

SAINT MICHAEL ARCHANGEL AND THE CHURCH'S STRUGGLE

Feast of Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael

September 29, 1077

Huizúcar

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Revelation 12:7-12a

John 11:47-51

My dear sisters and brothers, women and men religious and all the faithful.

As pastor, I come to visit you, but I also come here as a Christian, the same as you. I come as a pilgrim to honor Michael the Archangel. I have just told the pastor that I come to bring you a message, a message that the Lord commands me to speak to the community of Huizúcar on the occasion of its patronal feast. As a pilgrim who desires to honor Saint Michael the Archangel, I come here and am aware of the power of the struggle in which the Church is engaged, a struggle that she feels in her flesh. I am also aware of the power of the enemy who does not want to see the Kingdom of God draw near to them, those who do not want to see this Kingdom move forward. We come to pray with you, the faithful people, who throughout the centuries have placed your trust in Saint Michael the Archangel: *Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our shield against the powers of evil.*

My sisters and brothers, I believe that our Eucharistic celebration and our prayer of thanksgiving in this blessed parish of Huizúcar that has been placed beneath the patronage of the powerful wings of Saint Michael the Archangel, is an action that will benefit the whole Archdiocese. For at this moment, we are here to pray for all the concerns of the diocese, for all the priests, for all the communities and for all the Christians who form part of what is called the local Church of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

Every time that we celebrate the patronal feast of a community, we are filled with hope and lift up our eyes to heaven where our patron dwells with God. In the present celebration, that of Saint Michael the Archangel, we do not honor a pilgrim of this earth who went to heaven (like the other holy patron saints). Rather we honor a prince of this other world, a being whom God sent to protect the People of God. Therefore, our prayers and our confidence are offered to God with greater devotion and respect and trust. We know that we stand before a mysterious presence that has not arisen from this world, but as we say in our Creed: *we believe in God, creator of all that is seen and unseen.* Saint Michael is part of this invisible world, a world that we have knowledge of, but only to the degree that God has revealed these mysteries to us.

My sisters and brothers, I was very pleased --- and I admit my deep feelings --- to be received by you with such warmth that is so characteristic of our people. I was also very pleased to come here and accompany you and find myself in this scenic area on this mountain-top where our ancestors built this Church. It could be said that these churches and cathedrals appear to be spiritual fortifications that have been built by Christians of every era in the most exquisite areas that our environment can provide. We are greeted by an

incredible sight as we enter the plaza and this church. We see Saint Michael in the center, above this altar, and on either side the other two great archangels, who together with Saint Michael form this royal court that has visited our land from their heavenly position. Their names express their relationship with God.

Saint Raphael means *the medicine of God*. As you can read in the beautiful book of Tobit, Raphael accompanied Tobit and healed the family of their spiritual and material suffering. Tobit never imagined that he was being accompanied by an archangel. It was only when the archangel had accomplished his mission on earth, that he departs and says: *I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord* (a). At that moment Tobiah and their whole family realized that through the infinite power of God, they had been in contact with the divine. They fell to the ground on their knees and covered their faces as they adored God. Yes, they now realized that they were with an archangel and yet previously had been unaware of this reality. (b) I believe this is also our attitude as we adore one of the seven spirits that is near the throne of God.

The bible also presents us with the angel Gabriel who communicated to the world God's message of redemption. Gabriel means *the power of God* because through the Incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of Mary, the power of redemption was revealed. The world was saved from sin. The power of infinite love was necessary and for this reason God sent the archangel who is characterized in this way. The angel Gabriel was sent by God to the town of Nazareth and thus begins the beautiful dialogue between the Virgin and the archangel that announced the nearness of the world's redemption (c).

In addition to these two princes, Gabriel and Rafael, another name is also highlighted, that of Michael which means *who is like God*. Michael was constituted a prince in order to defend the rights of God before the claims of hell and Satan who at that time had become a devil, the Prince of Darkness. It is said that Satan had been the most beautiful of the angels but in the struggle with Michael, he was subdued and became a devil. Michael was put in charge of these rights of God, not only in heaven, where he is the prince of these evil heavenly creatures, but also on earth, where he is most frequently known by name, perhaps better known than Rafael and Gabriel. The Old Testament presents Michael in an on-going relationship with the synagogue, that is, with the church of the Old Testament. He is the protector of Israel. He defends the people in their faith and in their battles on this earth.

