

CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR CHURCH

Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 21, 1977

Isaiah 66:18-21

Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

Luke 13:22-30

My dear brothers and sisters.

The Word of God is proclaimed in a very concrete way for this community that has gathered together for reflection. Through these radio broadcasts, I know that this community is increasing in number. I hope that this word might provide light, hope and faith as we confront the situations that we, the people of El Salvador, must face every day. Though these situations might be tragic and difficult, yet with the faith of the Church, may we live with the true joy of being a part of the Kingdom of God that is nourished by the Word. May we continue to walk steadfastly, with the assurance that we walk with the Lord and we walk toward the Kingdom.

Life of the Church

Many things have happened this week, but I want to highlight just a few of these events. I am grateful for the way in which you celebrated my birthday. I have understood, once more, that my life does not belong to me, but rather belongs to you. In this sense then, as was stated on the radio, the celebration was truly an ecclesial celebration. This bishop is not a private person but a sign of unity. I am happy that this event [my birthday] was an occasion for many people to express their solidarity, love and unity with the Church. On a personal level, my birthday has no meaning. So I thank all of you for the ways in which you showed me your friendship and your solidarity. I receive all these gifts and, as your bishop, I place them at Jesus' feet and pray that they might bring greater honor and glory to God. Because of the warmth and tenderness of their messages, I want to highlight the many letters that arrived at my office from the Escuela San Luis in Cuscatancingo. These letters have been entered in a competition and after the winners have been chosen, I will go there personally, to present awards to the students who wrote these letters.

Another event of great importance for the Diocese was the three days of reflection during this past week. The priests and religious, who are involved in pastoral work in many areas of the Archdiocese, came together at *Domus Mariae* and studied the Pope's letter, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. It is a modern document that outlines a process of evangelization for the world today. We had a wonderful attendance of about 100-125 priests and religious. We attempted to place ourselves in line with the actual Church. The pastoral lines that we are currently following are not something that we have invented nor are they a process of brainwashing, as many have accused us of doing. We are simply trying to follow the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellin Conference, which were authorized and then ratified by the Pope in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. This document states that

the evangelization of the world cannot be separated from the development of humankind. Thanks be to God, the Archdiocese has proceeded in this direction for many years. In fact, this has been the cause for our difficulties and conflicts. Yet we must continue to develop humankind and defend the dignity and the rights of all men and women. We must proclaim a Gospel that does not reject the world but one that is involved in the affairs of the world, not to become worldly but to sanctify the world. This gathering arrived at some wonderful and effective conclusions and we hope that, little by little, they will be put into practice. This meeting of the priests and pastors and religious involved in the pastoral ministry of the Archdiocese has not concluded. For me, this gathering represents a starting point, a new initiative in the Archdiocese in order to continue to make concrete the different forms of evangelization in our Archdiocese.

One of the very concrete proposals was directed to the people of Chalatenango. Chalatenango is rich in vocations. The priests and the religious from this area agreed to come together to seek some solutions for this area of the Archdiocese. I was pleased to see the great number of clergy and religious who are from this area. In fact, a great majority of those who gathered together for this meeting are from Chalatenango. Therefore, in agreement with the Bishop, it was decided to create an episcopal-vicar for this area. That means that we would appoint a priest who would have episcopal powers over this Department and this will enable him to better organize the Church there and also continue to cultivate this fertile area that, because of the many vocations from this area, is the hope of our clergy and the religious communities. Father Fabián Ayalla, who is from this area, was elected to this position. He will be assisted by Father Efaín López, the actual pastor of Comasagua. This is not the time to go into great detail about these days of study. You will know about these matters as they are put into practice.

This week I also announced that Father Francisco Díaz would become the new pastor of Tenancingo. Father Miguel returns as pastor of El Carmen. With his advanced age and illness he gives a wonderful testimony to the priesthood, for the priesthood is not for those who want to rest but for those who want to work. I thank him and wish him much success. Father Ernesto Barrera will become the pastor of San Sebastián in Ciudad Delgado.

This morning we will go to Jicarón in El Paisnal to visit the community there. Then, on Friday, the 26th, we will go to Tres Ceibas in the area of Aguilares.

Yesterday and today, the Commission for the Laity, a commission that was recently created to promote the ministry of the laity throughout the Archdiocese, has been meeting together in Planes Renderos. The laity are all those persons who have been baptized and are not religious or clerics. Because of Baptism they have a priesthood which unfortunately many do not exercise because they do not understand the meaning of Baptism. Thanks to God, the Second Vatican Council has awakened the People of God to become more aware of this priesthood of the laity and more and more people are accepting their responsibility for the Church. To continue to develop this awareness, the Commission is taking time to become aware of their own responsibilities in Planes de Renderos. We greet them and wish them much success.

