

## JESUS, THE MASTER OF TRUE RELIGION

**Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time  
September 2, 1979**

*Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8*

*James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27*

*Mark 7:1-8a, 14-15, 21-23*

My dear sisters and brothers.

This morning I have the impression that you and I are the image of a pilgrim Church. Outside the sky is grey and it is raining --- a sad day. We do not have a cathedral in which we can celebrate our Eucharist. The Eucharist which on this occasion was going to be celebrated in the church El Rosario, cannot be celebrated there because that church is also occupied. Thus we had to ask for hospitality in the Basilica of El Sagrado Corazón. We are grateful for this hospitality and we are the image of a Church that is similar to the people that Moses led through the desert --- they picked up their tent and journeyed forward.(1) A sign is always given, a sign of something that is being sought, a sign of the pilgrimage, a sign of something that has not yet been established: the Church is on pilgrimage and cannot set up her abode on earth and therefore cannot identify herself with any ideology or any other earthly reality. The Church is always that column of light in the desert that leads humanity toward definitive happiness that does not exist in this world.

This fact, which can be interpreted in this way, must also be analyzed more deeply: Why is the Cathedral and the church El Rosario, and the churches in Cojutepeque, Apopa, Suchitoto, and Mejicanos being occupied? Why last night has this list of churches grown to include the churches in Aguilares, San Miguel and who knows how many more? It is easy to say the hierarchy is to blame. It is easy to blame others. I want to call all of us to reflect this morning on the Word of God that has been proclaimed to us: in a certain sense we all share the blame.

The popular political organizations can be blamed. What is the mentality of their leaders? In their hearts do they have any respect for the life and the mission of the Church? Do they have an understanding of the meaning of solidarity with the people who are the beneficiaries of public acts of worship? They ignore all these values and give consideration to only one reality, the reality of their own strategy. As they occupy our churches they cry out on behalf of their just demands. Yes, they share the blame in all of this. I want to remind these groups, as well as all those other groups that struggle for just causes, that the end does not justify the means. You cannot do improper things in order to achieve a good objective. Even when organizations say that they are struggling for the well-being of the people, if they do this with means that offend the feelings of people then their own objective becomes less credible. Therefore people must reflect on the way in which they engage in these struggles so that they do not offend people's religious feelings. They will have the support of people in those matters that are just because what is just is also good for people.

The authorities of our nation also share in the blame. They have to look for normal ways for people to express their cries of anguish; otherwise they will seek abnormal ways of expression. When a tumor has no escape it explodes into available space. If a boiling pot does not have adequate escape valves, it will quickly explode. The government must provide adequate channels

so that the voices of the workers, *campesinos*, and any other group can be heard. These people go before the Legislative Assembly and they are not heard. They go to the different governmental ministers and they are treated like second class citizens. They go to different places where they should be served but instead are placed on the margins of society and not heard. I believe if there existed normal channels for people to express themselves we would not be in this situation where our churches are being occupied. The blame for the occupation of our churches can be placed on the government. They are primarily to blame for all of this.\*

Let us not rend our clothing hypocritically because the government has also occupied our churches.\* This has occurred in Aguilares without the permission of the authorities and been done for bloody objectives. This has become customary and we have created this environment: during our patronal feasts municipalities do not respect the churches and set up stands that sell all kinds of different articles and put obstacles in the way of those who want to worship their patron saint. Occupation of our churches (plundering and pillaging them) is the history of our people. In Mexico and Guatemala and in some places in El Salvador there is proof that the government has robbed the churches. This ought to cause scandal in the government and should cause them to act justly.

In great part, the means of communication can also be blamed. There is no place in the press to speak about the just demands of the people. Where have we seen published the abuse that our *campesinos* are suffering in Arcatao and Aguilares? The news is presented in a distorted manner. In order to make this abuse known the people have to come here and shout and so they shout from within our churches. The Church has to understand, without justifying this, that the press and television and radio have become instruments of oppression\* and so the people and the opposition have no way to express themselves. The Church, together with the people, has experienced the reality of living on the margins of society. How many times have we wanted to publish the facts and been unable to find a way to do this because the facts offend those who oppress and repress. So many means of communication that ought to serve the truth and freedom do not do so.\*

It is not easy to decipher who is to blame for the occupation of our churches. We cannot be simplistic in this matter. I am not in agreement with this action of occupying the churches but I try to understand the reasons behind these actions. Hopefully those who occupy our churches will analyze the ways in which their actions have placed obstacles in the way of our worship. Hopefully they will have more respect for the people. Indeed, all of us have had a part to play in this anomaly. Therefore, with greater sincerity and in light of the divine Word I invite you all this morning to analyze not only the phenomenon of the occupation of our churches but all the hypocrisy of those who, under the guise of religion, commit so many atrocities among us. Jesus called some people: *hypocrites*. (2) This word appears to be almost a curse on the lips of Jesus and so let us pray that this harsh word of Jesus will not be used as a whip against us this morning.