The reading that was proclaimed by Father Alvarenga presents us with the first characteristic that I want to highlight: the archangel of hope. The second reading from the book of Revelation, presents us with the archangel as he battles on behalf of God, as he battles in the Kingdom of God on earth. In the gospel, Jesus speaks of the angels descending and ascending on the Son of Man. The archangel is present, not as one coming of his own power, but rather he is a humble creature who comes from God and Christ, who is the power that will ultimately save the world. Let us focus on these three thoughts, my sisters and brothers, so that we can understand the clear message of this feast of Saint Michael the archangel, the patron of this blessed town.

The Archangel of hope

The first reading from the book of Daniel tells us that Daniel had great visions. He saw that a throne was being prepared in heaven for the Eternal One, for God. Then when God was seated on this throne, the prophet saw *one like the son of man coming on the clouds*

of heaven (d). What is the meaning of the prophet's words? When the words *son of man* are spoken, usually one is referring to the vision of the prophet Daniel. When Christ refers to the son of man and when Daniel says that *one like the son of man* was drawing near to the throne of God, the Scriptures explain this in terms of the kingdom that Christ is going to conquer on earth. Jesus alone is not the son of man. He is the son of man because he, and all women and men who have been redeemed by Christ, form in heaven one single person, one single kingdom. Christ is the head of this kingdom and all who have been saved (let us do everything possible to obtain this salvation) will form with Christ a glorious people. We will be one single son of man, one nation. As we heard in the reading: *when he (the son of man) reached the Ancient One and was presented before him... nations and people of every language served him* (e). My sisters and brothers, how beautiful to form part of that royal court of Christ, the Lamb of God, who dwells in the eternal city of heaven! In that kingdom, all who have been saved will form with Christ this son of man. The children of this earth will become a glorious Christ in eternity. There dwell our ancestors who have been saved. There dwell our martyrs in the triumphant city of heaven. How many members of our family are part of this son of man --- family members who have triumphed in heaven and draw near to the splendor of the Eternal One! Yes, God has crowned them for eternity.

There dwells Michael the archangel, in that mysterious kingdom that is beyond history, the kingdom toward which we journey. We know that when we complete our life here on earth, we will live happily in that kingdom. There Saint Michael comes to tell us, we who are still on our pilgrimage, that the Kingdom exists and that he is the prince of that kingdom. He has been placed there because of the courage that he showed in defending God's rights. There is the archangel of hope. This should strengthen us in our hope. Every time that we think about the patron of this town, our hope should be enlivened. When we are overwhelmed by the suffering, persecution and anxiety of this world, when our hope grows weak, let us raise our eyes to this son of man who dwells in the heavenly city where will be all be glorified. Let us understand that we are supported by these heavenly creatures, who did not live on this earth but were created by God to form his court. As we read in the Scriptures: *thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads attended him* (f).

What a wonderful eternal city is opened to us this morning by Saint Michael the archangel! What a beautiful scene is described here! This vision of Saint Michael and his heavenly army fills all Christians with hope.

The archangel engaged in God's battles in the kingdom of God on this earth

Let us now look at the second reading from the book of Revelation. In the famous twelfth chapter, Saint John appears to be in a state of contemplation and sees a tremendous struggle taking place in heaven. The dragon has seven heads and is crowned with diadems --- a way to express the power of this creature and to show how the recognized governments of this earth can become this beast that fights against the Kingdom of God when they forget that all their power comes from God. In such a situation they become like Lucifer, crowned with diadems, who believed he could destroy God. But instead of destroying God, his own ruin was at hand. Lucifer was converted into the fierce dragon, into this beast that drags down all those who allow themselves to be deceived. My sisters and brothers, woe to that situation in which power and governments want to become like God! These words of Saint John were written at a time when the Roman Emperor believed he was a god and the Christians adored no other God but the Lord. Because the Christians refused to adore the emperor, many of

them died as martyrs. This is always the cause of martyrdom. When Jesus confessed that he was God, the priests of the temple tore their garments and said: *He has blasphemed! He deserves to die!* (g). When one proclaims the message of God before the powers of this earth, people are disturbed and will persecute and attempt to destroy the messenger.

Thus the struggle of the Church is precisely the following: to maintain herself faithful to the majesty of God as she confronts the powers of this earth. For her defense of God, the Church is slandered. Those who attempt to establish the Kingdom of God on this earth are seen as subversive and therefore persecuted and denounced. My sisters and brothers, be very careful about these denunciations. During these days, you have seen how a flyer has been distributed that stated that the bishop, that I travel through the towns and villages preaching subversion. What I am preaching to you now is what I always preach. If there is someone here who would denounce me and say that I am preaching subversion in Huizúcar, then you, yourselves, know that is a lie and slander. I am simply stating that the Church preaches the Kingdom of God and that before the only Lord of history, the Church must defend God, even when we must pay the price of this proclamation with our lives.