While speaking about the theme of Baptism, I want to remind you that beginning tomorrow, we are going to offer a series of talks and orientation in the parishes of María Auxiliadora, Corazón de María and Planes de Renderos. This is part of a movement that is called the Catechumenate Movement. In former times, before receiving the sacrament of

Baptism, there was an instruction period called the Catechumenate. Today, the Christian family can present their children to the Church to be baptized, but very often it is forgotten that when a child is baptized, it is supposed that the family will continue to educate their children in the faith. The children have continued to grow in the family but the family has very often not fulfilled this obligation of educating them in the faith. As a result, we have many people who have been baptized, but do not understand the dignity and the responsibility of their Baptism. This was another initiative of the Vatican Council: to reestablish the catechumenate (a). Therefore, even if you have been baptized, come and participate in these presentations. It is a way to become informed about Baptism and so again, I invite everyone to participate in these courses.

I am very happy for those many communities that, even though they have no resident priest, are blessed with committed lay persons who gather the community together in their chapels and small churches. At this time they are listening to me. I know this because they have told me that they listen to the Mass that is celebrated in the cathedral. Then, at the time of Communion, in accord with their pastors, they turn off the radio and offer their own prayers before the Eucharist is distributed. This is a wonderful initiative that can be carried out in all the towns and villages that have no resident priest. This is also a way for the pastors of these areas to develop lay ministers and place a value on this wonderful means of communication that is at our disposal. I am very happy to be able to be present by radio to so many communities that I and my beloved priests have the responsibility to serve.

My sisters and brothers, we also want to extend our sincerest condolences to the mother and wife who, with great sorrow, wrote to me about Tomás Orellana of San Martín. He was assassinated and now he is being called subversive and a revolutionary. There is no truth to any of this. It is simply more calumnies and lies. It is unfortunate that the means of social communication allow themselves to defame the good reputation of a deceased person. I would hope that our newspapers would reflect on these facts and be more careful before printing stories that cause even greater pain to a family that is already in mourning. It would be best if they said nothing. We would hope that the papers would not remain silent about the truth.¹ Everyone knows about this case. We have denounced the injustice against this man on our radio program. So we speak to you, his family, and we want you to know that the Church is with you in your sorrow and will not cover up the injustice that has been committed against you.

Also this week a very dangerous bulletin has appeared² in which there are facts that cannot be denied. These injustices must be investigated so that those who commit so many crimes, and are the cause for all this terror and these kidnappings, might be held responsible. Who are the people responsible for this? How much longer must we continue to stain the face of our country? From the pulpit of this Church I appeal to our nation's justice. Let justice be done!

In this line of thought, I want to place the reflections that the Word of God presents to us today. I want to draw forth from these three beautiful readings, three characteristics of our Church. Our Church --- my sisters and brothers and radio audience, as true Catholics, let us realize that we are Church. Let us be proud of belonging to a Church that is characterized by being, first of all, a missionary and pilgrim Church; secondly, an eschatological Church (and I will explain the meaning of this word); and thirdly, a Church that is in the process of conversion.

The missionary and pilgrim Church

When the prophet Isaiah announced, almost six centuries before it happened, what the Church, founded by the Redeemer, would be like, he spoke of the arrival in Jerusalem of people from all over the world. This would be the century of the Reign of God. As we proclaimed in the Responsorial Psalm, God gave an order: *Go out to all the world and tell the Good News* (b). Isaiah begins to list the places where the Good News must be proclaimed: *Tarshish, Put, and Lud, Mosoch, Tubal and Javan and to the distant coastlands that have never heard of my fame or seen my glory* (c). Was this not the situation when the coasts of the Americas were discovered sixteen hundred years after these words were pronounced? Is this not the case when I referred to the concrete places where we, as Church, are now on pilgrimage? Is this not the situation in Tenancingo, San Sebastián de Ciudad Delgado, El Carmen, and all those parishes and communities and villages where people are gathered together in reflection. They are the names of places that are being linked together, like pearls of the Kingdom of God. People and communities, everyone has the obligation to proclaim the Kingdom.