In front of you, my dear Catholics, my beloved sisters and brothers, I want to say: I understand the confusion and the diversity of opinions which are used to judge these events that deserve to be analyzed more profoundly. We are going to do just that with all of the priests. Yes, I understand that there are different opinions on this matter and so I say two things to you:

We have to distinguish between normal and extraordinary times. In normal times no one occupies the churches. In normal times when there are normal channels of expression the churches express the religious feeling of the people and nothing else. These are not normal times but rather times of emergency. If unfortunately we were to be afflicted by an earthquake, the churches would open their doors to receive the injured and wounded and no one would say that the churches were

being profaned. We must understand that in times of emergency it is not easy to condemn acts which in normal times would definitely be condemned.

I want to take this reflection further and say to you: the image that I am pleased to contemplate here in the Basilica is that of a pilgrim Church. I think about Jesus who wanted to change the attitude of the Jewish people who viewed the Temple in its material dimension. Jesus presents them with the meaning of true worship of God. Jesus said: *Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up* (3). The Jews thought that he was speaking about the material building but as the gospels explain Jesus was not referring to the Temple.(4) He had transferred the spirit of the Temple to himself. He will be raised up on the third day and so he is the true temple for all Christians. Through him we offer our acts of thanksgiving and adoration to God. Without Christ, our churches, no matter how beautiful, would be worthless. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman and told her: *the hour is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth* (5).

One of our popular song writers<sup>1</sup>, singing about the death of Father Rafael Palacios, uses these beautiful words: *God is not in the temple but in the community*. You are the temple! What use is it to have beautiful churches if Jesus were to proclaim to us today the same words that he spoke to the Pharisees: *in vain do your worship me* (6). Yes, we might celebrate elaborate worship services, with many flowers and other adornments, with many people invited to participate in the celebration, but where is the worship in Spirit and truth? I believe there is a lesson here for us and so my sisters and brothers, I am the first one to receive it and attempt to interpret it. Perhaps I, as a priest, have not known how to fulfill in a proper way my duties involving the worship of God. Perhaps I and my brother priests have been too concerned about the beautiful arrangement of the altar and perhaps I have asked for money in order to have the altar more beautifully decorated. We have commercialized our worship. Therefore God, as though entering Jerusalem with a whip tells us, *My house shall be a house of prayer but you are making it a den of thieves* (7). We all have to stop and think. We are all guilty.

Today we return to the gospel that we have been reflecting on throughout the year, the gospel of Saint Mark, the gospel that presents Jesus as the personification of the Lord's redemption. Today, we also encounter Moses who was afraid that people would turn aside from their worship of the Lord and embrace the false idols that they would find in the Promised Land. Therefore Moses urges them to respect the Law of God. Saint James also speaks to us today (not James the elder but James the younger). He is a practical man who is not guided by appearances and tells us: *what good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works* (8). Above all, we are presented with the Master of the disciples, our Master, Christ, our Lord. He is the primary Master and therefore I entitle this homily: Jesus, the Master of true religion. I am happy that you and I are reflecting this morning on the meaning of true religion. Perhaps we have to purify ourselves from concepts of false religiosity, hypocritical interpretations that place the blame on others and do not allow us to reflect on our own interior dispositions. I will develop the following points: 1) empty worship, 2) religion that is pleasing to God, 3) the honor of the People of God.

### **Empty worship**

The passage that is presented to us in Saint Mark's gospel transfers an eastern environment to a western environment, the environment of Rome where Saint Mark is writing his gospel that is based on Saint Peter's preaching. Saint Mark was like the secretary of Saint Peter and wrote about what Peter preached and explained to the Romans the things they could not understand because they were not of Jewish origin. One of the Jewish customs was that of frequent washing of hands and plates and cups because they felt that these were unclean. Here the meaning of impurity is not that which

is understood today, but referred to a material uncleanness. How many laws there were that referred to things that were unclean! To touch a dead body made one unclean. Remember the great hypocrisy of Jews who did not want to enter Pilate's house because he was a Gentile.(9) Ay, if a Jewish person were to mingle with a Gentile! At the same time they felt no remorse as they asked this Gentile, Pilate, to condemn the innocent Jesus to death. We see then that the laws became forms of hypocritical appearances, mere legalism and a betrayal of the true law of God.

As this passage concerning the washing of hands continues Jesus throws in the face of the Pharisees their custom of making an offering to the Temple and then saying to their father and mother: *any support you might have had from me is qorban [meaning dedicated to God]* (10). Jesus tells them: *You hypocrites, in this way you nullify the fourth commandment of God: Honor your father and your mother.* God did not command anyone to make an offering to the Temple without honoring mother and father. What right does a son have to substitute a false understanding of religion for an obligation toward his parents? As we analyze this passage we see that Jesus was right in becoming angry with those people and therefore he called their religion hypocritical because they paid for legal purity with hypocritical impurity.

This is false religion. Jesus says: *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me* (11). How empty! The Pharisees are accused of lacking three things: first a lack of interiority, second, a lack of God's truth and revelation and third, a lack of good works. These three failures are condemned today as the false practice of religion. We must be careful about these same failures so that we do not offer to the Lord an empty heart.

