

THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 7, 1977

Wisdom 18:6-9
Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-9
Luke 12:32-48

My dear sisters and brothers.

During this past week the Church of the Archdiocese has celebrated the exaltation of its patron. I want to thank the faithful for the devotion and the enthusiasm of your participation in honoring our Divine Patron. I want to thank in a special way all those persons, priests, religious and lay who contributed in any way to the realization of this splendid festivity in honor of the Divine Savior.

Life of the Church

This past week we once again mourned together. On Thursday, in Cojutepeque, we buried the venerable priest, Father Manuel Guardado, seventy-nine years old. He led a hidden life, like that of a violet, but like the violet, he was filled with a wonderful spirituality. He was a very learned man; he was a doctor and spent his life studying. He was a wonderful example, for as one of our elders, he renewed himself in the Church's thinking. It was wonderful to listen to the words of the pastor of Cojutepeque, Father Ayala, who at the time of burial said that despite their difference in age, Father Guardado was his guide and they spoke together on a regular basis. He lived the renewal of Church that was initiated by the Second Vatican Council and the Medellin Conference. Unlike many priests younger than he, Father Guardado was not scandalized by any of these changes, but knew that the Church could not be mistaken. He loved the Church, and followed her until the time of his death. Despite his eighty years, he was a priest renewed in the thinking of the Church. How wonderful if we could instill this spirit of our venerable brother into the whole community, into people of every age! How wonderful if everyone was renewed with the Church's teaching! Indeed, the greatest tragedy of our day is that there are people who do not want to understand the Church and her message.

Despite all the things that occurred this week, or perhaps it is better to say that, seeing the value in the concrete history of our nation, our family and our diocese, God continues the work of salvation. Yesterday, I announced the publication of my Second Pastoral Letter¹. A pastoral letter contains the teaching of the bishop and is a way to orient the diocese. With the publication of this letter, we desire to orient those minds that might be confused, those people of good will who are surprised by the actual changes in the Church, who are tottering in their faith, and who have doubts. We want to tell you that there is no reason to doubt. We also want to speak to those who persecute the Church and remind them that they are sinning against the Holy Spirit. This is not a special grace of God but a terrible tragedy and therefore we invite you to repentance. This pastoral letter is also directed to good people, to people of

good will, to those who in good will, doubt and are searching for the light and truth. We also have hope that those who act with ill-will, those who persecute and slander the Church, those who, as Scripture tells us, have perverted their hearts and serve created things rather than the Creator, my sisters and brothers, we pray that all might be truly converted to the Lord. This pastoral letter contains a line of thought that is wonderfully enlightened by the Word of God.

One of the changes in the Church is seen in breaking the dichotomy and the separation between the Church and world. The Church has understood that there is a unity between the history of humankind and the history of salvation. In our spirituality and in our way of thinking as Church, we formerly viewed the world as despicable. We viewed the history of humankind as a parameter, a time of testing, and thus the history of humankind progressed in parallel with the spiritual history of God's salvation. There was an almost impassable separation between material and spiritual realities, between the profane and the sacred. We counseled a type of conformity: move through life and history as best one can, and then will come heaven and eternal salvation and be careful here on earth so as not to be condemned to hell. In this way, history seemed to be something that went on apart from ourselves.

When the Church pondered this in prayer and reflected on the Word of God, she discovered that God has a plan to save humankind and to do so by giving a value to their history. In the history of the people of Israel, God wove his plan of salvation and this paradigm becomes actual in the history of all people. The history of the Savior, with its nobility, politics, defects, concerns and all the other good things, is the history of the people of El Salvador and the history of El Salvador is the place where God wants to meet with the men and women of El Salvador and save them.

