

**THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF FAITH  
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OPTION FOR THE POOR**

*(Address by Archbishop Romero on the Occasion of the Conferral of a Doctorate,  
Honoris Causa by the University of Louvain, Belgium, February 2, 1980)*

I come from the smallest country in faraway Latin America. I come bringing in my heart, which is that of a Salvadoran Christian and pastor, greetings, gratitude, and the joy of sharing the experiences of life.

I first of all greet with admiration this noble alma mater of Louvain. Never did I imagine the enormous honor of being thus linked with a European center of such academic and cultural prestige, a center where were born so many of the ideas that have contributed to the marvelous effort being made by the Church and by society to adapt themselves to the new times in which we live.

Therefore I come also to express my thanks to the University of Louvain, and to the Church in Belgium. I want to think of this honorary doctorate as something other than an act of homage to me personally. The enormous disproportion of such a great weight being attributed to my few merits would overwhelm me. Let me rather interpret this generous distinction awarded by the university as an affectionate act of homage to the people of El Salvador and to their Church, as an eloquent testimony of support for, and solidarity with, the sufferings of my people and for their noble struggle for liberation, and as a gesture of communion, and of sympathy, with the apostolic work of my Archdiocese.

I could not refuse to accept the privilege of this act of homage if, by coming to receive it, I could come to thank the Church of Belgium for the invaluable pastoral help it has given to the Church of El Salvador. It would not, indeed, have been possible to find a more suitable time and place to say *thank you* than this one, so courteously provided to me by the University of Louvain. So, from the depths of my heart, many thanks to you -- - bishop, priests, religious, and lay persons --- for so generously uniting your lives and your labors with the hardships and the persecution involved in our pastoral activities.

And in the same spirit of friendship as that in which I expressed my greetings and my gratitude, I want to express the joy I have in coming to share with you, in a fraternal way, my experience as a pastor and as a Salvadoran, and my theological reflection as a teacher of the faith.

In line with the friendly suggestion made by the university, I have the honor of placing this experience and reflection within the series of conferences taking place here upon the theme of the political dimensions of the Christian faith.

I shall not try to talk, and you cannot expect me to talk, as would an expert in politics. Nor will I even speculate, as someone might who was an expert, on the theoretical relationship between the faith and politics. No, I am going to speak to you simply as a pastor, as one who together with his people, has been learning the beautiful but harsh truth that the Christian faith does not cut us off from the world but immerses us in it, that the Church is not a fortress set apart from the city. The Church follows Jesus who lived, worked, battled and died in the midst of a city, in the *polis*. It is in this sense that I should like to talk about the political dimension of the Christian faith: in the precise sense of the repercussions of the faith on the world, and also of the repercussions that being in the world has on faith.

### **A Church at the Service of the World**

We ought to be clear from the start that the Christian faith and the activity of the Church have always had socio-political repercussions. By commission or omission, by associating themselves with one or another social group, Christians have always had an influence upon the socio-political makeup of the world in which they lived. The problem is about the *how* of this influence in the socio-political world, whether or not it is in accordance with the faith.

As a first idea, though still a very general one, I want to propose the intuition of Vatican II that lies at the root of every ecclesial movement of today. The essence of the Church lies in its mission of service to the world, in its mission to save the world in its totality, and of saving it in history, here and now. The Church exists to act in solidarity with the hopes and joys, the anxieties and sorrows, of men and women. Like Jesus, the Church was sent *to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart ... to see and to save what was lost* [Luke 4:18; 19:10] (*Lumen Gentium*, #8).

#### ***The world of the poor***

You all know these words of Scripture, given prominence by Vatican II. During the 1960's several of your bishops and theologians helped to throw light on the essence and the mission of the Church understood in these terms. My contribution will be to flesh out these beautiful declarations from the standpoint of my own situation, that of a small Latin American country, typical of what today is called the Third World. To put it in one word --- in a word that sums it all up and makes it concrete --- the world that the Church ought to serve is, for us, the world of the poor.

Our Salvadoran world is no abstraction. It is not another example of what is understood by *world* in developed countries such as yours. It is a world made up mostly of men and women who are poor and oppressed. And we say of that world of the poor that it is the key to understanding the Christian faith, to understanding the activity of the Church and the political dimension of her faith and her ecclesial activity. It is the poor who tell us what the world is, and what the Church's service to the world should be. It is the poor who tell us what the *polis* is, what the city is and what it means for the Church to really live in the world.