This dragon was defeated by Michael and cast down to the earth. The conquerors sang the hymn that is recounted in the book of Revelation --- for the victory of God has been accomplished. But another event is described in this twelfth chapter, an event that was not read today. When the dragon is conquered, there appears in the sky another sign: *a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars* (h). She is pregnant and about to give birth. The dragon has its jaws open and wants to devour the child that is to be born. At the time of birth, however, the child and the woman are saved, but the persecution on the part of the dragon continues throughout history. (i)

What is the meaning of this vision? Scripture scholars have interpreted this passage as referring to the Church. Many have also felt that this passage refers to the Virgin Mary, the mother of the Church. It has the same meaning because Mary, the mother of Christ, is a figure of the Church, and Mary is also mother of the Church. Whoever attacks the Church attacks Mary and whoever speaks about the Church speaks about Mary. This mysterious woman mentioned in the book of Revelation can be seen as the Church, the child of Mary, founded by Christ and given to all people who are converted and accept Jesus as the Redeemer. The Church suffers the threats of the dragon who wants to kill the offspring of her womb, for the dragon does not want to see Christ born on earth, in the hearts of people or in history. Thus the struggle by Michael the archangel is presented in this passage. He confronts the dragon and defends the Church and Christ who is born in the hearts of men and women and comes alive in our towns and villages. Thanks to the ministry of preaching and the ministry of the priests, catechists, and men and women religious who spread the doctrine of Christ, they enable this Jesus to be born anew in the hearts of children and in the hearts of sinners who repent.

The devil is disturbed by all of this, disturbed by the fact that Jesus becomes more and more visible on earth. So the Church is persecuted because she gives birth to Jesus and because this Jesus is reborn in the hearts of men and women. This struggle will continue throughout history. Therefore we should not be surprised when we hear that the Church is persecuted. Indeed, the very nature of the Church is to be persecuted. This victory is presented to us in this Biblical language where the woman is persecuted by the dragon who wants to devour her child. Thus the powers of hell are clearly revealed and these powers use instruments on this earth, people who are willing to continue this persecution, people who do

not listen to the Church's voice and instead slander and persecute her. But the Church is guaranteed that there is a heavenly prince who defends and guards her. The book of Revelation tells us that at the end of time, the dragon will be definitively defeated and the child of Mary, together with those men and women who are saved, will triumph, as we said before, in the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who are engaged at this time in the battle. Now is the time of struggle here on earth. Let us lift high the banner of Christ and follow the Lord's teaching. Let us not fear persecution but rather look toward the heavenly powers for our protection, powers symbolized by Michael the archangel. Let us persevere in our faith and hope and let us not become discouraged by the difficulties of the struggle.

My sisters and brothers, at this time in history, we find ourselves in this phase of persecution. Look at the people who fill this Church, a truly incredible scene, men, women and children --- all ages --- how beautiful is this kingdom of God! You are people of faith. You are one with this woman who is about to give birth to Christ. Because of your belief, and because of your profession of faith and hope that dwells in your hearts, you are witnesses that Christ lives on earth. If Christ lives, it is because we incarnate him here on earth.

I believe that you are aware of my pastoral letter entitled, *The Church, the Body of Christ in History* which states that all of us who live now, we are the Church. In our flesh we incarnate Christ who lives here in El Salvador, in 1977. Today Christ lives in our Church. In previous centuries our ancestors incarnated Christ in the Church and future generations will incarnate Christ in the Church after we have died. Christ will continue to dwell in this Church. Therefore, as we have heard in the book of Revelation, Christ and his Church will continue the struggle throughout the history of the world and will also sing a hymn of victory.

The power of Michael the Archangel comes from God

Finally, my sisters and brothers, I want to speak about this third point with regard to Michael the archangel and refer to the words that Jesus spoke to Nathaniel. The gospel passage today is very beautiful. Father Pocasangre read the passage where Jesus encounters a man named Nathaniel. He tells Nathaniel that he knows all his secrets: *I saw you under the fig tree* (j). What was Nathaniel doing under the fig tree? No one knows but it seems that it was something to be held in secret. He was, perhaps, thinking or meditating or doing something that only he knew. When he is surprised by these words of Jesus, he says: *Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel*. Jesus responds: *Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see even greater things than this... You will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man* (k).

