

THE CHURCH, CHRIST'S BODY IN TIME

Feast of the Divine Saviour of the World
August 6, 1977

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
2 Peter 1:16-19
Luke 9:28b-36

My dear brother, Bishop Rivera Damas, beloved brother priests, dear faithful, people of El Salvador who fill this plaza that faces the cathedral of the Archdiocese and all those who are listening with great interest to the transmission of this celebration that honors the divine patron of our nation.

In order to grasp the meaning of the event that has just been proclaimed in the Gospel, that is, the transfiguration of the Lord who presents himself with *his face changed in appearance and his clothing... dazzling white*, beautiful and so attractive that Peter wanted to remain there and exclaims: *Master, it is good that we are here* (a) --- to understand the meaning of all this, we only have to look at this people gathered here. My dear Catholics, I tell you that all of us, the Church, we who are gathered here, are the transfiguration of Christ: a people enlightened by faith, encouraged by great hope and sealed with great love. We are truly the glory of the Lord, and more especially so when we recognize that the glorious name of our country is a gift of the Lord's predilection. We attempt to honor the Lord, to receive him warmly, and to render him homage every year on August 6th. It is not poetic fancy to say that this people is the transfiguration of Christ. It is a theological and evangelical reality that expresses the sublime ideal of Christ in forming his Church.

On this beautiful day of August 6th, I have the pleasure of gifting the Archdiocese with my second Pastoral Letter entitled: *The Church, the Body of Christ in history*. Here today, I simply want to present a summary of this letter, but I encourage all of you to study this document so that your doubts might be dispelled and clarified. All those who have unconditionally adhered to the pastoral lines of the Archdiocese, may you be strengthened in your trust and be assured that you walk in the ways of Jesus. For those who have some reservations, who love the Church but still suspect that their bishop has become a communist and their priests are preaching subversion and violence, you who hate and slander us, know that you are slandering the Body of Christ. Repent! We begin by asking if these evident changes of the modern Church are a betrayal of the Gospel or changes demanded of her in order to be faithful to the Gospel. What are these changes? We will present this matter in two ways.

The Church in the world

In the first place, the Church has understood that at times she has lived with her back to the world, but now she has been converted and has entered into dialogue with the world. The Second Vatican Council wrote a beautiful document entitled the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (b). The Church is no stranger to the world. Everything

that is human touches her heart and she feels that she must continue to intensify her dialogue with this world in which she must take interest. All of you, especially you who are poor or suffer or abused and without voice, the Church identifies herself with this world that suffers, but not exclusively, for she also identifies herself with all people who build a better world.

A second way to view the actual changes is to realize that we live enmeshed in two parallel histories that will be joined together at the time of our death. At times we have been told that the history of the world and the history of our nation were of no interest to us and that we were only interested in the world beyond, in heaven. But the Church, reflecting on the Bible, came to see that this Sacred Book is the history of a people and at the same time, a history of salvation. She has come to understand that human history is penetrated with the history of salvation and with the saving plan of God. Therefore, there is not a worldly history and a history of salvation. Rather the history of every people is the concrete context in which God desires to save them through the intermediary of his Church. The Church, then, identifies herself with this history and the Church marches forward with history and tells the people of El Salvador: We have to save ourselves within our own history, with a history that is penetrated with the light of salvation and Christian hope. The whole history of El Salvador, her politics, her economy, and everything that constitutes the everyday life of the people of this nation, must be illuminated with faith. There should be no divorce between history and faith. The history of the people of this country must be penetrated with the plan of God and then lived with faith and hope as a history that will lead us to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Whence has the Church received these extraordinary changes? When the Council came to a close, the Pope was accused by some who said: *The Council has forgotten the Gospel and been converted to the ways of humankind*¹. The same words are spoken here: *The Church has forgotten her mission. She has entered the political arena and become Marxist. She preaches revolution and hatred.* The Church is accused in a way that is most painful and yet the Church's new language is a demand placed upon her if she is to remain faithful to the Gospel of Christ. Thanks to God, year after year, we are able to see on the face of the transfigured Christ, his pleasure with his Church that rejects a form of Church that would betray him. Today, on August 6, 1977, we see a people who have been drawn together by Christ, a people who joined together in a beautiful procession yesterday afternoon, a people who filled the cathedral and participated in a prayer vigil last night and a people who, today, at this beautiful outdoor Mass where all the parishes have come together, clearly states that the Church is walking on the path of Christ. The illuminated face of Christ is like a compass that guides the pilgrims and shows them that they are on the right path.