In light of this perspective that I have just mentioned, the Church, as the Kingdom of God on earth, loves this history of humankind, loves this nation more than anyone else. But as for El Salvador, the Church wants the Kingdom of God to be reflected on every page of its history. For this reason, as the Church identifies herself with this world and this concrete history, she must also be aware of the shadows of the mystery of iniquity, that is, she must be aware of the presence of sin in the world. Thus, if the history of humankind separates itself from the history of salvation, from the salvific plans of God, it is the fault of humankind. It is because the men and women of El Salvador have made this history sinful and have allowed sin to enter into our history. Therefore, the Church, who is with God and against sin, has the mission of rooting out sin from history. From this perspective, conflicts will naturally arise between the Church and the history of humankind. The Church cannot tolerate sin and has been given a mission of sanctifying the history of El Salvador and freeing this history from anything that might make people a slave of sin. This is the mission of the Church and of all those who are part of the Church --- not only the priests, but all those who have been baptized and call themselves Christian. All baptized persons are part of this Kingdom of God.

In today's Gospel we hear the tender words that Jesus speaks to his Apostles and to all Catholics: *Do not be afraid any longer, little flock (a)*. What a beautiful name! A very descriptive name that makes us think of the crowds that participated in the procession on Friday, and in the Mass that was celebrated in the plaza yesterday. There, in these celebrations, we were one people. Weren't there distinguished people there? Yes, there were many distinguished people there, but the Church is not interested in the social or economic or political position of people. For the Church, the people are those who follow Christ enthusiastically --- this is authentic history. Authentic history is not written by those who

place idols in the midst of history and separate themselves from worshipping the true God. Therefore, the authentic people of Christ, and the authentic people of God, even though they are qualified by the words of the Gospel, is this little flock --- the people are this little flock. God is not interested in the number of people nor in the quality of the people; God is simply interested in this little flock that he has chosen. God has given the Kingdom to this little flock: *Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom* (b).

The history of salvation

In the first reading we encounter the people that was chosen by God. Look at the beautiful way in which the three readings present us the history of salvation! They present us with a beautiful catechetical lesson on the history of salvation that begins with the vocation of Abraham. Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews--- we are not sure if Paul is the author of this letter since today a more critical study of this letter has been undertaken --- but whoever the author might be, presents us with an analysis of the history of Israel which was injected into the history of salvation.

An Israelite, a humble shepherd, is chosen by God (always the poor), and God speaks to this shepherd of Israel: *I have chosen you. Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you* (c). This Sunday, the Word of God calls us to a life of faith and Abraham, the father of believers, is presented to us as a model of this faith. He listens to God who tells him: *I have chosen you. Go to the land that I will show you*. With no knowledge of where this land might be, he leaves his present secure situation and moves on, believing in the word of God. This is faith: to believe in the word of a God who cannot deceive. God knows where this land is, even though I do not. Therefore, I will leave my land, my security, my herd and I will go with God. So Abraham begins his pilgrimage, he begins his pilgrimage of faith, not knowing where all of this will lead him. His sure destiny is the Word of God. So Abraham walks, unsure of where he is going, but trusting in God. The Lord God gives Abraham another test. He promises him that a people will be born from his seed, and all nations will be blessed through him. But he is elderly and his wife Sarah is sterile. It is impossible! Nevertheless, God has spoken and Abraham believes. One day, when the sterility of Sarah is made fertile and she bears a son Isaac, Abraham jumps with joy for from this child will descend the people that God had promised. How absurd are the things of God! God told Abraham: *Take your son Isaac... and offer him up as a holocaust* (d). Abraham is obedient, takes his son up the mountain and is willing to offer up Isaac, the son whom he had hoped for. Saint Paul tells us that Abraham was willing to do this because: *he reasons that God was able to raise even from the dead* (e). This is a faith in the impossible. At the very moment that Abraham is about to kill his son, God stops him, because God was simply testing his faith. Paul then compares the faith of Abraham to the faith of the Christians who believe in the One who died on the cross, was raised to new life and now lives. Isaac is a Christ figure --- dead because God wanted him to die, risen because God wanted to return his life to him.

