

THE CHURCH OF THE BEATITUDES

**Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
January 29, 1978**

Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Let us draw near to Jesus

My dear sisters and brothers, the scene that was presented to us in this morning's gospel is still relevant today. (a) The people who are drawing near to Jesus have not completed their journey. We, who gather here in this Cathedral and those who have come together around the Word of God in other churches and hermitages and community centers to reflect on the Word of God, are part of that people who draw near to Jesus. We draw near to Jesus and he begins to speak and teach us. (b) Jesus' teaching is prolonged and comes alive in our midst. Thus Jesus becomes present in the people, in society, in the family and community groups that want to nourish themselves on these divine orientations.

For this reason, my sisters and brothers, when we celebrate the Mass here in the Cathedral at 8:00 in the morning and when we broadcast this celebration by radio and establish a communion with numerous communities in the Archdiocese, I feel that at this moment we are all together with Jesus. He [Jesus] is the teacher and I am his humble instrument. He wants to instruct you and me how to walk toward happiness and walk according to the Beatitudes. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I am always concerned in my preaching each Sunday to place the eternal and actual teaching of Jesus in the framework of the realities that we live here in San Salvador. Each one of you must also make an effort to actualize this eternal Word for yourselves, your family and your people. You must make this effort because this eternal Word is valid for all people. Valid for all people but not valid in the same way but rather varies according to the needs and circumstances of each person. Thus I am careful to speak here with you about some of the most outstanding events of the week.

Events of the week

For example, this week the Chancery of the Archdiocese witnessed one of the signs of the times when the Assistant Secretary of State of the United States, Mr. Todman, visited us.¹ While he was in El Salvador he visited the Chancery where we had a very cordial conversation in which he highlighted the following thought: he said that zeal for human rights is part of his life. We must remember that Mr. Todman is a black man which means he has experienced a very anti-Christian marginalization in the society of the United States. He carries in his life and in his race this right of the equality of all people. In fact this right is engraved in the depths of his existence.

I was also pleased to hear how his own thinking coincides with the thinking of the Church especially when he stated that the root of all violence and terrorism is the unjust social situation in which people live. He went on to say that there is an obligation to create structures that will enable the nation to achieve the good for all people. If these structures are

not adequate to achieve the common good then there is an obligation to change them. I then intervened and said that the human person does not serve structures but rather that structures must serve the human person. As I attempt to apply this wise saying, I say that this is indeed the Church's voice. (c) Political, economic and social structures must be adapted in such a way that they enable the people of El Salvador to live with the freedom and dignity that God has given them. If there are structures that do not serve the common good, then it is necessary to change them. Mr. Todman also understood when I told him personally that the good relations between the Church and government are put in place not for personal benefit or prestige but for the positive service of the people. He told me: *I like to hear those words.*

I also want to call to your attention another significant visit from Catholic Solidarity of Holland. Some Christians wanted to travel to our country and view our situation and then promised us their help and solidarity. I want to publicly thank them and communicate to you, dear Catholics and radio audience, the joy of affirming this communion with these sisters and brothers. This is the Church: a communion in which the merits, joys and sufferings of one Christian redound on the good of all Christians. Let us always remember these gestures of solidarity that have been shown to the Archdiocese of San Salvador and let us know how to identify with the concerns and anxieties of other dioceses in other lands. This is what it means to live as a family, as the family of God that is extended throughout the world.

Yesterday in the parish of Apopa, the people commemorated the one year anniversary of the expulsion of their pastor, Father Mario Bernal. I want to use this event to clarify the fact that the Church wants respect for the priests who have been expelled from the country and those that have been prevented from entering. I am not demanding that they be allowed to enter the country but I am asking that the reasons for their expulsion be reviewed. Justice as well as the prestige of the Church and the prestige of each priest demands this [review]. We do not want these priests to be burdened by the false accusations that caused them to be expelled: they are communists, subversives and they do not respect the country's laws... I only ask that these accusations be clarified. If they are guilty, then they should be punished. If, however, they have simply been expelled for no valid reason, then this attitude is not just. Again, let it be clear, I am not asking for their return, but I am asking that the causes for their expulsion be examined.