Like Saint Paul, the Church turns toward Christ and asks: *Who are you, sir (c)*. If the Church were to forget to ask Christ: *Who are you so that I might follow you, so that I might lend you my feet to walk on the paths of my country's history, so that I might lend you my mouth to proclaim your message and my hands to work and bring about your Kingdom?* If the Church were to forget Christ, then Christ himself would come to this gathering each year and ask us as he asked his disciples: *Who do the people of El Salvador say that I am? (d)*. The Church, with tears in her eyes, spittle on her face and her virginal garment stained, would have to say: *They have treated me as a traitor. They have torn my garment. They have spat in my face with propaganda campaigns. They have defiled me and said terrible things about me. They have accused me of being unfaithful to you and selling myself to strange ideologies.* Then the Lord will console her: *If you say this morning that I am the One who represents the Father, then you walk on the road of truth.*

So it is, my sisters and brothers. We have just listened to the words of the Eternal Father: *This is my chosen one; listen to him* (e). We know that as Church in 1977, we have not separated ourselves from the beloved Son of God. We know that today, August 6, 1977, we proclaim the same faith as Pedro de Alvarado who founded this city that has now become a great metropolitan area. We proclaim the same faith that many centuries ago was preached by the missionaries from Spain. Yes, in 1977, we preach the same faith, but naturally we integrate into our preaching the changes of Vatican II and the Medellin Conference. All of this assures us that the true and authentic Christ continues to be the Christ of this Church --- Christ who is both God and man. As God, Christ is the one who can explain the beginning and the end of each human life and knows better than anyone the mystery of the human person and the history El Salvador, for he is the King of our history. As man who became incarnate twenty centuries ago, God became man in history. He lived in a country dominated by a foreign power. He lived in Palestine and Nazareth and shows us how we, in El Salvador, ought to live our history.

Let us listen as Christ teaches us that his incarnation sums up the preaching and message that is synthesized by Mark: *This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel* (f). Be converted to the Good News! The Good News that Jesus preached was a proclamation of great hope and a configuration of humankind into a body where all recognized one another as sisters and brothers and where God was seen as the Father of all. In our effort to come to know the true God, we come to recognize that our sisters and brother are created in the image of God. In our effort to love one another and not separate people by social class or hatred or vengeance, we draw near to God.

The Church preaches the Kingdom of God

This message of Jesus that the Kingdom of God is near is the message that the Church continues to preach. The Kingdom of God is near and when we come to understand this message that was proclaimed twenty centuries ago and that is proclaimed by evangelizers in 1977, we begin to love one another and create community and detest distinctions based on class. Know that the Kingdom of God cannot be present where sin rules. Sinners are told to repent. Conversion is the word of order in the Church. We do not preach against the powerful with hatred or resentment, but with the love of one who wants them to be saved. The Son of God entered the world for this same reason. In the time of Jesus, the rich were converted and shared their wealth with others. Sinners were converted and found in Christ the joy of discovering that, without any distinction, they were joined to others as sisters and brothers and that all were children of the same Father. The Church continues to preach this today.

Therefore when the Church is accused of being subversive, of preaching hatred and dividing people into social classes, she is being slandered in the most painful and delicate dimensions of her conscience. The Church never preaches hatred. When the Church raises her voice and demands a solution to what Medellin called *institutionalized violence* (g), she must shout vehemently, in the same way as the prophets who cried out against the unjust structures of their time. The Church does not preach violence, but has provoked others to use violence, hatred, torture, pain, and social inequality. Therefore, the Church must use strong language because it is also the language of Christ who, without hatred or vengeance, seeks to root out sin from the hearts of people and replace it with the Kingdom of God.