Allow me, then, briefly to explain from the perspective of the poor among my people, whom I represent, the situation and the activity of our Church in the world in which we live, and then to reflect theologically upon the importance that this real world, this culture, this socio-political world, has for the Church.

In its pastoral work, our Archdiocese in recent years has been moving in a direction that can only be described and only be understood as a turning toward the world of the poor --- to their real, concrete world.

### ***Incarnation in the world of the poor***

Just as elsewhere in Latin America, the words of Exodus have, after many years, perhaps centuries, finally resounded in our ears: *The cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them* (Exodus 3:9). These words have given us new eyes to see what has always been the case among us, but which has so often been hidden, even from the view of the Church herself. We have learned to see what is the first, basic fact about our world and, as pastors, we have made a judgment about it at Medellín and at Puebla: *that misery, as a collective fact expresses itself as an injustice which cries to the heavens* (Medellín Document, *Justice*, #1). At Puebla we declared, *So we brand the situation of inhuman poverty in which millions of Latin Americans live as the most devastating and humiliating kind of scourge. And this situation finds expression in such things as a high rate of infant mortality, lack of adequate housing, health problems, starvation wages, unemployment and underemployment, malnutrition, job uncertainty, compulsory mass migrations, etc.* (Puebla, #29). Experiencing these realities, and letting ourselves be affected by them, far from separating us from our faith, has sent us back to the world of the poor as to our true home. It has moved us, as a first basic step, to take the world of the poor upon ourselves.

It is there that we have found the real faces of the poor, about which Puebla speaks (cf. Puebla, 31-39). There we have met land-workers without land and without steady employment, without running water or electricity in their homes, without medical assistance when mothers give birth, and without schools for their children. There we have met factory workers who have no labor rights, and who get fired from their jobs if they demand such rights, human beings who are at the mercy of cold economic calculations. There we have met the mothers and the wives of those who have disappeared, or who are political prisoners. There we have met the shantytown dwellers, whose wretchedness defies imagination --- suffering that is permanently mocked by nearby mansions.

It is within this world devoid of a human face, in the midst of this contemporary sacrament of the suffering servant of Yahweh that the Church of my archdiocese has undertaken the task of incarnating herself. I do not say this in a triumphalistic spirit, for I am well aware how much in this regard remains to be done. But I say it with immense joy, for we have made the effort not to pass by or to circle around the one lying wounded in the roadway, but to approach him or her as did the Good Samaritan.

This coming closer to the world of the poor is what we understand both by the incarnation and by conversion. The changes that were needed within the Church and in her apostolate, in education, in religious and in priestly life, in lay movements --- the changes which we had not brought about simply by looking inward upon the Church, we are now carrying out by turning ourselves outward toward the world of the poor.

### ***Proclaiming the Good News to the poor***

Our encounter with the poor has regained for us the central truth of the gospel, namely, the Word of God urges us to conversion. The Church has to proclaim the Good News to the poor. Those who, in this-worldly terms, have heard bad news, and who have lived through even worse realities, are now listening to the Church as she proclaims the words of Jesus: *the Kingdom of God is at hand; blessed are you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours*. And hence they also have good news to proclaim to the rich: that they, too, must become poor in order to share the benefits of the kingdom with the poor. Anyone who knows Latin America will be quite clear that there is no ingenuousness in these words, still less the workings of a soporific drug. What is to be found in these words is a coming together of the aspirations on our continent for liberation and for God's offer of love to the poor. This is the hope that the Church offers, and it coincides with the hope, at times dormant and at other times frustrated or manipulated, of the poor of Latin America.

It is something new among our people that today the poor see in the Church a source of hope and a support for their noble struggle for liberation. The hope that our Church encourages is neither naïve nor passive. It is rather a summons from the Word of God for the great majority of people, the poor, that they assume their proper responsibility, that they undertake their own conscientization, that, in a country where it is illegal or practically prohibited (at some periods more so than at others) they set about organizing themselves. And it is support, sometimes critical support, for their just causes and demands. The hope that we preach to the poor is intended to give them back their dignity, to encourage them to take charge of their own future. In a world, the Church has not only turned toward the poor, it has made of the poor the special beneficiaries of its mission because, as Puebla says, *God take on their defense and loves them* (Puebla, 1142).

### ***Commitment to the defense of the poor***

The Church has not only incarnated herself in the world of the poor, giving them hope, she has also firmly committed herself to their defense. The majority of the poor in our country are oppressed and repressed daily by economic and political structures. The terrible words spoken by the prophets of Israel continue to be verified among us. Among us there are those who sell others for money, who sell a poor person for a pair of sandals; those who, in their mansions, pile up violence and plunder; those who crush the poor; those who make the kingdom of violence come closer as they lie upon their beds of ivory; those who join house to house, and field to field, until they occupy the whole land and are the only ones there.