Abraham is the first believer in the Paschal Mystery. His son has, as it were, been raised from the dead, a death that came about because of Abraham's faith and obedience. Saint Paul praises this faith and sees this faith in those Christians who believe in a Jesus who has died but also in a Jesus who has been raised to new life and now lives on through the centuries. Thus the faith of Abraham is a sign of our faith. When Abraham dies without knowing the land that God had promised him, his children, the patriarchs of the Old

Testament, continue to live with this same faith, trusting that God had not deceived them. In the midst of the history of humankind, they appear as people who are deluded, nevertheless, their faith gives them stability in this history.

One of the patriarchs is imprisoned in Egypt during some of the most difficult times in its history. Look at how God enters not only the history of Israel but also of Egypt. For from Egypt will come forward another precious historical chapter: that of Moses. Moses is God's confidant and God speaks to him: *I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint... I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt* (f). When will God fulfill this promise of land that was made to Abraham? The people still have no land and yet the faith of the people of Israel remains alive and they believe that this will happen. They see themselves freed from oppression. Moses, despite his own feelings, obeys God: *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh* (g) with all his political power and army and chariots? Human prepotency faces human smallness ---these are times for the history of God. Moses is encouraged by his hope and faith and by the fact that God is with his people. Thus begin the exodus, the second book of the bible. Read it, my sisters and brothers. At this time of repression in El Salvador, let us not become discouraged. The situation of Israel in Egypt was more difficult.

The exodus is a song of God's victory. The first reading from the book of Wisdom beautifully captures that moment: the people of Israel are oppressed in Egypt, but on that holy night the angel of the Lord passes over and kills the first born sons of the Egyptians, a punishment for the crimes they have committed against the people of Israel. My sisters and brothers, every crime is punished. The Bible tells us: *all who take the sword will perish by the sword* (h). All those who abuse their power cannot remain unpunished. The exterminating angel passed over the land of Egypt and that night there was great mourning in the Egyptian homes, for God punished Pharaoh for his crimes (i). Authority is a terrible reality when it does not fulfill its obligation, when it raises up arms against the unarmed powerlessness of the people. All of Egypt mourned but the oppressed people began their exodus. The holy book that we have read today speaks about the events of this sacred night (j). The book of Wisdom states that on that holy night the Israelites felt that God had fulfilled his word. They initiated the Passover celebration. They ate the vegetables and the lamb that had been slaughtered on that Passover. Every year thereafter, the people of Israel celebrated that night of freedom. Through Christ, this celebration has been handed on to the Christian community and it continues to be a remembrance of an oppressed people who have been freed by God because of their faith and hope in the Lord.

Today's gospel and the reading from Saint Paul gather together all this history, this sacred history and remind us that in Christ we find the beginning of the history of all people. Blessed are the people who embrace Christ as their redeemer! In Christ is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, the realization of freedom that was begun with Moses. In Christ all the prophets and patriarchs find their fulfillment. The people that was promised to Abraham and that Abraham, trusting in God, began to search for without knowing where all this would lead him, this people was the people of Israel. Moses led this people to the Promised Land, which is not so much a geographical location but rather represents that people composed of saints and prophets. This saintly and prophetic people came to full maturity in a virgin, who would be Mother and Virgin, Mary. From Mary's womb comes forth the promise made to Abraham, the true Redeemer --- not simply the redeemer who will lead the people out Egypt, but the redeemer of all people: Christ, the Lord.

In this light, yesterday, the feast of the Savior of the world, El Salvador was shaken because the people felt that all the emotions of the people of Israel, all of God's promises, and all that had been spoken by the prophets, was fulfilled in Christ, our patron and our Savior. God has said that in Christ all nations will be saved. El Salvador will be saved and all people who place their confidence in Christ will be saved. Jesus tells his people: *Do no be afraid any longer, little flock* (k) because though they might be insignificant and small, yet they have been given the kingdom. You are Abraham; you are Moses; you are the new Israel. You carry within your hearts liberty that is life-giving. You carry within your hearts the song of victory. Even though you appear to be oppressed, despised by other, nevertheless, you will rejoice because you are with God.