The life of the Church

My dear sisters and brothers, we have many interesting and consoling aspects to report about the life of the Church. We greet the new pastor of María Auxiliadora, Father Giraudo who has been substituted for Father Alas who is now assisting Bishop Rivera in Santiago de María.

Yesterday in Chalatenango I was greatly pleased because with a small group of young students we inaugurated the minor seminary that bears the name of the patron of Chalatenango: Saint John the Baptist. This gives great joy to the entire Department that is so rich in vocations, and now that a center of ecclesiastical education has been established there, we are sure that this will bring us great consolation with regard to priestly vocations. We want to extend our greetings to Father Fabián Amaya and all those who have collaborated in making the dream of a seminary in Chalatenango a reality. I also want to let you know that within a few days classes will begin in San José de la Montaña and as I have told you previously, our Minor and Major Seminary are filled to capacity. There are fewer students in the high school seminary but more students who are studying Philosophy and Theology. In

both of these centers the Lord has blessed our Archdiocese with an abundance of vocations. I ask you to give thanks to the Lord for these blessings.

I now say to the whole Diocese what I said yesterday in Chalatenango: my sisters and brothers, I want all the People of God to feel that the work of the seminary belongs to them because this is really true. The renewal of the priesthood by these young men who have been called to serve God is a cause of joy and hope not only for the Bishop but also for all the people. Therefore we need everyone to pray for and to support these young men. In this way they will not feel that they are alone or doing something that is strange but rather they will come to an understanding of what they are preparing themselves for and that the people anxiously await them and receive them with kindness.

Let us provide our seminary with an environment of moral support --- and I am not ashamed to also ask for your economical support. We have undertaken a tremendous adventure in the establishment of this seminary --- and teachers know how much it costs to provide an education and lodging for students, but this is a small sacrifice if we are able to provide priests who minister according to the heart of God. For this reason then I ask for your economic support, and we have thought of returning to the custom of dedicating the collection on the third Sunday of the month to this work. On the third Sunday of the month a collection will be taken in all the parishes. We will also accept donations of food and other materials which can be given to your pastors who will in turn assure the delivery of these goods to the Seminaries. And so here in the Cathedral, we will be beggars for the Seminary on the third Sunday of the month so that everyone can make some contribution and we ask each pastor to be mindful of this collaboration that without doubt the People of God will generously support.

With regard to religious life, I want to congratulate the Carmelite Sisters of San José on the occasion of their profession of vows, and especially for the abundance of vocations that they have received. When the young women are asked what attracts them to this Congregation, it is a wonderful testimony to listen to them say: *it is the simplicity of life and the love that is shown to one another, but especially attractive is the generous service that they give to the parishes and the various centers of development.* Thanks to God this is true not only of the Carmelites but of various Congregations that are serving our people directly. Without a doubt God will reward them with many vocations. This week the Guadalupe Sisters are going to celebrate the centenary of their foundation. We congratulate them and recommend them to the Lord. The Carmelite Missionaries, who serve in the Divina Providencia Hospital, invite everyone to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist tomorrow at 6:00pm --- a Mass of thanksgiving to celebrate the twelve years of their foundation and service in this hospital which is truly a work of Divine Providence. It is a miraculous work and anyone who wants to become aware of God's Providence only has to visit this place and assist in some way the ministry that takes place. So, tomorrow on this important anniversary you are invited to participate in this celebration.

I visited the communities of San Antonio in Santa Tecla where a faithful servant of the Church continues to give us an example of perseverance: Msgr. Alvarenga. Almost one hundred years old he continues to minister faithfully in this parish which he established and has administered. I also visited the house of Buen Pastor, where there has been a change of Superior and there one sees a generous spirit of love toward the young people who are sheltered in this house. I visited Aldeíta, a village of Tejutía, where the men and women of this area together with the people of El Paraíso are going to build a new parish. The

Betlemita Sisters and Father Gabriel Rodríguez are engaged in a wonderful apostolate in that region. I had the pleasure of making the pilgrimage to Esquipulas, to the Shrine of Santa Cruz Michapa, where Father Ayala and his committee work very enthusiastically on behalf of the people there. This Sunday the people in El Calvario are celebrating their patronal feast, the Lord of Calvary. There is a beautiful crucifix in this community, an image that goes back to the foundation of the city of San Salvador.