Amos and Isaiah are not just voices from distant centuries; their writings are not merely texts that we reverently read in the liturgy. They are everyday realities. Day by day we live out the cruelty and ferocity they excoriate. We live them when mothers and wives come to us and seek help because their sons/daughters/husbands have been arrested or have disappeared, when mutilated bodies turn up in secret cemeteries, and when those who fight for justice and peace are assassinated. Daily we live in our Archdiocese the reality that Puebla so vigorously denounced with the following words: *There are the anxieties based on systematic or selective repression; it is accompanied by accusations, violations of privacy, improper pressures, tortures, and exile. There are the anxieties produced in many families by the disappearance of their loved ones, about whom they cannot get any news. There is the total insecurity bound up with arrest and detention without judicial consent. There are the anxieties felt in the face of a system of justice that has been suborned or cowed* (Puebla, 42).

In this situation of conflict and antagonism, in which just a few persons control economic and political power, the Church has placed herself at the side of the poor and has undertaken their defense. The Church cannot do otherwise, for she remembers that Jesus had pity on the multitude. But by defending the poor she has entered into serious conflict with the powerful who belong to the monied oligarchies and with the political and military authorities of the state.

### ***Persecuted for serving the poor***

This defense of the poor in a world deep in conflict has occasioned something new in the recent history of our Church: persecution. You know the more important facts. In less than three years over fifty priests have been attacked, threatened, calumniated. Six are already martyrs --- they were murdered. Some have been tortured and others expelled. Nuns have also been persecuted. The Archdiocesan radio station and educational institutions that are Catholic or of a Christian inspiration have been attacked, threatened, intimidated, even bombed. Several parish communities have been raided.

If all of this happened to persons who are the most evident representatives of the Church, you can guess what has happened to ordinary Christians, to the *campesinos*, catechists, lay ministers and to the ecclesial base communities. There have been threats, arrests, tortures, and murders numbering in the hundred and thousands. As always, even in persecution, it has been the poor among the Christians who have suffered most.

It is, then, an indisputable fact that, over the last three years, our Church has been persecuted. But it is important to note why it has been persecuted. Not any and every priest has been persecuted, not any and every institution has been attacked. The part of the Church that has been attacked and persecuted is that Church that has placed itself on the side of the people --- the Church that has gone to the people's defense.

Here again we find the same key to understanding the persecution of the Church: the poor. Once again it is the poor who enable us to understand what has really

happened. That is why the Church has understood the persecution from the perspective of the poor. Persecution has been occasioned by the defense of the poor. It amounts to nothing other than the Church's taking upon herself the lot of the poor.

Real persecution has been directed against the poor, the body of Christ in history today. They, like Jesus, are the crucified, the persecuted servants of Yahweh. They are the ones who make up in their own bodies that which is lacking in the passion of Christ. And for that reason when the Church has organized and united herself around the hopes and anxieties of the poor, she has incurred the same fate as that of Jesus and the poor: persecution.

### ***The political dimension of the faith***

This has been a brief sketch of the situation and of the stance of the Church in El Salvador. The political dimension of the faith is nothing other than the Church's response to the demands made upon it by the de facto socio-political world in which it exists. What we have rediscovered is that this demand is a fundamental one for the faith, and that the Church cannot ignore it. This is not to say that the Church should regard herself as a political institution entering into competition with other political institutions, or that she has her own political processes. I am talking about something more profound, something more in keeping with the gospel. I am talking about an authentic option for the poor, of becoming incarnate in their world, of proclaiming the Good News to them, of giving them hope, of encouraging them to engage in a liberating praxis, of defending their cause and of sharing their fate.

The Church's option for the poor explains the political dimension of the faith in its fundamentals and in its basic outline. Because the Church has opted for the truly poor, not for the fictitiously poor, because she has opted for those who really are oppressed and repressed, the Church lives in a political world, and she fulfills herself as Church also through politics. It cannot be otherwise if the Church, like Jesus, is to turn herself toward the poor.

### ***Making the faith real in the world of the poor***

The course taken by the Archdiocese has clearly arisen from its faith conviction. The transcendence of the gospel has guided us in our judgment and in our action. We have judged the social and political situation from the standpoint of faith. But it is also true, to look at it another way, that the faith itself has been deepened, that hidden riches of the gospel have been opened, precisely by taking up this stance toward the socio-political reality as it is.