When today's gospel presents us with Jesus walking toward Jerusalem --- *he walked through towns and villages* (d) --- it is the pilgrim Church that is being announced; it is the Church that, as I say in my Pastoral Letter that will be published and distributed this week, is the body of Christ in history. The Church is Christ who continues walking to Jerusalem, passing through towns and villages. My sisters and brothers, it is wonderful to think about our Church as a missionary and pilgrim Church, for this implies that all of us, who are members of this Church, are also a pilgrim people. No one can feel at home in this world. We have to go on pilgrimage with a walking staff in our hands. Yes, we have to bring happiness to the earth that we inhabit, but we must realize that we are only passing by. Today, we occupy the land; yesterday, our ancestors occupied the same land and they have died; tomorrow, a future generation will occupy the land and we will no longer exist. But Jesus wants to walk with us in our history; he wants to be involved in the history of every generation. Jesus was with our ancestors, he is with us now, and he will be with the future generation. We, however, are on a pilgrimage, and one of the primary concerns of the Church is to establish the Church in all parts of the world. Using the wonderful words of the prophet Isaiah: *even on those distant coastlands* (e).

Next Mission Sunday, which is always celebrated on the next to last Sunday in October, the Pope has called upon all Catholics to take on a missionary spirit.³ To be a missionary does not mean that someone leaves the homeland in order to go to some foreign land. Those individuals are our heroes: the priests and religious and doctors and nurses and all those individuals who give years of service in foreign lands. If someone wants to do this, you can sign up and there is a place for everyone. But not everyone is called to serve in this way. We do not know the language of other lands, we are afraid of new customs and we are not able to adapt to new circumstances. Indeed, we have to admire those missionaries who are able to adapt so easily to a new culture. We, however, as part of the rear guard, this army that conquers the world for God and for the faith, we also have to be missionaries. Remember that the saint of the missions is Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, a contemplative sister, who never left her cloister in Lisieux, France. Yet here is the secret of the missionary: from the cloister, the home, the store, the marketplace --- from whatever profession, like Saint Theresa, offer all your sorrows and sacrifices for the missions.

When the poor, tired woman, suffering from tuberculosis, walked in the patio of the convent and became tired, she rested on an earthenware flower pot and said: *I offer my weariness to the Lord for the missionary who at this moment is walking through unknown lands.* My sisters and brothers, how beautiful it is to be a missionary and to know that the souls that do not know Christ now but will come to know him through the preaching of the Gospel, are supported by our prayers and sacrifice. Yes it is good to offer our infirmities up for the missionaries and for those who are not yet Christian. Missionaries are all those who feel that the Church must be established throughout the world because of the command of Jesus: *Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature* (f). The Pope, in his message for Mission Sunday, 1976 stated that missionary education, and the fact that all Christians are called to be missionaries, is not something like an appendix, but rather it pertains to the very constitution of our Christian faith. One cannot be a true Christian and ignore this missionary vocation, especially when our own country is a missionary land. Perhaps in many missionary lands there does not occur the savage things that occur here in El Salvador.

Let us begin to make our nation a land that gives witness to its missionary vocation. One of the great problems in Latin America is that we officially call ourselves Christians, a continental Christian community and yet the torch of our faith does not burn brightly. Many who call themselves Christians are perverted and are like those pilgrims who walked through the desert to the Promised Land but wanted to return to Egypt, the land of slavery. (g) They continue to adore their idols of money and abuse their authority. (h) Is this how we are going to be light to the world? It is sad to think that many of those who assassinate and torture and trample on the dignity of the nation are Christians. They need to be reconverted. We all need to be reconverted.

My sisters and brothers, I would like us all to reflect on today's Word, for it presents us with an image of Jesus on pilgrimage --- planting seeds of faith, hope and Christian joy everywhere, --- proclaiming the gospel and his message of peace. Let us go to those who are unfaithful, here in our own country. Let us be missionaries in our homes and in our professional careers. Let us be missionaries in the public office that we hold. Imagine if the government officials, workers, teachers, professionals, imagine if they all felt that they could obtain a living through their work and at the same time, fulfill their role as missionaries and be missionaries to their friends.

1. The eschatological Church

What can we say about the Church's mission? The second message of today's reading tells us that the Church is eschatological. What does this mean? It is precisely that which provoked the question in today's Gospel when Jesus was asked: *will only a few people be saved* (i). This is the concern of eschatology. Eschatology is a characteristic of this Church that is aware of the fact that history is not brought to its fullness here on earth. The Church's hopes enable her to see a new heaven and a new earth, where justice and peace and love will reign. (j)

Christians know that, as hard as they might work for the well being of this earth, their work will always be passing, provisional and missionary. But we must continue to work. Yet we cannot look for the fullness of history to take place here on earth. That will only happen in eternity, where the Kingdom of God is perfect. This perspective of eternal salvation, of the Kingdom of God consummated in glory, this Church with her arms raised on

high, this Church with her eyes raised toward heaven --- this is eschatology and the eschatological Church.