Throughout history, the Church has preached this. She is also happy to know that she is faithful to Jesus Christ, even though at certain times in history, she may not have had this same fidelity and had to ask forgiveness. Therefore, as the bishops stated in their message dated March 5, 1977: *One who denounces must be prepared to be denounced*². I have stated that I am open to dialogue and all those who find anything improper or unsuitable in our preaching or in the message that the Church preaches, come to us, correct us, and help us to preach better. But while there might be some defects in our language or style, we are convinced that the substance of our message is the same as Jesus’.

Like Christ, we opt in a preferential way for those who suffer. We do this, not to be partial, but to point out to all people the road of charity and love. We know that the poor must also be converted. Indeed, the situation of social injustice that reigns in our continent is not only the fault of the rich and the powerful. Those poor persons who do not want to develop themselves, who are lazy, who do not cultivate their life so that they can live as children of God, are collaborating with this situation of social sin. Thus, the Church preaches to them about development. The Church must suffer because she proclaims this promotion of the human person and wants to awaken them from their state of conformity and make them active in designing their own destiny. Those who want the “masses” to continue in their state of sleep, who do not want people who are critical and able to reshape their lives and history, will be disappointed when people leave their condition of exploitation. Therefore, when the Church preaches this authentic liberation of Christ, she helps some people develop and enables others to put aside their selfishness. Like Christ in his time, the Church speaks to everyone: *Leave your selfish ways! Repent! The Kingdom of God is near..* We will be culpable if we do not collaborate in the construction of this world.

The Archdiocese of the Divine Saviour

So my sisters and brothers, we come to the last part of this pastoral letter that I will soon offer to you and that, this morning, I offer to the Lord as a precious gift of the Archdiocese, the most beautiful of these hosts that will be offered to God by myself and my beloved brother priests, collaborators in this beautiful process of evangelization. These hosts represent the Archdiocese, this local church that can say this morning to the transfigured Lord that she is his beloved spouse. If in any way her garment has been stained, she can purify herself through penance and conversion and return to the Lord as his beloved faithful spouse. I consider all this slander against the Church as unjust and so I call all faithful Catholics to pray to God for the conversion of those who hate and slander. The Church does not preach hatred, but love. If our word is violent, it is to root out the reign of sin from the hearts of men and women and bring about their conversion to the Lord. The Church is not Marxist or committed to any social system.

With regard to all these social systems, the Church simply defends her religious ethic and states that atheistic communism is incompatible with her transcendence and faith in God. We have also said that the materialism of liberal capitalism is also atheistic and an idol because this system adores money and defends this money with no regard for the dignity of others. Thus, there is sin here. The Church defends the ethic of her religion and her love of God. In looking at the different social systems, this religious ethic is most important. Without becoming Marxist or capitalist, she speaks to all these people and invites them to be converted from materialism. She also urges them to adore the one God and allow their social

concerns to be changed into a desire to build the Kingdom of God and thus become one with all humankind.

The Church is not political because she has learned from the Second Vatican Council that civil authority rejoices in its own autonomy (h). The Church, also, has its autonomy. Yet each one, in its own field, has to collaborate with the other in working together for the common good. The common good is the politics of the Church. Because of her moral role in the world, she has a right to denounce political abuses and thus, tell the powerful that they are not God. If they have authority to rule, it is because God has given them this authority. Therefore, they have to measure their laws and actions and examine their conformity to the law of the Lord. As the early Christians spoke to their emperors and Caesars, so, too, we must also say that it is illicit to burn incense before them, because they are not gods. Christians, preachers and priests have the obligation to obey God in the first place and only then, men (i). They should not allow themselves to be chained by conditions imposed on them by civil authorities. God tells us what we must preach. This holy freedom will be best supported by sharing her honors and not clinging to them. In fact, when the Church clings to these honors and privileges, she actually loses prestige and some of her moral authority.

