses to our questionnaire point out the terrible domination of the mystery of sin in the Salvadoran society. Puebla corroborates this by pointing to the roots of corruption in the governmental and social orders as well as among individuals and families: individual materialism, consumerism, the deterioration of basic family values, the deterioration of public and private integrity, manipulation of information by various authorities and groups (11). All of these have caused serious defects in our people and a great moral deterioration.

And finally, the internal crisis of the Church. We want to be very honest here. One who denounces must also be willing to be denounced and if the Church fulfills her duty of denunciation then she also expects to be denounced by you who are able to do this. The Church recognizes that there are many good things happening in our midst: the presence of lively communities, the presence of priests working in some very dangerous areas of our Diocese, committed Christians willing to give their lives and willing to be riddled with bullets, communities persecuted as subversive or communist or political when all they are doing is carrying on the mission of evangelization that the Church asks of them at this time. Despite all these good things, the Church must also admit that many of our people have replaced the criteria of the gospel with political criteria. It is sad that we must say that many Christian have devalued Christian and gospel criteria

and have preferred to follow the criteria of a particular political option, believing themselves wiser than the wisdom of the gospel and the Church.*

With pain we must also point out the division among the hierarchy. We cannot hide this. I, for my part, ask pardon of the Church and will try to explain this to you in a way that perhaps you will understand and that will help us to find its causes and ways to resolve it, because what is happening among us is a reflection of what is happening in our society. Therefore it is incumbent upon society and the priests and the bishops and all Christians to become converted.

In order that you might hear the authoritative word of Puebla concerning the origins of this sin in the Church, let me read this passage to you: *Not all of us in the Latin American Church have committed ourselves sufficiently to the poor. We are not always concerned about them or in solidarity with them. Service to them really calls for constant conversion and purification among all Christians. That must be done if we are to achieve fuller identification each day with the poor Christ and our own poor* (12). This is not only lacking on the part of the bishops or priests and religious communities of men and women but is lacking in all Christians in general. The way the Church points out in order to resolve this crisis is the path of conversion, the path where Jesus says he can be found: *whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me* (13). Conversion toward the poor is the solution of our inter-ecclesial divisions.

The Church's contribution

The first thing that the Church can offer is, naturally, evangelization. Evangelization is the task of the Church and her reason for existence. According to Puebla and John Paul II evangelization involves an indispensable action on behalf of justice and work that promotes the development of the human person. Do not confuse, my sisters and brothers, the mission of the Church as she evangelizes and works on behalf of justice with subversive campaigns. They are quite distinct! People will call the gospel subversive because it questions the foundations of an order that should not exist because it is unjust.*

Second, the Church offers her collaboration while maintaining her identity. My beloved communities that are present here and those who are reflecting with us as they listen to their radios, our greatest concern as we reflect on the gospel should be a desire to be the Church that Christ wants us to be. We should do nothing except that which the Church must do. Even though people will slander us we have a clear conscience because we are doing what the Church must do. We have a clear conscience because we are not meddling in things that are foreign to the Church but illuminating our realities with the light and the identity that is proper to the Church.

The third contribution that the Church offers during this national crisis is her doctrine on the human person. If the dignity of the human person is trampled upon it is because the state and other people in our present situation have erected idols and forgotten that these idols have no importance when compared to the human person. The Church demands respect for the dignity of the human person, even the poorest of persons, even the person who is tortured* and in prison and killed*.

The fourth contribution that the Church offers, that which we are doing here and now, is a prophetic denunciation of everything that is sin. We make these denunciations not to brag or as some form of demagoguery. Rather the Church denounces and calls people to conversion. The Church denounces sin in order to uproot sin from the world and to convert sinners. This is what I believe we have always done. We have pointed out the disorders, assassinations, and injustice and

have raised our voices against all these abuses. At the same time we have invoked the mercy of God pleading for the conversion and the salvation of sinners.