My dear sisters and brothers, above all I rejoice and want to give thanks to God for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that was concluded in a very reverent way last Wednesday here in the Cathedral. Those who were unable to come but offered to the Lord their infirmities, their pain, and their absence are generous benefactors of this work of Christian unity. Father Cortés sent us a beautiful telegram: *From my sick bed I participated in the week of Christian Unity and offered up my suffering. I congratulate you on a celebration that was never seen here before.*

Truly, my sisters and brothers, the Lord has blessed us with this idea that has been embraced by Catholics and Protestants of good will and who realize that as long as we do not achieve this unity that Jesus desires, we will be a hindrance to the process of evangelizing the world. On the other hand, the day when the unity of all who believe in the gospel of Jesus is made known to the world, that unity will become the most eloquent call to Christianity. Indeed, all the world will become Christian on the day that we affirm our unity. Even though the week of Christian Unity has concluded, I ask you to continue to keep this intention in your prayers, to offer sacrifices and make an effort to come together with our Protestant and Orthodox sisters and brothers --- even though there are not many members of the Orthodox faith among us. Let all of us seek that unity especially within our own churches.

Therefore my sisters and brothers, the sense of today's homily could be this: the Church of the Beatitudes. Dominant in today's reading and the liturgy of the Word is this wonderful passage of Saint Matthew: the Beatitudes. But in order to understand the sublime mystery of these eight norms that Christ gave us in order to know if a person is truly Christian or not, it is necessary to keep in mind the framework of the today's liturgy of the Word. We go back to the first reading from a prophet of the Old Testament, a prophet called Zephaniah and then we see the realization of this word of Jesus in the primitive Christian community as narrated today in the second reading from Saint Paul that was directed to the community of Corinth. In this way we will come to an understanding of the depths of the Divine Teacher's invitation.

But I have gotten ahead of myself: we will not understand the greatness of the Beatitudes because at the moment Jesus proclaimed these words, a moral revolution has been unleashed that has not yet reached its climax. We are still involved in this process and we will not fully understand all of this until the goal of this revolution becomes a reality: the Kingdom of Heaven which is promised as a reward for following each one of the Beatitudes. Today there are eight ways that are open to humanity, eight ways that we must walk with faith. In order to understand this Church of the Beatitudes, I want to propose, as is my custom, three ideas -- - three ideas taken from the Old Testament but incarnated in the New Testament: (1) The remnant of Israel is prolonged in the Church. (2) The Day of the Lord provides us with an eschatological perspective and Christian hope. (3) Christ is the strength of this Church that journeys in faith and hope. These are three thoughts from today's readings.

The remnant of Israel is prolonged in the Church

The prophets describe this small group of faithful men and women who remained true to the promises and the following of God's way as the remnant of Israel. God called the people of the Old Testament and entered into a covenant with them. But this people, with their propensity to idolatry, materialism and their search for those material realities of the earth, forgot God. Yet there always remained a remnant, a faithful group of men and women, and the prophet directs his words to this group. From the perspective of this remnant of Israel, the prophet denounces all the abuses, injustices and materialism of unfaithful Israel. For this reason my sisters and brothers, I say that it is necessary to read the Bible and keep in mind the circumstances in which we live today. Saint Paul places this Christian group of men and women who follow Christ with this faithful group of people: the remnant of Israel. Thus this group of people who are faithful to Christ will have to live in their own history the same vicissitudes as the remnant of Israel.

It is good to read the Old Testament, especially the prophets, and listen to the prophets' emphasis on severe reprimands and their call for order which included the kings, government officials, the rich and those who abused and trampled the people. The prophets said: *you have caused a break in God's covenant with his people*. The prophets called men and women to repentance: *change your way of life and be renewed*. Through the Church Christ continues to call people to conversion and to be faithful. Fragile people, like all of us, will not always respond to this call to holiness but create idols of money, power and other realities of this earth. Be converted, be faithful to your Baptismal commitment, be faithful to your Lord.