My sisters and brother, thanks to God the Archdiocese can now offer to the Eternal Father and the transfigured Lord a united Church. The presence of these priests, seldom seen in the history of our Church, is a sign that the preachers of God's Word are in accord with their bishop, a herald of my venerable predecessor, Bishop Luís Chávez y González. Our pastoral lines of action have not been invented by us. They come from the Second Vatican Council and the necessary changes are the response of a Church that, as the body of Christ in history, questions herself: *How do you want me to speak at this time in history?* Jesus tells me: *You must speak differently from those who spoke four centuries ago, from those who spoke during the time of the primitive Church. I go with you and I need your mouth to speak to men and women in 1977 in a language that they can understand.*

This unity, my sisters and brothers, has been felt in many ways. I have just recently arrived from a trip where my brother bishops in Central America presented me with letters from all different parts of Latin America and in a moving way, expressed their solidarity with this Church of the Archdiocese of El Salvador. The bishops, together with the humble letters of our people and the letters from professionals and university students, are telling us that they want everyone to be gathered as one Church and that our Archdiocese, far from betraying the Gospel, is actually being the Church of the transfigured Lord.

We also tell Christ that we offer him a Church that is stained by blood, a Church whose white garment is stained by persecution. We have had persecution and there is persecution because theologically, persecution is another way of saying that the proclamation of the Church's message is impeded. This has indeed occurred. The proclamation of the authentic message of the Church has been impeded. They want to put conditions on our preaching. Yet, we must listen to Jesus, for as the Eternal Father has said this morning: *Listen to him; he will tell you what to preach* (j). Our priests experience persecution. It is not necessary to repeat this fact because everyone knows and is aware of the fact that the Church is persecuted in the person of the beneficiaries of her message, in her people, in her *campesinos*, in her reflection groups, in those places where fear and terror are sown and people are mistrustful of one another. In authentic language, all of this can rightfully be called persecution. But this morning, the Church raises up her eyes to her Divine Spouse and says: *I give you thanks because I place my hope in you, and so I commit myself to you. Give*

courage to my children in this time of persecution. May all of us be willing to lay down our lives to defend this faith that must be professed.

My sisters and brothers, we are a Church of hope. Because the Church no longer finds her power in worldly realities, the Church has been able to awaken great hope in the hearts of people. The powers that the world offered the Church and offered out of self-interest have failed her and so she has stripped herself of all this power in order to be faithful to the Gospel. Now, in her poverty, the Church knows what it means to be with the poor and with all those who want to live with her and live with hope in her. Now the Church finds support in the weakness of the abused Jesus and in her own weakness as the spouse of Christ. She also finds support in her poverty, her Gospel and her authentic following of the Lord.

Like Saint Paul, we feel that *in our weakness, we are strong* (k), because Christ is all-powerful, more powerful than all the powers of the world. We have this hope, a hope that we want to extend to all citizens because we are all children of this one nation. How are we going to see ourselves as sisters and brothers when we reveal such an ugly face to those who live in other lands? I have just experienced this reality. While the Church shines forth in beauty and fidelity, our poor country is seen as one that has to be reconstructed. The Church wants to offer her cooperation: defense of human dignity, human rights and the defense of the dignity of God so that God might be respected in the midst of our people. Only in this way, only by respecting the law of God can our nation once again reveal her truly beautiful face, that face that she has received from Christ and the most beautiful name, the country of the Divine Savior.

To this hope we add another, namely, that the Church not only continue to work with her authenticity, beauty and unity but also work with the hope that she can become more beautiful in this time of persecution. May she be understood by her persecutors, with no hatred or resentment. May she use all the rich potential that Christ offers her to sanctify family life, politics, and the economy. In this way we will enable Christ to speak, here, in El Salvador, and say: *The kingdom of God is near. Repent!* (l).

Divine Savior of the world, through the intercession of your most holy Mother, the Queen of Peace and Patroness of El Salvador, we pray that this Church and people of hope, who today represent your transfiguration, might rejoice in the happiness of seeing their hopes fulfilled. So be it.

¹ See Paul VI, Allocution on the closure of Vatican II (7 December 1965).

² See "Mensaje de la Conferencia Episcopal de El Salvador sobre el momento actual que vive el país", *Orientación*, 20 March 1977.

Margin References (a) Lk 9,33: (b) GS 1: (c) Ac 9,25: (d) Lk 9,18: (e) Lk 9,35: (f) Mk 1,15: (g) M 2,16: (h) GS 76: (i) Ac 5,29: (j) Lk 9,35: (k) 1 Co 1,25: (l) Mk 1,15.