Another big contribution of the Church is to point out the fact that the only exit from this situation is the conversion of people. Even though it seems like some form of idealism or utopia --- when all the sinners will be converted --- the Church will always proclaim this message because as long as the people of El Salvador do not walk along the path of conversion, there can be no solution to the crisis that threatens our people.

It is for this reason that the Church collaborates in unmasking these idolatries. In my Pastoral Letter I focus on three absolutes, three realities that some people have erected absolutes in their lives.

For some people wealth and private property have become absolutes. The Church says that wealth is not an absolute and private property does not have a definitive meaning. The Pope has spoken about this with very specific words: *The Church's teaching is that there is a social mortgage on all private property.*⁶ The Church is concerned about the welfare of all people and not the wealth of a few or the private property of a few*.

A second absolute that involves many people of El Salvador is called national security. Puebla states: *In many instances the ideologies of National Security have helped to intensify the totalitarian or authoritarian character of governments based on the use of force.* In the name of national security hundreds of lives have been sacrificed. In the name of national security human rights have been violated. In the name of national security insecurity has been implanted among the people. Puebla goes on to state: *the ideology of national security is not compatible with the Christian vision of the human being as responsible for carrying out a temporal project and to its vision of the State as the administrator of the common good*⁷.

The third absolute that is found in many people of good will in El Salvador and that should therefore be kept in mind as we unmask the idols that have been erected as substitutes for our Lord, Jesus Christ*, refers to popular and political organizations. Here there is much need for our ecclesial base communities to be very careful. There is a certain fanaticism, sectarianism and elitist arrogance in all of this. No individual and no organization can pretend to express the total thinking of the people. Organizations will express people's thinking in one specific way but in all of this people must be respected. Let us therefore respect their options and never attempt to make our individual options or the options of any group or organization the option of all the people. The country is more important than the organization, not the organization than the country.*

Ecclesial illumination of some specific problems

The third part of the Pastoral Letter contains an application of the Church's doctrine to certain specific problems which I am not going to go into great detail here since you can read this for yourselves.

First, the problem of violence: I emphasize what I spoke about last year but am more specific in light of certain present day realities.

Secondly, conditions for a true national dialogue: Such a dialogue must be open and not partial and must take place in a climate of trust and credibility and not one of repression. I also speak

about the urgent need for a change of structures that cannot be avoided. The right of people to organize should be respected and the voice of these people should also be listened to.*

Another problem that we must confront is that of Marxism. This is a very complex problem. Catholics cannot just say: *Marxists are condemned!* Many other aspects must be examined. Puebla distinguishes between an ideology that can influence the behavior of a person and the collaboration of a person, who holds firm Christian principles, with other people of different ideologies. We must also distinguish between a scientific system of analysis and the practice of political organizations in the struggle for power which allows means to be taken that are not admissible for Christians to use. In the questionnaire I found a very wonderful phrase: *there is no reason to fear Marxism because we can win this struggle if we take seriously our preferential option for the poor.* It seem to me that those words contain the key.* Our work on behalf of the poor and our defense of the poor is seen by anti-communist fanatics as communism. But it is not communism but rather Christ is saying: *whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me* (14). Thus work on behalf of the poor is the best way to combat Marxism.*

Puebla's pastoral approach applied to the Archdiocese

The fourth part is a treatise on pastoral theology. I have entitled this part: *Puebla's Pastoral Approach Applied to the Archdiocese* thus defining the approach as being in line with the Second Vatican Council and Medellin which our predecessor, Bishop Chávez, with the help of Bishop Rivera and the clergy, attempted to make a part of the life of this Archdiocese. I have simply received this inheritance and have tried to love it and deepen its root among us.*

This supposes, first of all, an attitude of searching. In Mexico the Pope stated: *Mary is great because she found no security except in her faith in God and because in faith she sought the paths of life.*⁸ We can say the same about the Archdiocese that was pointed out by Puebla, namely, the realities of yesterday that were accepted in the pulpit and in our schools, today are not so easily accepted. (15) There have been changes and there is need for a new language and new attitudes. The new pastoral guidelines of the Archdiocese desire precisely this attitude of searching.