This is the remnant of Israel that Zephaniah refers to after describing the terrible injustices that were present in the society of his time: pride, wealth and luxury of the powerful. The prophet calls and tells them: *I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly* (d). This is what the Church desires: a humble people, a people who are willing to follow Christ, a remnant. My sisters and brothers, we should not become excited about great numbers of people but rather we should be concerned about the authenticity and the quality of Christians and their sincerity in seeking Christ.

I am happy that during these times when it is difficult to be faithful to Christ, there are many good Christians in the archdiocese, in the cities and the rural areas, in every part of our diocese. Here it is known who is faithful and who belongs to this remnant of faithful people. May my call, in the name of Jesus Christ, touch people's hearts and may everyone desire not so much to be sinless or angels --- we are all sinners and have evil tendencies --- but may everyone make an effort to be authentic, to confess their sins and to struggle so as to not remain content and thus enthrone sin in the world. Let us struggle to overcome sin and root out selfishness, pride, vanity, etc. The effort of the remnant of Israel is seen in their dissatisfaction with mediocrity and their desire to be a poor and humble people. We will explain the meaning of these words.

My sisters and brothers, before doing this I want to read to you some words from *Populorum Progressio* so that you can see what the Pope describes as a destruction of this spirit of poverty: *The pursuit of life's necessities is quite legitimate; hence we are duty-bound to do the work which enables us to obtain them... But the acquisition of worldly goods can lead men to greed, to the unrelenting desire for more, to the pursuit of greater personal power. Rich and poor alike—be they individuals, families or nations—can fall prey to avarice and soul-stifling materialism* (e). My sisters and brothers, let us remember this: the spirit of

avarice can also be rooted in those persons whom we refer to as poor persons who in reality are not poor because their hearts are attached and they are avaricious. Thus people who live on the margins of society as well as those who are rich can become victims of avarice and it is this soul-stifling materialism that can lead one to become avaricious.

The Pope continues: *Neither individuals nor nations should regard the possession of more and more goods as the ultimate objective. Every kind of progress is a two-edged sword. It is necessary if man is to grow as a human being; yet it can also enslave him, if he comes to regard it as the supreme good and cannot look beyond it (g).* The consequences of this are: *men harden their hearts, shut out others from their minds and gather together solely for reasons of self-interest rather than out of friendship; dissension and disunity follow soon after. Thus the exclusive pursuit of material possessions prevents man's growth as a human being and stands in opposition to his true grandeur (h).* The Pope concludes with this concise phrase: *Avarice, in individuals and in nations, is the most obvious form of stultified moral development.* In other words nations and individuals are not underdeveloped simply because they lack material goods: people are morally underdeveloped even if they have every comfort but yet are avaricious.

The Day of the Lord provides us with an eschatological perspective and Christian hope

My sisters and brothers, my second thought places before us the Beatitudes. This beautiful passage that dominates today's Liturgy of the Word, ought to be the object of our reflection during the week. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (i).* Saint Matthew adds: *in spirit*, but originally this phrase read, *blessed are the poor*. Saint Luke does use not the phrase *in spirit (j)*, and when the prophet Isaiah announces that Christ will proclaim the Good News, he simply says he will preach the good news to the poor (k). When the Saint Matthew wrote his gospel in the midst of a Jewish-Greco-Roman world, like today, there were many poor. (l)

We should not be afraid to say that this Beatitude refers to the poor, but as the Pope has told us, it does not refer to just any poor person since as we have just seen there are poor people who are also avaricious. This Beatitude refers to those who have made poverty their ethic. Poor are those who do not view themselves as being self-sufficient and are even willing to run the risk of becoming servile because they have a feeling of psychological inability and insecurity. It is this psychological insecurity that Christ wants to use in order to open women and men to the hope that they have everything in God for whom nothing is impossible

Blessed are those who take advantage of their poverty and open themselves to this hope. This is a passage that, in the midst of our trials and tribulations, opens us to hope. This should not lead us to preach conformity. The Church is never in conformity with the present state of reality! People must continue to struggle in this world, but must be careful, for as the Pope has told us, we must avoid making avarice and the desire *to have* our ultimate goal. This simply depersonalizes men and women and leads people to moral underdevelopment. We must continue to work and struggle for comfort for ourselves and our families, but our hearts must be open to this hope and our love must be open to the service of others.