Now I should just like to put forward some short reflections on several fundamental aspects of the faith that we have seen enriched through this real incarnation in the socio-political world.

### *A clearer awareness of sin*

In the first place, we have a better knowledge of what sin is. We know that offending God is death for human beings. We know that such a sin really is mortal, not only in the sense of the interior death of the person who commits the sin, but also because of the real, objective death that sin produces. Let us remind ourselves of a fundamental fact of our Christian faith: sin killed the Son of God, and sin is what continues to kill the children of God.

We see that basic truth of the Christian faith daily in the situation of our country. It is impossible to offend God without offending one's brother or sister. And the worst offense against God, the worst form of secularism, as one of our Salvadoran theologians has said, is: *to turn children of God, temples of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ in history, into victims of oppression and injustice, into slaves to economic greed, into fodder for political repression. The worst of these forms of secularism is the denial of grace by the objectivization of this world as an operative presence of the powers of evil, the visible presence of the denial of God* (Ellacuria, *Entre Medellín y Puebla*, Estudios Centroamericanos, March 1978, number 353, p. 123).

It is not a matter of sheer routine that I insist once again on the existence in our country of structures of sin. They are sinful because they produce the fruits of sin: the death of Salvadorans --- the swift death brought by repression or the long, drawn out, but no less real, death from structural oppression. That is why we have denounced what in our country has become the idolatry of wealth, the idolatry of the absolute right (within the capitalist system) of private property, and the idolatry of political power in national security regimes, in the name of which personal security is itself institutionalized.

No matter how tragic it may appear, the Church through her entrance into the real socio-political world has learned how to recognize, and how to deepen her understanding of the essence of sin. The fundamental essence of sin in our world is revealed in the death of Salvadorans.

### *Greater clarity on the Incarnation and the Redemption*

In the second place we now have a better understanding of what the incarnation means, what it means to say that Jesus really took human flesh and made himself one with his sisters and brothers in suffering, in tears and laments, and in surrender. I am not speaking of a universal incarnation. This is impossible. I am speaking of an incarnation that is preferential and partial: incarnation in the world of the poor. From that perspective the Church will become a Church for everyone. The Church will offer a service to the powerful, too, through the apostolate of conversion --- but not the other way around, as has so often been the case in the past.

The world of the poor, with its very concrete social and political characteristics, teaches us where the Church can incarnate herself in such a way that she will avoid the false universalism that inclines the Church to associate herself with the powerful. The

world of the poor teaches us about the nature of Christian love, a love that certainly seeks peace but also unmask false pacifism --- the pacifism of resignation and inactivity. It is a love that should certainly be freely offered, but that seeks to be effective in history. The world of the poor teaches us that the sublimity of Christian love ought to be mediated through the overriding necessity of justice for the majority. It ought not to turn away from honorable conflict. The world of the poor teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of handouts from governments or from the Church, but when they themselves are the masters of, and protagonists in, their own struggle and liberation, thereby unmasking the roots of false paternalism, including ecclesiastical paternalism.

The real world of the poor also teaches us about Christian hope. The Church prepares a new heaven and a new earth. She knows, moreover, that no socio-political system can be exchanged for the final fullness that is given by God. But she has also learned that transcendent hope must be preserved by signs of hope in history, no matter how simple they may apparently be --- such as those proclaimed by the Trito-Isaiah when he says: *they will build houses and inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit* (Isaiah 65:21). What in this is an authentically Christian hope --- not reduced, as is so often said disparagingly, to what is merely of this world or purely human --- is being learned daily through contact with those who have no houses and no vineyards, those who build for others to inhabit and work so that others may eat the fruits.

### *A deeper faith in God and in his Christ*

In the third place, incarnation in the socio-political world is the locus for deepening faith in God and in Christ. We believe in Jesus who came to bring the fullness of life and we believe in a living God who gives life to men and women and wants them truly to live. These radical truths of the faith become really true and truly radical when the Church enters into the heart of the life and death of people. Then there is put before the faith of the Church, as it is put before the faith of every individual, the most fundamental choice: to be in favor of life or to be in favor of death. We see, with great clarity, that here neutrality is impossible. Either we serve the life of Salvadorans or we are accomplices in their death. And here is what is most fundamental about the faith is given expression in history: either we believe in a God of life or we serve the idols of death.