Faith and hope will save the world

My sisters and brothers, today the Word of God wants to plant seeds of faith and hope in every human heart. Hope, therefore, together with faith must be the characteristics that distinguish true Catholics from those who have lost their faith and hope and placed their hope in the things of this world. Yet it is not political power, nor human wisdom or technology, or money that will save people. People will be saved by their faith in the smallness and the humiliation of Christ. People will be saved by their hope in the Almighty and their faith in God, the Savior. Any revolution that wants to build a better world based on hatred and violence and kidnappings and resentments cannot be a sign of the true Kingdom of God. God does not walk there, in pools of blood and torture. God walks on the pure road of hope and love.

My dear people of El Salvador, may the celebration of our patron awaken in us the faith of Abraham and the hope of Moses. May we have that faith and hope that allows us, in the midst of oppression, to trust the Lord. The Lord will come ... he will come when he wants to come and not when we want him to come.

There is a beautiful chapter in one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council that I believe is a beautiful commentary on today's readings, in which Christ says that the Kingdom of God *is like those servants who await their master's return from a wedding* (l). Woe to the one who is not on guard, who believes that the master will not come, who begins to beat the little ones and the servants and believes he is the owner of the house. When the master comes, he will surprise that one who is in no way the owner of the house but simply another servant. On the other hand, blessed are those faithful ones who are prepared, who in accord with an eastern custom, tighten their belt so that they are prompt in their work and therefore when the master comes they simply have to run and open door and serve him. Jesus says they are blessed and the master will become their servant because he is happy to have such faithful servants (m).

Tonight, as we await the morning, as we await the arrival of the master, tonight is the history of the world. The Council states: *The Church that was initiated by Christ twenty centuries ago for the renewal of the world awaits the fullness of its perfection which will be realized with the coming of the Lord.* (n) My dear Catholic men and women, let us be mindful of the fact that we are servants who await the return of the master! Let no one forget this! Neither those who, because they possess power, feel they are masters of the world, nor those who are servants awaiting the return of the master. The Gospel concludes: those who have been given more, who have greater responsibility, will be judged more severely (o). Those who have received more, who could make the world more happy with their goods and

yet were selfish, like the servant who felt he was the owner of everything that he had ... they are dreaming. The day will come and they will be awakened from their dream. They will find themselves face to face with the Master of all things, face to face with the Master of all peoples, face to face with the Lord of history.

We are waiting, and this hope is no illusion. The Council invites us to justify our hope and we know that our hope is not irrational nor is it a hope that proclaims a conformity with things as they are: *Conform and you will find happiness in heaven.* This is not the Church's preaching. In today's readings we see that the Church presents us with an eschatological meaning, but not in the sense of Saint Matthew who in the first gospel presents us with an eschatology that appears uninterested in what occurs in the here-and-now of history. Saint Luke writes in a pagan environment, where the here-and-now has a meaning and a value. The things of the earth are beautiful; gold and money are precious. Ambition, authority and power have great value. Saint Luke says: *Yes, they are valuable. Therefore use them and be aware that you will have to account for the way that you use them.* The Council says the same thing when she states that she has learned to dialogue with the present world and then speaks to the world: *Yes, all the things of the earth are precious. Matrimonial love is beautiful. Creatures are beautiful because God has given them their beauty. All things are beautiful when they have this transcendent meaning of a God who has created them and a God who will ask for an account of their use.*

The final judgment will not only ask for an accounting of the actions of individuals, but also will hold us responsible for social sin, for that sin which is born in the hearts of men and women and becomes apparent in unjust situations. Not only will the individual person who commits these sins be punished but also the society that has allowed these sins to become a social sin. The same will occur with the good and the virtue that an individual does. The individual and the society that reflected the Kingdom of God on earth will be rewarded. For this reason we are called to work for a more just, more equal world, a world where all become aware that they are children of God, on pilgrimage toward the Kingdom. This is not some ingenuous hope that waits for men and women to build some definitive world. For the Church there is no definite world in history or on earth, but the Church asks that we reflect in history this definitive world that we await.