*Interior emptiness.* Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person, but the things that come out from within are what defile. (12) When one has a pure heart, then even though one might be in the midst of mud, the mud does no damage because it is not taken into the interior life of a person. One must make a decision about all those things that are decaying and that can enter into the interior life of a person. When people hear an evil conversation or witness bad example or witness some other event that might seduce them to sin, those persons who do not want to sin will not sin. People sin when they allow that which is putrid to enter into the heart. People who have a timid conscience very often believe that they offend God by listening to bad words or seeing things they should not look at. No, my beloved sisters and brothers, that which enters from outside cannot make a person impure if the heart does not receive these things. During this time of crime and violence and vengeance, those people who preserve their hearts and are not hateful but rather are loving, then this sinful situation does no harm to them but only causes harm to those who are predisposed to have their hearts poisoned. Interiority consists in the fact that God does not have this complaint: *their hearts are far from me* (13). May our hearts be close to God! How God longs to have his children close to him! God longs even for sinners to repent and return to the Lord. Therefore, our denunciation of crime and so many other things that we have denounced today is not an attempt to shine before others and gain applause. I am not interested in any of that but am only concerned about the conversion of sinners. I am only concerned about leading to conversion those who have abducted others or done any kind of injustice against another. *God does not desire the death of sinners but wants them to be converted and live.*(14) If we should have the pleasure of rejoicing in heaven then it should not be repugnant to be in heaven close to those who today have declared themselves to be our enemies, because there in heaven there are no enemies. Be converted to love and we will find ourselves together rejoicing with God and living in God's love. I want everyone to rejoice in the joy of this intimacy with the Lord.

Let us not be lacking in this interiority because this is basic to religion. God looks at our interior. The Bible says: *we know one another by face but God knows the heart* (15). We also

read: *Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven* (16). Hopefully, my sisters and brothers, this lack of interiority will not be a source of our condemnation because there are many people who do not allow themselves to be filled with religion because they prefer to be lacking in religion. Let us fill our interior lives and then like Saint Augustine, the sinner, we shall say: *Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace*<sup>2</sup>. Saint Augustine knew the Lord and was saved and was holy. It does not matter how sinful people might be when they enter into this beautiful relationship with the Lord. Today we are called to this interior disposition and called to put aside all emptiness and those realities that lead us to make religion an exterior practice.

Jesus denounces another form of emptiness: *the emptiness of revelation and truth. And this can be very relevant for us.* (17) Be careful to wash your hands and not touch a dead body --- these are human traditions! These human traditions had made people less careful about the true revelation of God. Who knows, my sisters and brothers, if many of those who criticize the Church have this same spirit. They have based their religion on human traditions. Human traditions involve worshiping in a certain way, clothing oneself with specific clothing and praying in a particular manner. To pray in Latin or Spanish, to pray facing the people or with one's back to the people --- these are traditions. Let us look for that which is more pleasing to God, that which is a true religion in the midst of people.

A poll was taken in France and the results of this poll are incredible. It states that the Church in France has lost the workers beginning in the last century and now the Church is losing women. Women between the ages of 18 and 35 say that the Church has nothing to say to them. Only 9% of the women in this age category are practicing Catholics. For the rest, religion has no importance for them. This same situation could occur among us if we base our religion on an attachment to the traditional realities and not force ourselves to keep pace with the present advances and if we do not try to understand the hopes and desires of people. I am not saying that we ought to identify ourselves with everything that the people ask for but yes, we must know how to echo the anguish of people. The Second Vatican Council states that we must know how to interpret the signs of the times for people today (18) and we must know how to express the desires of our people.

I rejoice that many of our communities and priests want to adhere to the pastoral guidelines of the Archdiocese, guidelines which have been set out by the Council and by the gatherings of the bishops of Latin America in Medellin and Puebla. These are all an attempt to bring the Church into the twentieth century. The very theme of Puebla states: *evangelization at present and in the future of Latin America*. The Church, who alone saves, can lose her power of salvation if she is not heard by the world.

Dear sisters and brothers, we must make an effort to have a religion that does not think of God because it is tied up in human traditions. How sad for Christ, who was the revealed word of God, to acknowledge that people paid no attention: *He came unto his own, and his own did not receive him.* (19) They preferred their traditions of washing hands, not touching the dead, fleeing from lepers -- all this hypocrisy - and didn't accept the call to a real spirituality that Christ brought them.

How many people in El Salvador, how many young people and students and professionals are following false religions? The current of agnosticism is very strong and in our midst we have Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and more people are following these religions. Jesus could say to all of these people today: *you are following the doctrine of men and women and have forgotten the revelation of the Lord.* My sisters and brothers let us study our religion and not lose our faith which is the grace of God. Let us not play with this gift of faith by comparing it with other faiths or by placing our faith in an inferior position to other realities that are not the true Church that attempts to understand our people. I am truly pained in the pastoral effort to be the voice that expresses the anguish of our people. Those who are comfortable in their present position naturally do not like to be disturbed by us. But the Church would not fulfill her duty if she only defended a minority who are privileged and did not love the people or was not willing to give her life for the people.

And, finally, a lack of works. Let us now turn to the second reading from the letter of Saint James and I invite all of you to read this letter slowly in your homes. James is a practical man who speaks to the converts from Judaism who had all the bad habits of the Pharisees: *Be careful! Do not base your religion on theory.* If a religion lacks good works, then those who practice that religion cannot enter into the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus says: *Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," or those who pray beautiful prayers will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven* (21). In his letter Saint James places before us two examples of good works: *to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world* (22). This is true religion. Not only does it mean to keep oneself unstained by the world but it also involves visiting the widows and orphans. This is a Biblical expression that means we should be concerned about those in need. Puebla simply echoes the voice of this disciple when it states that the preferential option of the Church in Latin America must be a preferential option for the poor.(23) The document explains that here we are not speaking about a division between rich and poor. Notice well my sisters and brothers, we are not involved in a division here. Puebla says that the Church must call everyone regardless of their social class and we are concerned about the poor as if they were our own proper cause. Furthermore, we are concerned about the poor in the same way that we are concerned about the cause of Christ<sup>3</sup> who has said: *whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me* (24).