Blessed are the meek, Jesus says, for they will inherit the land (m). In these words of Jesus we can almost hear an echo of God promising Abraham a new land, a land of hope, a new heaven, a new earth. (n) This land of justice and love that Christians await is not found

here in this world, even though this world ought to reflect this justice and love. But these realities are found beyond human history and are the object of our ultimate destiny.

Blessed are those who mourn (o). They mourn because they do not have the worldly joys that others have. They mourn because they are aware of the sins of the people and ask for God's forgiveness. Blessed are those who mourn with these noble feelings because they will receive the greatest comfort: they will see God forgive the people and will see that there are joys that can never be found on this earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (p). Justice in the Biblical sense means a good relationship between God and humankind. It also means God's victory over the evil of men and women. Truly just people desire this: to maintain their relationship with God and not allow this relationship to be disturbed by the sins of the world. Truly just people are also grieved by the fact that so many people do not have a good relationship with God because they have made their God into something that is not really the true God. Indeed, God will triumph over the evil of humankind because of justice. Blessed are those who desire this justice, *for they will be satisfied* (Matthew 5:6); they will see this desire fulfilled and their hunger will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (q). This is one of the most profound Biblical desires. The human person has not been created for vengeance, hatred or violence but for reconciliation, love and forgiveness. We will be forgiven according to the way we forgive others, for we pray to God: *forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors* (r). Blessed are the merciful hearts! and those who are generous and peacemakers and those who establish harmony where there is a lack of unity. (s)

Blessed are the clean of heart. The gospel refers to that sincerity that caused a conflict to arise between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were only concerned about an exterior, ritualistic and legalistic cleanliness. For them cleanliness consisted in washing hands and certain other exterior purifications. Jesus called them: *hypocrites* (t). What good is it to clean the outside of the plate if inside it is unclean? What good is it to have the outside of the tomb well painted, if inside it is filled with decay and rotteness? Clean of heart refers to those who sincerely cleanse their hearts because one is not made unclean by those things that enter the stomach or by eating with unclean hands, (u) but rather one is made unclean by the things that come forth from the heart: evil thoughts and desires, avarice. These are the things that make a person unclean. Thus Jesus is calling us to be sincere.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God (v). My sisters and brothers, at this time God wants his children to work on behalf of peace and not violence. He wants us to work in such a way that we do not lose our time in creating something that simply gives the appearance of being peace but invites us to create peace that is rooted in love and justice.

And finally, *blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (w). Surely Saint Matthew must have felt the murmuring, the criticism and the persecution of the Christian community by the Jewish community. Throughout the centuries, persecution has been the inheritance of the Church. But now is also the time to say blessed are those who are persecuted.

Christ is the strength of this Church that journey's with faith and hope

Finally, my sisters and brothers, I present my third thought which I hope will be a synthesis of all that I have said: Christ is the strength of the Church. Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians and responds to the realities that motivated the divisions among them. These divisions resulted from the Christians focusing on the wisdom of this world: I am for Apollo, the great preacher; I am for Cephas; I am for Paul. (x) They were only looking at the eloquence of these individuals. Saint Paul calls their attention to this: *look at those who are gathered here, in the eyes of the world not many of us are people of prestige --- we are poor* (y). Paul had the experience of preaching in the Areopagus to the wise people of Greece as well as the Jews. (z) He was despised, stoned and persecuted by both groups. Yet here, on the shores of the lake, at the port of Corinth, he is with simple and humble people, or as the prophet Zephaniah said: *a humble and lowly people* (a2). Saint Paul says that this is the type of people that the Lord chooses. He has chosen the *lowly and the despised of the world, those who count for nothing... so that no human being might boast before God. It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification and redemption* (b2).