Therefore, the Church can never be an accomplice of an ideology that attempts to create, on this earth, a kingdom where men and women will be completely happy. In other words, the Church cannot be communist. The Church, also, cannot be capitalist, because capitalism has a narrow view and sees happiness, passion and heaven in their palaces and property and money and others material things. They are comfortable here on earth, and this comfort zone is not compatible with the Church. The Church is eschatological and therefore, the Church turns toward the poor and tells them: *You are most able to understand this hope and this eschatology.*

And so we turn toward the poor, not to make them conformists, for while eschatology means we await heaven, it does not imply that we can now fall asleep. It is here where communism falsely accuses us when they tell us that we are giving opium to the people and preaching to people about a kingdom in the hereafter and thus discouraging people from struggling here on earth. Who knows who really encourages people more, communism or the Church? I say the Church, because when we preach about a hope in heaven, we are also telling people that they must gain this heaven. If men and women work here on earth and fulfill their obligations, only then will their lives be rewarded for eternity. Those who fulfill their obligations to the best of their ability will be given a richer and broader eschatology. No one is more ambitious than the saints and Christians. They do not seek a kingdom on this earth where people die, but rather they seek a kingdom for eternity, where people live forever the joy of having collaborated and anticipated here on earth the Kingdom of God.

Here in El Salvador, the enemies of the Church are scandalized when they are told that the Kingdom of the God and the Church, which is the beginning of that Kingdom of Heaven, must be established here on earth. We do not have to wait until death in order to be happy. God wants us to be happy on this earth and therefore he wants us to reflect the new heaven and the new earth during our pilgrimage here on earth. The Church visualizes a beautiful heaven during her pilgrimage and the earth must become a reflection of that heaven. Today, Jesus' word teaches us that the Kingdom of God has begun on this earth and that only those who enter by the narrow gate will be united with him, the definitive foundation. (k) Those who, on this earth, have not exerted any effort to enter this kingdom, will remain outside. In other words, those who have not worked for the Kingdom of God and who at the hour of their death attempt to enter by another door, will discover that the door is locked.

Look at today's Gospel: *You will stand outside knocking and saying, "Lord, open the door for us." He will say to you in reply, "I do not know where you are from." And you will say, "We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets." Then he will say to you, "I do not know where you are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!"* (l). It is not enough to say that one is a Christian and live like a pagan and then present oneself to Jesus and say: *Jesus, you know me.* But Jesus does not know those who have not made their name *Christian* a way of life.

We are called as Christians to live this eschatology, this hope, this heaven. The Vatican Council has enlightened in a wonderful way the meaning of eschatology. The Medellin Documents also invite men and women to work here on this earth and from the perspective of the risen Lord, who is now part of history, to continue the work of establishing the Kingdom of God that will be brought to its full realization in eternity. If we truly believe

that the risen Christ awaits us and that when he comes in glory he will reward us and all those who have worked with him, then my sisters and brothers, we must work now. All those who impede this work of the kingdom are betraying their vocation as human persons.

The Council states: *The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation* (m). Let us respond to the question that was placed before Jesus: *Lord, will only a few people be saved?* (n). Jesus does not seem to be interested in the number because he proceeds to give us a wonderful teaching about the narrow gate and the need to live fully Christian lives. Let us take on the same attitude. It is not important whether few or many will be saved. But it is important that we fulfill our obligations here on earth. We are trying to enter through the narrow gate and therefore, we do not walk along the wide paths of vice and selfishness and injustice. From this then comes the third condition, and here I will conclude my thoughts. Today's readings present us with this final characteristic of the Church when they present us with the Church that is in a process of conversion.

The Church in the process of conversion

I never grow weary of shouting out this word: conversion. Unfortunately many times we speak and believe that we are understood, but at times the simplest words are not understood. I questioned myself this week, and as a humble man, I received a great revelation as I sat with the question: *what is conversion?* I thank all of you, because when you do not understand some word that I use in my preaching, you have the confidence to ask me about it.