Here we are all called and we exclude no one. *Come, you who are rich and you will be saved,* but you will be saved only if you come to do that which Christ desires: do not live squandering your goods that is so offensive to the majority of people who are poor.\* The poor provide us with the opportunity to make religion something that does not lack good works. The works that Jesus is going to look at and the acts that will save us are these: *I was hungry and you gave me food! I was thirsty and you gave me drink! I was in prison and you visited me! I was ill and you comforted me!* (25). Yes, Jesus is going to look at every human situation of poverty and suffering and marginalization because he was there in the midst of those situations. These situations are like a mine that enables us to proclaim and live our religion with good works. How near is this mine and yet how despised by so many!

Let us not serve the poor in a paternalistic way, from a lofty position to an inferior position. This is not what God wants. Rather God desires us serve one another as sisters and brothers. This poor person should be seen as my sister or brother because this person is Christ and when I go to Christ I do not go to him from a lofty position to an inferior position, but rather I go to serve Jesus from a position of lowliness. As the Chilean poet wrote: *Forgive me, Lord, for teaching you! But it is in this way that we must approach people with our help, alms and mercy. Forgive me Lord, for serving you because in this poor person I saw you!*<sup>4</sup> The coins, the *tortilla* or the piece of cloth that we give to those who are in need, the clothing that was in the closet but that is no longer needed,

receive these things, Lord, because we give them to you! In this way we fill our lives with good works! I want to congratulate you for the many good works that are being done in every part of the Archdiocese. There are good people, people who will present themselves to the King with their hands filled with good works and the Lord will not be able to tell them that they practiced a religion without works.

Faith is not enough; good works are the proof of our faith. Thus, as Jesus speaks about all different forms of vice, he points out a most horrible reality --- a corrupted heart. The things that enter people from outside do not defile them, but rather the things that come from their hearts defile them. (26) Where have all these things that we are breathing here in El Salvador come from? Let us make no mistake about this because Jesus has pointed this out to us today: *From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly* (27).

### **Events of the week**

Here I want to link the divine words of the Lord with the denunciations that the Church has to make in regard to all of this filth that comes from the hearts of so many people in El Salvador.

For example, this week there have been many statements from governmental sources informing the Legislative Assembly that there exists in the country serious problems on the political, social and economic level. But when are they going to analyze why these problems exist in El Salvador? They say: the country has limited resources and the economy revolves around the cultivation and the exportation of coffee, cotton and sugar and the prices of these commodities depend on the fluctuations of the market.<sup>5</sup> According to these sources this fact has led to the lack of sufficient state and individual resources that would enable all the people of El Salvador to achieve the same level of prosperity<sup>6</sup>. But again the cause is not pointed out. This is not caused by simple economic or political or social differences but because those who denounce this situation are then said to be the persons who promote violence and plant hatred in the minds of others<sup>7</sup>. These people do not want to see the present situation changed. They are convinced that all those persons who protest against this difference have to be mindful that El Salvador cannot produce more. *Leave us alone! Do not disturb us! You are the violent ones and the terrorists!* This is not justice.

The Church also notes these differences but it says the main reason for them is social injustice. The Church does not promote violence or hatred but preaches peace. The Church has said that the peace that could have been and the peace that has been lost will not be restored until there is justice. These people are aware of the fact that everyone cannot be equal and so this justifies the fact that there should be some who have everything and the rest have nothing. We exhort these people to share their wealth!\* The true expression of love is sharing. We cannot say that we are a society and that we love another as long as we do not share with one another. Look at this statistical data and tell me if these are not signs of evil hearts: 60% of the urban population has an income between 42.00 – 140.00 colones a month. In other words almost a million and a half people in the cities have between 1.40 - 4.60 colones a day on which to live. Do you really believe that a person can live on 1.40 colones a day? This is, however, our situation!

We would have to say something similar to the Association of Salvadorian Industries who made a statement about the actual crisis and underlined the important role of the business sector<sup>8</sup>. We are certainly happy that they are sensitive to our present situation and we exhort them to be deeply concerned about this. This is a group of people who can determine the economy of our nation. But in their statement they have forgotten one thing: they alone do not determine the economy of the

nation. The perspective of the worker must also be kept in mind because without a work force they cannot shape the economy of the country. We do not want to put capital and human work in opposition to one another. In the plan of God, the human person is first. If something is wrong with the way our industries are functioning then we must look for the causes of this and we must also look for positive solutions that result from an understanding that respects the human person. Businessmen must understand that they can do nothing without the worker and workers must understand that they can do nothing without businessmen. From the time of Leo XIII it has been said that capital and work must come together.<sup>(28)</sup> Neither side can claim to be the determining factor in the country but both together are able to do this. Each side must be mindful of the other side.