If we are logical and carry this hope to its conclusion so that we love one another as children of God and eliminate violence and rancor so that there are no longer any enemies, then we must work to make these qualities a part of our history here on earth. Everyone --- government officials, the rich and powerful, those who have in their hands the ability to transform a nation --- is obliged to reflect this hope and faith. We, the little flock, the history of the Church, the most humble ones in the society of El Salvador --- we, who are valued not for our money or politics but because of the hope that is in our hearts --- in the heart of the most humble *campesino*, and in the heart of the humblest woman of the village --- let us live this hope and faith! Let us raise up our voices to God! Let us educate our children and give them an example of hope and faith! Let us collaborate with the powerful and build up the Kingdom of God on earth --- let us build as Jesus wants us to build. This Kingdom of God has come --- it is in our hearts!

How beautiful would be the hope and faith of Christians if these realities not only became part of our individual prayer but became part of a public proclamation that announced that God wants his Kingdom to be present here, on earth! I pray that all my sisters and brothers, priests, men and women religious, catholic schools, base communities,

and parishes live this certainty of faith and hope. We are not living a fantasy or some type of conformity. As Saint Paul says, we are living a reality, the reality of those unseen things (p). Because they are unseen, they are most real. Reality, even though it is not seen or shines like gold or seduces like the flattery of the powerful, is in truth reality and is the reason for our hope. We hope, however, not for ourselves ---and here I will conclude my homily --- for we have no illusions. We trust, like Abraham, in the promise that is not only a promise but that, in light of the risen Lord, is a reality. The Lord is risen! During our prayer vigil in the cathedral we heard people exclaim: *Christ lives!* My brothers and sisters, Christ lives! The Divine Savior of the world is no pious illusion of our hearts. The Divine Savior is a person, God-man, who lives and is the center of all history. He urges us to build a world that is truly worthy of this life that will never perish. We place our hope in this Divine Savior of the world.

Yes, we will be laughed at, just as our catechists and priests are laughed at when they are cruelly tortured. *Where is your hope?* they are asked. Oh, these people who torture believe that their rifles that beat and punish, and their heels that kick and lash out, are more powerful than the hope that is in the heart of those being tortured. But after all of this, it is hope that remains. Everything else will perish, just like Pharaoh's army perished in the Red Sea (q). The Red Sea devoured Pharaoh's army who believed they were more powerful than the People of God and their hope in the Lord. Yet the People of God sang the victory canticle of Moses: a sign of the eternal victory that we will all sing if we live with the humility of Abraham and Moses and all the saints who have lived and known that the Risen Lord has decreed the transformation of the world and no one can detain this transformation.

My dear Christians, let us work with Christ! Let us find our security in holiness and prayer and hope and faith! May the actual circumstances of our Church and nation never extinguish this flame! May it burn brighter or more beautifully! May we feel closer to God who is closer to those who hope in him and believe in him. So be it.

¹ *La Iglesia, cuerpo de Cristo en las historias.* Second pastoral letter of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero, archbishop of San Salvador (6 August 1977).

Margin References (a) Lk 12,32: (b) Lk 12,32: (c) Gn 12,1: (d) Gn 22,2: (e) Heb 11,19: (f) Ex 3,7-10: (g) Ex 3,11: (h) Mt 26,52: (i) Ex 12,29-30: (j) Ws 18,9: (k) Lk 12,32: (l) Lk 12,45: (m) Lk 12,37: (n) LG 48: (o) Lk 12,48: (p) Heb 11,1: (q) Ex 14,27-28: (r) Ex 15,1-18.