Second, a preferential option for the poor: this implies understanding the mechanisms that engender poverty, struggling for a most just world, supporting workers and the *campesinos* in their just demands and in their right to organize, and being close to people who are poor.*

Third, united in a joint apostolate. My dear sisters and brothers, here we distinguish between an apostolic spirit and a pastoral spirit which could be compared to a river that is later channeled. In all the movements of our Diocese there is an apostolic spirit but there is not always a pastoral spirit. We want to take advantage of the richness and the different charisms that the movements and congregations give to us. I invite you to allow yourselves to be guided in your pastoral activity by a team approach to your ministry. No community should feel isolated from or superior to other communities. We should all feel as though we are one single work of God dwelling in the midst of the people.

Finally, pastoral adaptation. I am pleased to offer you the idea of creating in the Archdiocese and intensifying this pastoral adaptation in three areas:

A pastoral of the masses: like the multitude that is gathered here in front of us today, a multitude that can very easily not be cared for.* We have an example of this type of pastoral when reflecting on the beautiful procession of the *Bajada* (descent) that took place yesterday and that was

transmitted by our radio station. This was done with great pastoral concern for the people and here I am referring to a pastoral activity directed toward the urban areas where the problems are quite distinct from those of the rural areas.

Secondly, the ecclesial base communities: these small groups that the Pope referred to as the place where the gospel is reflected upon in a more simple, intimate and friendly manner.

And finally thirdly, a pastoral of accompaniment: this is urgent because there are many Christians who say that they must opt for a specific political situation or organization and as a result, often lose their faith. The Church cannot abandon these individuals who sincerely opt for a political party or a political organization. We must accompany these men and women and do so in such a way that these Christian women and men can experience wherever they go that they carry within themselves the Word, the seed of salvation and the light of the gospel.*

My dear sisters and brothers forgive me if this appears to be some kind of classroom situation especially since we are in such an uncomfortable situation, standing beneath the hot sun --- but all of this has a meaning. It means two things:

First, that the feast of the Divine Savior of the world gives a transcendent meaning to all of our efforts to make the teachings of Puebla a part of our ministry in the Archdiocese. As Jesus is transfigured he points out to us our goal: to make new women and men, transfigured and clothed with the love of God who proclaims: *these are my beloved children with whom I am well pleased* (17). Biblical commentators believe that the man in the first reading, whom Daniel depicted as rejoicing in the glory of God (18), refers to the glorified Christ surrounded by all those who are saved. This is the transfiguration that we desire: a glorified Church but also a pilgrim Church that does not lose sight of her holy destiny.

And the second thing we want to say today is that the challenge of the Divine Savior of the world to our people should be accepted by each person according to his/her vocation. We are the Church and therefore let us identify ourselves as Church according to our own charism, our own congregation, our own vocation as married people or single, rich or poor, professionals or laborers -- let each one of us incarnate this challenge that Christ holds out to us so that each one of us might collaborate in the transfiguration of our nation. So be it.*

¹ See Radio message of Pius XII to the First National Eucharistic Congress of El Salvador, 26 November 1942

² See 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.

³ John XXIII and Paul VI.

⁴ Before writing the pastoral letter, Mons. Romero consulted with the priests and basic Christian communities of the archdiocese.

⁵ See Message of John Paul II to the Bishops of Latin America (23 March 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 1 April 1979.

⁶ Discourse of John Paul II at the opening of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla (28 March 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 February 1979.

⁷ We haven't found this quotation. Puebla speaks of "national security" in numbers 49, 314, 547, 549 and 1262; texts which Mons. Romero quotes in his pastoral letter.

⁸ See Homily of John Paul II in the metropolitan cathedral of Mexico City (26 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 February 1979.