The Commission on Human Rights has published some very helpful statements during these days as they pointed out the causes of our present situation<sup>9</sup>. It has been said that those people who are opposed to the elections are subversive. I believe that we must distinguish this unjust appraisal from that which is trying to be accomplished. Here we are not dealing with the refusal to accept free elections, but rather we have asked for an environment of trust and credibility and freedom in order to be able to speak about freedom during the elections. How can these things be improved if all we see is brutal repression in the face of which *campesinos* and others tremble? Who is going to vote with this kind of freedom? \*We are not dealing with subversion but with the just demands of the people who can be given some taste of freedom.

The explanation of the Defense Minister is most offensive. He spoke in the Legislative Assembly with regard to those who have disappeared. He said that the families of these people ask the authorities for information because they do not know anything about their children who have left the country to receive Marxist education.<sup>10</sup> Truly, from the heart comes all forms of evil! The Defense Minister ought to remember that the Chancery has registered 188 cases of people who have disappeared. The family members of these people question the authorities not because they do not know anything about their loved ones but because they know that they have been arrested and captured and want to know their whereabouts.\*

In this same line of thought I am happy that in light of so many injustices committed against those who have been arrested, Amnesty International has presented (or is going to present) a universal petition for international habeas corpus. What a wonderful idea: an international habeas corpus! In other words, the efforts of the lawyers in El Salvador are ridiculed in the supreme tribunal of the country so now the judicial powers of the world will present their case before the supreme tribunal of the nations where there is a greater respect for the petition of habeas corpus than there is here in El Salvador.

It has been said today that we are weary of this disorder<sup>11</sup>. This is quite true but to those who say that the government is to blame for this we also say that we are weary of all the disorder that is coming from the security forces. So much injustice and repression is being inflicted on our people.\*

Thanks to God, Don Jaime Conde, who was abducted seventeen days ago, has been freed. However, Carlos Rafael Nieto has not been freed. You have seen the statement in which the ERP was called upon to set this man free.<sup>12</sup> His family has fulfilled the conditions that were placed upon them and cannot fulfill any new demands. My sisters and brothers, it is for this reason that I said that our judgment must be impartial: if we judge harshly the injustices of the government then we must also be severe in our judgment of certain groups of the extreme left who abuse their power.



I want to congratulate Fe y Alegría who have come to the defense of their teachers<sup>13</sup>.

The coffee growers have organized themselves and formed La Union de Cooperativas de Cafetaleros<sup>14</sup> (the cooperative union of coffee-growers). I am happy. This is just because all people have a right to organize themselves. I want to say to the coffee growers who have organized themselves: be understanding of those who cut the coffee and to the many other *campesinos* and support their right to organize.

There have been some recent labor conflicts that have produced disappointment because of the intransigence of some of the participants. But there has also been some excellent collective bargaining that sets before us an example of how we can negotiate matters reasonably<sup>15</sup>. To be fair, I would like to note that in recent days I have met businessmen who maintain good labor relations with their workers, even beyond that which the law requires<sup>16</sup>. They are ready for a new and better climate to be created in the country in every respect. I say we must not reject such views, even though they are very imperfect and tiny lights, but they are lights of hope. We are not demagogically in favor of one social class; we are in favor of God's reign and we want to promote justice, love, and understanding wherever there is a heart that is well-disposed. El Salvador's liberation need not mean so much bloodshed --- there is still time. If we all bring our goodwill to bear, renounce material things and seek those of divine worth, we can certainly find the way. Naturally, there must be the courage to yield in regard to what has become an untouchable institution, one at the base of all forms of violence: institutionalized violence, the country's injustice.

I want to unite myself with the suffering of these families: Santana Argueta, Moisés Barillas Pleitez and Carlos Eguizábal García (all *campesinos*), and the student Eladio Franco Valle. They were all arrested during the early morning and their bodies were found on the litoral highway.

The body of José Osmin Abrego was also found. Who killed him? You can deduce that for yourselves. When his family asked that he be brought before the court, they testified before the Supreme Court of Justice and said that José had been arrested on August 15<sup>th</sup> by a permanent reserve made up of army soldiers and National Guard.

Juan Francisco Romero, a catechist, was arrested 105 days ago and still we know nothing more about him. Rubén Darío Portillo is in the same situation. You can find out more information about all these persons on the Solidarity Page in our newspaper, *Orientación*<sup>17</sup>.

Jesus has spoken correctly: *evil comes from the hearts of people* (29). In El Salvador people are stained by all these things because their hearts are focused on misery.

### **The religion that is pleasing to God**

Thanks to God, there are also good people in El Salvador, people whose hearts are like fountains of pure water that washes away these stains from our country. I am called to perform this service, as I ask you in my second point, as Our Lord did: What is true religion? We have already seen what false religion is. Puebla states: *Other anxieties that stem from the abuse of power are typical of regimes based on force and the Church must raise its voice to denounce and condemn these situations, particularly when the responsible officials or rulers call themselves Christian and believe they are the defenders of Western Christianity* (30). There is no greater hypocrisy than to beat Christian women and men and do this in the name of Christianity.