What does Jesus mean? Among these angels that are ascending and descending, we see our blessed archangel Saint Michael. According to biblical thinking, the angels are the presence of God. When Jesus says that his apostles will see a multitude of angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, he is saying that those who believe in him will understand that the life of God has come with him into this world. The angels are the words that Jesus preaches. The angels are sign of the redemption that Jesus will carry out to pay for the sins of the whole world. The angels surround the Son of God. We are seeing the beauty of this passage here in this Church. Each one of us is an angel who surrounds the Son of God. Here the vision of Nathaniel is being realized. As Christians we believe that Christ is the center of our love; Christ builds the Church; Christ preaches against the injustices and the sins of the world; Christ, through his Church, moves forward in history to make us happy and proclaim

his kingdom. Christ, with his word, message and Church is the promised vision in this gospel passage. We, like Nathaniel, because we live in this Christian era, are seeing many things more wonderful than the miracle that Nathaniel experienced when Jesus read his thoughts and discovered the secrets of his heart. Yes, we have experienced something greater, for it is Christ who speaks to us.

My dear sisters and brothers, this is the great honor that I feel, for through my words, it is Christ who is speaking to you. When the priest preaches here, it is Christ who is preaching through the word of the priest or the catechist or through the presence of these mothers and fathers who lead their children along the right paths, who teach their children about Jesus and prepare them for First Communion --- such as these children that will soon approach the altar. At the present time, the Church calls us to make real the miracle of the apostolate that Christ proclaimed to his disciples who believed in him: *you are going to see great things in your preaching and in your ministry* (l). We are seeing this now, my sisters and brothers. We see these wonderful things in the many men and women who at this time have repented and turned toward the Church. Many people have turned toward the Church with a new hope and trust. We are seeing Christ come alive in this world. The angels of God, the power of God, is alive on this earth and from this earth, supplications, acts of thanksgiving and forgiveness and prayers are being raised up to God.

This is the message of Saint Michael. Therefore, when the Bible presents us with the ministry of Michael the archangel, it is described by one of the prophets, as I said at the beginning of this Mass: *I saw at the altar of God, the archangel Michael who gathered together, in a bowl of incense, the prayers of the all the faithful. Then these prayers burned, like incense, and ascended like perfume toward heaven* (m). Therefore all the supplications, prayers, work, suffering and hope of all those who have come to this Mass and have gathered around the altar to pray are gathered together by our patron, Michael the archangel. Not one of our prayers is lost. Through Michael, our prayers ascend to heaven. At the side of the Son of God, Michael the archangel is fulfilling his work as mediator. Yes, his ministry is subordinate to that of Christ, because there is only one true mediator between God and humankind: Jesus Christ. Saint Michael is a minister, one who is an instrument in this ministry of redemption.

My sisters and brothers, this is the meaning of my pilgrimage with you. I am one more Christian who has come at this dangerous time for the Church to ask Saint Michael the archangel, the archangel of hope (who presents us with this heavenly scene toward which we travel), to keep alive this hope in all of our hearts. May the archangel who goes to battle for God and who defends the Church in face of the dragon who wants to devour her offspring defend us in battle with that power that comes from God. As the book of Revelation says: *they conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death* (n). The triumph of Saint Michael takes nothing away from Christ. On the contrary, it makes the victory of Christ the victory of all people. Together with Mary and through the ministry of the Church, Christ shares this victory with all those whom he wishes to be saved. May the archangel, who gives us the presence of Christ, share his power with us and deepen us in our convictions. May we believe more deeply in Jesus, the Savior. May we never slander or mistrust this Church that was established by Christ. May we be proud to belong to this Church that is protected by the powerful archangel Michael. May we be proud to belong this Church that is the Body of Christ, our Lord.

Now my sisters and brothers, let us place on this humble but magnificent altar of Huizúcar our prayers at this time of the celebration of our patronal feast. Let us place on the altar our hopes, our afflictions, our anxieties, and our joys. Let us place on the altar everything that symbolizes our presence here. How many things do we bear in our hearts --- let us place all of this on the altar. I bring the things that are in my heart and together with you, place these in the bowl of incense so that Saint Michael might [raise them up to God].¹

¹ The final words of this homily were not registered on the recording tape.

Margin References (a) Tb 12,15: (b) Tb 12,16: (c) Lk 1,26: (d) Dn 7,13: (e) Dn 7,13-14: (f) Dn 7,10: (g) Mk 14,62-64: (h) Rv 12,10: (i) Rv 12,1-6: (j) Jn 1,48: (k) Jn 1,49-51: (l) Jn 1,50: (m) Rv 8,3-4: (n) Rv 12,11.