Conversion is like making an about face. Military people say that conversion to the right is conversion from one side to the other --- an about face. Conversion is a return to God and a desire to become more intimately united with God. Jesus points out the meaning of conversion when he says: *Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect* (o). When will we be perfect like God? If God wants the opposite of what I want, then to do what God wants is conversion, to do what I want is perversion. We might ask, for example, how does God want us to use political power in this country? He wants these political forces to become united and establish good laws and involve all citizens in a search for the common good. God does not want this power to be used to abuse and beat people or attack cities and villages; this is a perversion. How does God want us to use money and other material possessions? Again God seeks conversion. He wants us to give to created things the destiny that God has given to them. Material goods are always gifts from God and given for the benefit of everyone, so that everyone might share in the gift of happiness.

This on a large scale, but coming down to the particular: how does God want you to live your life in the home? God wants you to be united with your wife in the sacrament of marriage. How does God want you to be intimate as spouses? God wants you to use the gift of sexuality for procreation. If people maliciously interrupt procreation through artificial means, then they are blocking the will of God. Again God seeks conversion of the sinner. How does God want us to use alcohol? He wants us to abstain and not abuse it. God wants us to use it correctly and not abuse it. Abuse of alcohol is always a sin. Repent. Conversion is a call that is alluded to in the second reading that is taken from the letter of the Hebrews: *You have also forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons: "My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when reprovved by him* (p).

My sisters the brothers, the Church must also fulfill this obligation, because she herself is in the process of conversion. I, who am speaking with you, must be continually converted. The sinner, men and women religious, the Catholic schools, the parish, the pastor, the community, the Church, --- all of these have to be converted to do what God wants them to do at this moment in the history of El Salvador. If people live as good Christians, but do not adapt to our present times, do not denounce the injustices or courageously proclaim the Kingdom of God, do not reject the sins of people because they want to find favor with certain social classes and therefore they ignore the sins of these people, such persons are not fulfilling their obligations, but are sinning and betraying their mission. The Church is placed here to convert humankind and not to tell them that they do everything well. Naturally, therefore, people will not like the Church. Everyone whom we admonish does not like us. I know there are many people who do not like me and I also know that others do like me --- those who sincerely seek the conversion that the Church invites them to undertake, and remember, we are all Church.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, from this perspective, I call everyone to conversion. In the press this week, we have read about many crimes. Who has committed these crimes? Will their names remain hidden from the light of justice? It seems that the assassination of Father Grande, and Father Navarro, as well as the assassination and disappearance of many other people and countless other crimes, remain a mystery. But I know that someone has committed these crimes and unless they are converted they will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

This life will pass away and power and human life will pass. Everything will pass away, but the Church will remain as an eschatological sign that says: eternity will not pass away and therefore, people should be concerned about their salvation. Salvation begins here, on earth, because those who struggle here to establish the Kingdom of God in the midst of society and history, will participate in the Kingdom of God in heaven. Those who oppose and reject and repudiate the Church and the Kingdom of God, her ministers, her preachers, are impeding the Kingdom of God; they are persecuting the Church and impeding her ministry.

My dear sisters and brothers, let us conclude our message today --- and these are not my words but the Word of God --- and resolve to be a missionary and pilgrim Church. Let us not grow comfortable with our lives here on earth but rather let us be concerned about walking with Jesus. Reflect on the passage from Saint Luke that describes Jesus' mission as one of walking toward Calvary. The Church also walks toward Calvary, toward the cross but knows that after the cross, three days later, there is resurrection and joy and the Kingdom; there is a new heaven and a new earth. Let us renounce sin and all that is opposed to the Kingdom of God. Let us not be content with finding happiness and salvation here on earth nor in heaven. Let us find that wise and wonderful balance that allows us to fulfill the law of God here on earth so that we might merit the reward of heaven. Let us be courageous as Christians, for with all these characteristics, the Church is maintained on high and able to plant seeds of hope and joy in the hearts of the people of El Salvador.

¹ See “Un terrorista muerto y un policía herido en tiroteo”, *El Diario de Hoy*, 15 August 1977.

² On 19 August 1977 the *El Diario de Hoy* published a manifesto of RN-FARN (Resistencia Nacional and Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional) which accuses members of the army of taking part in massacres, torture and the assassination of political leaders, as well as organizing and directing UGB, FALANGE, ORDEN and other paramilitary groups.

³ See Paul VI, Message for the World Day of Missions (29 May 1977).

Margin References (a) SC 64: (b) Mk 16,15: (c) Is 66,19: (d) Lk 13,22: (e) Is 66,19: (f) Mk 16,15: (g) Ex 16,13: (h) Nb 11,5: (i) Lk 13,23: (j) Rv 21,1: (k) Lk 13,24: (l) Lk 13,25-27: (m) GS 43: (n) Lk 13,23: (o) Mt 5,48: (p) Heb 12,5.