On the other hand, true religion is not lacking in interiority, good works and accepts God's revelation. In today's gospel Jesus says: *everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile* (31). Again the focus is on interiority. My sisters and brothers, if we do not know how to encounter God in the interior of our conscience, then we do not know the meaning of true religion. This is so easy to do and even Alcoholics Anonymous has stated in their guiding steps that its members should grow in their awareness of their relationship with God. I want to say this to my beloved Christians: Let us grow daily in our awareness so that we are able to dialogue with our Lord and God, with our Father. This is interiority that inspires our sincerity. How could one deceive others, even in the Legislative Assembly, if such a person does not try to deceive oneself? People do not deceive themselves when they pray to the Lord God. This is why the saints have said that those who pray live well and those who do not pray live badly. If there are many people in El Salvador who do not live well, we see here its cause: they lack interiority and do not pray.

There is another condition of the law of true religion: fulfill the law of God and do not cling to human tradition.(32) The law of God is so beautiful, so easy, so simple. Everything is summarized in the Law of God and there is no need for penal, civil or constitutional law codes that are never followed. The Ten Commandments of the law of God are enough to transform the life of El Salvador. True religion fulfills the law of God and is not attached to human traditions or involved in the entanglements of human legalism.

A third condition comes from the second reading places on us certain conditions. Good works provide the proof that we are people of faith: (33) visit the widows and assist orphans. In other words, we are exhorted to do good works with a sense of charity and love, with a sense of equality among human persons. No one is superior to another and if people find themselves with extra goods it is because God has given them these things and through God they should be willing to share these possessions because they experience other people as their sisters and brothers.

A fourth condition: elements of a supernatural religion which St James places before us in the second reading. Since I am speaking to a Catholic audience composed of many religious women, many committed lay people, and base communities of faith who are listening on their radios, I want to tell you my beloved Christians that our religion is not satisfied with the three things that I have already spoken about, interiority, the law of God and good works.

There is another more divine horizon: the supernatural life, transcendence. Today Saint James tells us: *The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures* (34). In other words, those who are in God's grace are as if they had been begotten directly by God. The life that was given to us by our parents is not enough. This is natural life that since the time of Adam has been deprived of the grace of God. As we said last Sunday: that which is most beautiful about the Christian life is the fact that beside the life that was given to us by our parents (a life that is perhaps very pleasing and we may experience ourselves as intelligent and capable of doing many things) we still need something more, a second floor of the building if you will. That second floor is the grace of God. Grace is a gift that God wants to share with us: forgiveness of our sins, making us children of God, heirs of the glory of God so that when we die we are able to possess him eternally. This is the first element: to live in the grace of God.

And secondly, the word of truth. He begot us in the word of truth. Saint James exhorts us to accept with meekness the word planted in us, which is able to save us. (35) To believe, to hope --- this is the Christian's grace in our time. When many give up hope, when it seems that the nation has nowhere to go, as though it is all over, the Christian says: *No, we have not yet begun! We are still awaiting God's grace.* Yes, we are just beginning to build on this earth, and we will be a

blessed nation and will escape from so much evil. A time will come when there will be no more abductions, when we will be happy and can walk our streets and our countryside without fear of being tortured or kidnapped. That time will come! We have a song: *I have faith that all will change*. It must change if we truly believe in the Word that saves, if we truly place all of our trust in that Word.

For me, this is the greatest honor in the mission the Lord has entrusted to me: to maintain that hope and that faith in God's people and to tell them: *People of God, be worthy of your name* People of God is not the same as the people of El Salvador. You as the People of God are part of the people of El Salvador. You are an elect group. You are like the *firstfruits of salvation* (36) that Saint James spoke about. The People of God, those who have been baptized and are members of different communities, those who are Church --- all of these people must honor these lofty gifts of hope and faith and grace and divine filiation so that we do not become lost in the confusion of things on this earth. Even though we might be religious women and men yet very often false religions stir around us and this can create confusion. In our religion and even in our churches there can be present a false worship of the Lord. On the other hand, and in this there can be no mistake: repent of sin, live in the grace of God, place all your trust in the Lord --- these characterize the People of God and makes us the people of hope.

I want my Church, my Archdiocese, my beloved communities, my priests, my women religious ... I want all of us to be an expression of the divine life, an expression of transcendence, an expression of that hope beyond history but a hope that has begun to become a reality to the degree that we live the transcendent reality. I find it difficult to understand those people who do not understand transcendence. When we speak about injustice here on this earth and then denounce that injustice, these people think that we are meddling in politics. But we denounce the injustices of the world in the name of the just kingdom of God. In the name of the eternal reward we speak to those who still labor on this earth: *Work and place all your effort, your technical, professional, and political abilities at the service of the nation so that El Salvador does not become the product of decayed and rotten hearts but rather the product of holy politics and justice that should be exercised by the children of God who are responsible for the political situation on earth.*

### **The honor of the People of God**

Finally, before ending, the third point: the honour of the People of God. With eloquence Moses speaks to the people who are arriving at the Promised Land and tells them: *Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. In your observance of the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin upon you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations who will hear of all these statutes and say, "This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people." For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him? Or what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today* (37). Here we have various honours for the people that truly puts its honour in obeying the law of the Lord.