In the name of Jesus we want, and we work for, life in its fullness --- a life that is not reduced to the frantic search for basic material needs or one reduced to the sphere of the socio-political. We know perfectly well that the superabundant fullness of life is to be achieved only in the kingdom of the Father. In human history this fullness is achieved through a worthy service of that kingdom, a total surrender to the Father. But we see with equal clarity that in the name of Jesus it would be sheer illusion, it would be an irony, and it would be the most profound blasphemy, to forget and to ignore the basic levels of life --- the life that begins with bread, a roof, and a job.



With the Apostle John we believe that Jesus is *the Word who is life* (1 John 1:1), and that God reveals himself wherever this life is to be found. Where the poor begin to really live, where the poor begin to free themselves, where persons are able to sit around a common table to share with one another --- the God of life is there. When the Church inserts herself into the socio-political world she does so in order to work with it so that from such cooperation life may be given to the poor. In doing so, therefore, she is not distancing herself from her mission nor is she doing something of secondary importance or something incidental to her mission. She is giving testimony to her faith in God. She is being the instrument of the Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.

This faith in the God of life is the explanation for what lies deepest in the Christian mystery. To give life to the poor one has to give of one's own life, even to give one's life itself. The greatest sign of faith in a God of life is the witness of those who are ready to give up their own life. *A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends* (John 15:13). And we see this daily in our country. Many Salvadorans, many Christians, are ready to give their lives so that poor may have life. They are following Jesus and showing their faith in him. Living with the real world just as Jesus did, like him accused and threatened, like him laying down their lives --- they are giving witness to the Word of life.

Our story, then, is a very old one. It is Jesus' story that we, in all modesty, are trying to follow. As Church, we are not political experts nor do we want to manipulate politics through its own internal mechanisms. But entrance into the socio-political world, into the world where the lives and deaths of the great masses of the population are decided upon, is necessary and urgent if we are to preserve, not only in word, but in deed, faith in a God of life and follow the lead of Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I should like to sum up what is central to the things I have been saying. In the ecclesial life of our Archdiocese the political dimension of the faith --- or, if one prefers, the relationship between faith and politics --- has not been discovered by purely theoretical reflection, reflection made before the Church has acted. Such reflection is important --- but not decisive. Such reflection becomes important *and* decisive when it does indeed reflect the real life of the Church. The honor of putting my pastoral experience in words in this university setting has obliged me today to undertake theological reflection. But it is rather in the actual practice of service to the poor that the political dimension of the faith is to be found, and correctly found. In such practice one can discover the relationship between the two and what distinguishes them. It is the faith that provides the first impulse to incarnate oneself in the socio-political world of the poor, and gives encouragement to actions that lead to liberation and are also socio-political. And in turn, that praxis and that incarnation make concrete the basic aspects of the faith.

In what I have laid out here, I have sketched only a broad outline of this double movement. Naturally, there are many more topics to be discussed. I might have talked about the relationship between faith and political ideologies --- in particular Marxism. I

could have dwelt upon the question of violence and its legitimacy --- a burning issue for us. Such topics are frequent subjects for reflection, and we face them with preconceptions and without fear. But we face them to the extent that they become real problems and we are learning to provide solutions within the same process.

In the short period it has fallen to me to guide the Archdiocese, there have been four different governments with distinctive political programs. Over these years other political forces, revolutionary and democratic, have been growing and developing. So the Church has had to go on making judgments about politics from within a changing scene. At the present time the outlook is ambiguous. On the one hand all the projects emanating from the government are collapsing and the possibility of popular liberation is growing.

But rather than listing for you all the fluctuations in the politics of El Salvador, I have chosen to explain what lies at the root of the Church's stance in our explosive socio-political world. I have tried to make clear to you the ultimate criterion, one that is theological and historical, for the Church's involvement in the world of the poor. In accordance with her own specific nature the Church will go on supporting one or another political program to the extent that it operates in favor of the poor among the people.

I believe that this is the way to maintain the Church's identity and transcendence. We enter into the real socio-political development of our people. We judge it from the point of view of the poor. We encourage all liberation movements that really lead to justice and peace for the majority of the people. We think this is the way to preserve the transcendence and the identity of the Church because in this way we preserve our faith in God.

Every Christian used to say *Gloria Dei, vivens homo* (the glory of God is the living person). We could make this more concrete by saying *Gloria Dei, vivens pauper* (the glory of God is the living poor person). From the perspective of the transcendence of the gospel, I believe we can determine what the life of the poor truly is. And I also believe that by putting ourselves alongside the poor and trying to bring life to them, we shall come to know the eternal truth of the gospel.