My sisters and brothers, the great blessings that a Christians awaits should not be the same as those of noble people especially if these noble ones want to move forward politically, socially or economically, that is, if they want to have more. This is of no interest to Christians. Christians do not place their hope in being well positioned with the powerful of the earth. The authentic Church supports them in their weakness, their poverty and in the wealth that they hope for. For me, Christ is my wisdom, my righteousness, my sanctification and redemption. What more do I want? I want everyone to follow this Christ and to feel that Christ is the true greatness and support of our Church.

My sisters and brothers, there are some Christians among us who see the Archdiocese as a failure, at an impasse: *What is going to happen now?* But those who have placed their faith in Christ and who find their support in Christ --- these are good Christians. If this Church of the Archdiocese finds its support in Christ and awaits Christ's wisdom and redemption, then the Church is being built up and is not at an impasse, rather we are working together in solidarity with one another.

My sisters and brothers, I would like this reading from Saint Paul to convince us that we have no need to hope for anything else if we have Christ as the cornerstone of our building up of the Church. We are not waiting for something to happen. As Mr. Todman said, if something else does happen it will be for the good of the people, but meanwhile, the Church is doing much as she presents Christ to the world and invites all Christians to support themselves on this Rock, to believe in this Truth, to cling to this Wisdom --- for this is the wealth of those hearts that are humble and poor. Their happiness is not found in the transitory things of the world that remain behind at the time of death and which time carries off --- their happiness is found in the Wisdom of Christ and his justice, holiness and redemption. Blessed are the poor, for they know that their riches are in the One who, being rich, made himself poor in order to enrich us with his poverty, teaching us true Christian wisdom. (c2)

My sisters and brothers, as I said at the beginning, the Beatitudes are not something we can understand fully, and that is why there are young people especially who think that the love of the Beatitudes is not going to bring about a better world and who opt for violence, for guerrilla war, for revolution.

The Church will never make that its path. Let it be clear, I repeat, that the Church does not choose those ways of violence and so whatever is said to that effect is slander. The Church's option is for what Christ says in the Beatitudes. I am not surprised though that this is not understood. Young people especially are impatient and want a better world right away. But Christ, who preached the message twenty centuries ago, knew that he was sowing a long-term moral revolution in which we human beings come to change ourselves from worldly thinking.

Revolution means to overthrow an order, overthrow a moral order that generally dominates the world. The world does not say: blessed are the poor. The world says: blessed are the rich. You are worth as much as you have. But Christ says: wrong. *Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (d2), because they do not put their trust in what is so transitory.

Thus all the Beatitudes overthrow that which the world believes and puts in its place seeds of transformation that we are unable to see in their final form until we achieve our ultimate goal, the Kingdom of Heaven, which Christ points out to us as the infinite horizon. Blessed are those who walk even though the road appears to be in darkness and leading nowhere! Let us continue on the path for it is the path of Christ and we will arrive at the goal that today's readings point out to us as our hope and perspective. Let us proclaim, then, our faith in these truths of Christ.

¹ Terence A. Todman, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs of the United States interviewed Archbishop Romero on 27 January 1978. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 28 January 1978.

Margin References (a) Mt 5,1: (b) Mt 5,2: (c) Mk 2,27: (d) Zp 3,12: (e) PP 18: (f) PP 18: (g) PP 19: (h) PP 19: (i) Mt 5,3: (j) Lk 6,20: (k) Is 61,1: (l) Lk 4,18: (m) Mt 5,4: (n) Gn 21,1: (o) Mt 5,5: (p) Mt 5,6: (q) Mt 5,7: (r) Lk 11,4: (s) Mt 5,8: (t) Mt 23,25-28: (u) Mt 15,17-20: (v) Mt 5,9: (w) Mt 5,10: (x) 1Cor 1,12: (y) 1Cor 1,26-27: (z) Ac 17,22: (a2) Zp 3,12: (b2) 1Cor 1,27-30: (c2) 2Cor 8,9: (d2) Mt 5,3.