First, you will live: this is true life. My beloved sisters and brothers, I, for my part, do not want to have a life like many people who are powerful but who do not live in truth. Instead they live and are very vigilant, their conscience is not calm, and they live with great anxiety. This is not life. *If you fulfill the law of God, you will live* (38). Even if they kill me, I am not afraid.\* If we

die with a clear conscience, with a pure heart that has produced many good works, then what can death do to us? Thanks to God we have the example of our beloved pastoral ministers who share the dangers of our pastoral work, including the danger of being killed. Each priest that has died is, for me, a new concelebrant of the Eucharist of our Archdiocese. I know they are here giving us the encouragement because they knew how to die without fear and because in conscience they know they were committed to the law of the Lord: the preferential option for the poor.\*

*You will take possession of the land the Lord has promised.* (39) Who can live with more joy on earth than those who carry this hope in their hearts? Yes, many temptations abound today but when we fulfill the law of God some people will say: *but only you are honored here. Look at how everyone is taking advantage of you.* Let us be able to say: *Ah! those who are taking advantage here! Even though I might appear foolish in the midst of people who are all seeking for some advantage, I do not want to change my hope of heaven which will be given to me because I have fulfilled the law of God. I will not change my hope even though all others might trample on the law of God and sell their souls to the devil.\**

Then, the characteristics of people who fulfill the law: wisdom, intelligence and justice.(40) What would we give so that El Salvador could have this image of wisdom, intelligence and justice? Imagine if our nation were truly wise, intelligent and just and not in some two-faced manner. We can do this if we obey the law of God.

We can, above all, experience the nearness of God when we invoke his name. (41) We know that if we try to obey the Law of God, then when we are in need of God we can invoke his name and yes, he is with us. God has not abandoned us. We are the ones who become aware of his nearness. Saint Augustine said: *You were with me but I was not with you*<sup>18</sup>. But when we pray with calmness to act with justice and to obey God, then we experience the nearness of God. *O Beauty ever ancient, ever new!*

My sisters and brothers, we the Church, pilgrims who have come together to look for a dwelling place where we can celebrate the Eucharist because we do not have our permanent home ... it has been taken from us by some people today, by some other people tomorrow ... Let us not be afflicted! We are the People of God! Let us give honor to this title by obeying the Lord and then we shall see that we are truly salt and light for our country.

## **Life of the Church**

Allow me a few more minutes because I want to speak about our Church community and then I will conclude. When I refer to the works of the Archdiocesan Church and the work of the Pope on behalf of the universal Church, I want to call all people to a sense of solidarity with the Church, which, despite persecution, draws people together to be true men and women, gifted with wisdom, intelligence and justice, and called to be light for our nation. Let us be this Church.

This is also the Church that has been slandered this week. You have read how the beloved Sisters who minister in Arcata were told that they were to blame for all the disorders in that area and that they instigated the subversive activity of the people.<sup>19</sup> I am a witness of the hatred of soldiers there. I saw that when I arrived in the village where the courageous Sisters met me despite being prohibited to do so by the military authorities. I want to greet these Sisters and want to tell them that I advised them to leave there for a while and I also support them in all their apostolic endeavors because I also know that the things that are being said about them are all lies.\*

I am sending a letter to the President and to the Ministry of Defense and I want to be able to count on your support because we are Church. The letter reads as follows: *For several weeks I have pointed out in my Sunday homilies the systematic harassment that the security forces are carrying out in the area of Chalatenango against the pastoral ministry of the Church and the tranquility of the people. I not only have reliable information about this harassment but I witnessed this personally and on various occasions I have been a victim of this harassment.*

*In light of the fact that this attitude has not changed but only gotten worse, I address myself directly to you and ask you to order those responsible for these actions to cease placing obstacles in way of the Church's ministry and to cease the unjust repression of the campesino population.*

*The harassment by the Security Forces consists in unjustly intensifying the searches and slanders against the catechists, religious women, priests and the Episcopal vicar who exercises his priestly ministry in the area of Chalatenango in my name. They have prevented Christians from participating in the Masses in that area, they have been unable to celebrate their patron feast day, and they are prohibited from gathering together periodically to reflect on the Word of God. There have been numerous illegal arrests and various people have disappeared. The Security Forces have been allowed to assassinate others with no fear of punishment. Such was the case when Francisco Fuentes Landaverde was assassinated and his body was later found with seven others on August 24<sup>th</sup>.*

*Recently this abuse has been manifested in the publication of a statement in which two Sisters in Arcatao have been accused of instigating vandalism and provoking the authorities. We have been told that this is not the truth.*

*I believe that this public slander that is made in an environment of systematic persecution of the Church and repression of the people is an attempt to discredit the work of the Sisters who were previously expelled from the country for a brief time. According to public statements their expulsion was a mistake. Above all I fear that people want to distort the facts in an attempt to justify in public opinion some future repressive action against them and other pastoral ministers in this area.*

*In order to avoid having to lament a new irreparable mistake on the part of your subordinates, I have asked the Sisters in Arcatao to leave that place for a prudent period of time that will allow you to think this question over better and give orders to those responsible to respect the Sisters and stop harassing them. After this time, they will return again to Arcatao with my full support. I have received no evidence against them to demonstrate to me that they are instigating acts of vandalism, and I do have many testimonies of the excellent Church work that they are performing in the area, the results of which I have personally witnessed.*

*I hope that you, Mr. President and Mr. Minister of Defense will guarantee the free pastoral activity not only of the Sisters but of all the pastoral workers approved by the Archdiocese, and will take means to end the harassment and repression of the Church and the people in Chalatenango and the whole country. We wish to believe in the spoken promises of the President regarding the democratization of the country. But unfortunately, these actions tend to contradict those promises.<sup>20</sup> This is the letter that I am going to send.\**

In order not to abuse your time any longer I am only going to point out those communities where I have had some personal contact and thus be able to tell these communities how glad I am to see that the true religion is being lived in so many parts of our Archdiocese.

We celebrated the second anniversary of the death and assassination of Felipe de Jesús in El Salitre, Tejutla.

In La Palma we celebrated the second anniversary of the cooperative La Semilla de Dios.

On Tuesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, in the Christian community of Santa Tecla we gathered together memories of Father Rafael Palacios. The words of the gospel have been proven: *by their fruits you will know them* (42). There in that village one can only find the fruit of love.

On Wednesday, August 29<sup>th</sup> the people of San Juan Cojutepeque celebrated their patronal feast.

On Thursday, August 30, there was a wonderful gathering of the pastors from the Vicariate of Mejicanos.

Today at 4:00pm we will celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation in Ateos.

I want to announce that in San José de la Montaña we are going to provide more vocational assistance by offering psychological guidance to young people of both sexes. We will also offer this service to other people who are seeking some form of psychological assistance. Two of our seminarians have been offered scholarships by the Dominican Republic.

Next month our Legal Aid office will be celebrating their fourth anniversary. I have in my hand one of their works but I am going to allow you to read about this in the next edition of *Orientación*.<sup>21</sup> Here I simply want to mention the number of cases they have handled: 47 cases of a criminal nature, 12 civil cases, 8 cases dealing with leases, 2 cases dealing with transit matters, 23 individual labor cases, 7 collective labor cases, 94 petitions of habeas corpus (some of these cases were challenges of habeas corpus that are still unresolved), and 19 cases dealing with public order (these cases were presented in January).<sup>22</sup>

This is the community in which we live and the community that I invite to reflect on the concepts presented here. How I wish that all of us, beginning with myself, were members of a Church that was defined by Jesus: a Church not lacking but filled with interiority, a Church always doing good works and a Church that lives the truth of divine revelation and not human doctrines. From this perspective let us be the people who are honored because they fulfill the law of God. My dear sisters and brothers, may each one of us, you and I, give honor to the beautiful name that we received on the day of our Baptism: the People of God. So be it.

---

1 Guillermo Cuéllar, author of the song to Rafael Palacios.

<sup>2</sup> St Augustin, *Confessions*, X, 27: PL 32, 795.

<sup>3</sup> See *Message to the people of Latin America*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriela Mistral, *Oración de la maestra*.

<sup>5</sup> See "Frente a los gritos y la violencia, la vía pacífica del voto es la única solución democrática", Communication of the Information Secretary of the President of the Republic of El Salvador, *El Diario de Hoy*, 27 August 1979.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 28 August 1979.

<sup>9</sup> See La Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (CDHS) ante el pueblo salvadoreño, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 August 1979.

<sup>10</sup> "Defensa señala actividad de subversión en el país", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 August 1979.

<sup>11</sup> *El Diario de Hoy*, 30 August 1979.

---

<sup>12</sup> See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 30 August 1979.

<sup>13</sup> See Comunicado de *Fe y Alegría* ante la persecución y asesinato de maestros (27 August 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 29 August 1979.

<sup>14</sup> See *El Diario de Hoy*, 19 August 1979.

<sup>15</sup> See “Solidaridad”, *Orientación*, 2 September 1979.

<sup>16</sup> In his pastoral diary Mons. Romero notes that on March 28 August he had a meeting with “Messers Poma and De Sola”. See Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, *Su diario*, San Salvador, 1999, pp. 247-248.

<sup>17</sup> See *Orientación*, 2 and 9 September 1979.

<sup>18</sup> See St Augustine, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> See “Ola de bandolerismo en la zona norte del país”, *El Diario de Hoy*, 29 August 1979, and *La Prensa Gráfica*, 29 August 1979.

<sup>20</sup> This letter was also published in *Orientación*, 9 September 1979.

<sup>21</sup> See *Orientación*, 9 September 1979.

<sup>22</sup> “...during the months of January to June”, See *ibid.*

*Marginal References* (1) Nb 19,15-18; (2) Mk 7,6; (3) Jn 2,19; (4) Jn 2,21-22; (5) Jn 4,21-24; (6) Mk 7,7; (7) Mk 11,17; (8) Jm 2,17; (9) Jn 18,28; (10) Mk 7,9-13; (11) Mk 7,6; (12) Mk 7,15; (13) Mk 7,6; (14) Ez 33,11; (15) 1K 8,39; (16) Mt 7,21; (17) Mk 7,8; (18) GS 4; (19) Jn 1,11; (20) Mk 7,8; (21) Mt 7,21; (22) Jm 1,27; (23) P 1134; (24) Mt 25,40; (25) Mt 25,35-36; (26) Mk 7,15; (27) Mk 7,21-22; (28) RN 14; (29) Mk 7,21; (30) P 547; (31) Mk 7,15; (32) Mk 7,8; (33) Jm 1,27; (34) Jm 1,18; (35) Jm 1,21b; (36) Jm 1,18; (37) Dt 4,1.6-7; (38) Dt 4,1; (39) Dt 4,1; (40) Dt 4,6; (41) Dt 4,7; (42) Mt 7,16.