

PASTORAL LETTER
«I SEE VIOLENCE AND STRIFE IN THE CITY»



ON THE OCCASION OF THE FEAST
OF THE BELOVED BL. OSCAR ROMERO

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CERTIFICATE OF TRANSLATION

This is a true and accurate English translation of the Spanish language document entitled "*Carta Pastoral - Veo en La Ciudad Violencia y Discordia*," dated March 24, 2016.

This translation was created by Carlos X. Colorado, Esq., who is fluent in and understands both English and Spanish. April 15, 2016, Los Angeles, Calif. All rights reserved.

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**ABBREVIATIONS
BIBLICAL BOOKS**

<i>2 Cor</i>	The Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians
<i>Eccl</i>	The Book of Ecclesiastes
<i>Ex</i>	Exodus
<i>Ezek</i>	The Book of Ezekiel
<i>Gal</i>	The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians
<i>Gen</i>	Genesis
<i>Isa</i>	The Book of Isaiah
<i>Jn</i>	The Gospel According to St. John
<i>1 Jn</i>	The First Epistle of St. John
<i>1 Kings</i>	The First Book of Kings
<i>Lk</i>	The Gospel According to St. Luke
<i>Mk</i>	The Gospel According to St. Mark
<i>Mt</i>	The Gospel According to St. Matthew
<i>Num</i>	Numbers
<i>Prov</i>	The Book of Proverbs
<i>Sir</i>	Sirach
<i>Jas</i>	The General Epistle of St. James

ABBREVIATIONS
DOCUMENTS OF THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

AG	Second Vatican Council: Decree <i>Ad Gentes</i> on the Missionary Activity of the Church
CA	Pope John Paul II: Encyclical Letter <i>Centesimus Annus</i>
CD	Second Vatican Council: Decree <i>Christus Dominus</i> on the Pastoral Office of Bishops.
DA	General Conference of Latin American Bishops: Final Document of Aparecida
EG	Pope Francis: Apostolic Exhortation <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i>
GS	Second Vatican Council: Pastoral Constitution <i>Gaudium et Spes</i> on the Church in the Modern World.
LG	Second Vatican Council: Dogmatic Constitution <i>Lumen Gentium</i> on the Church
LS	Pope Francis: Encyclical Letter <i>Laudato Si'</i> , On Care for Our Common Home
PP	Pope Paul VI: Encyclical Letter <i>Populorum Progressio</i> , on the Development of Peoples

FOREWORD

Our very beloved **Bl. Archbishop Oscar Romero** is the wonderful light which illuminates our path, he is our great intercessor before God praying for us and present in our midst guiding our way with his teaching and with the example of his life. In honor of Archbishop Romero on the occasion of the celebration of his first feast as a Blessed, I present to you this simple pastoral letter, hoping that it will help us to find a solution to the great problem of violence that afflicts us, that it may be the light at the end of the tunnel we are facing, at this time of trial which we are living. So that all of us invoking the grace of God and giving the best of ourselves will be true peacemakers for our beloved country, El Salvador.

My dear brothers and dear sisters:

To our dear Bishops

To my brother diocesan and religious priests

To my dear seminarians

To the self-sacrificing Congregations of Religious Sisters and Brothers
Religious

To the highly valued lay brothers of the various movements, associations,
secular institutes and the communities of lay faithful

To all the faithful that the Lord has entrusted to me in this Archdiocese of
San Salvador

To all men and women of goodwill

THE PEACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST BE WITH YOU ALL

INTRODUCTION

1. I would have liked to have addressed these words to you at a better time; but I do it in the middle of a situation full of pain, violence, discord and death, as you all well know. This situation has been playing out for decades, and is not declining but rather continually increasing; filling our society with fear, taking away our joy and unfortunately, often hardening our hearts to the point of leaving us paralyzed or speechless just as the prophet Isaiah denounced during his time: *“The just have perished, but no one takes it to heart; The steadfast are swept away, while no one understands”* (Isa 57:1). Moreover, I join my voice to that of the Holy Father Pope Francis to say to you with a heavy heart that in El Salvador: *“The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident. It is a struggle to live and, often, to live with precious little dignity”* (EG 52).

2. In this Year of Mercy that we have already started, the Spirit, giver of the gifts of love and compassion, should move us to act to solve the painful misfortunes that strike us all so forcefully. For my part, I cry to the Lord for the current situation and I echo the psalmist: *“I see violence and strife in the city”* (Ps 55:10) I invite you, as pastor of this flock, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, men and women of good will, to take up two attitudes in this new year. First, let us strive to achieve a deeper understanding of the signs of the times in which we live, following Jesus, our ultimate pastor, who demanded of his contemporaries: *“Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”* (Lk 12:56). A closely

examination of our times will help discern the real root or roots of this scourge, recognizing that we may have limited ourselves to alleviating the symptoms instead of seeking to eliminate the underlying causes of the scourge. Or in the worst case, perhaps we have unwittingly contributed—through our silence or our actions – to generating this violence. Secondly, I invite you urgently to seek solutions; but solutions based on unity, solidarity and Christian commitment. Everyone, from wherever he or she may be, can contribute to achieving that national peace we long for, by becoming a builder and promoter of peace in their own place because “*peace is never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly*” (GS 78).

3. I confess to all of you that I do not have any precise solution—nor do I claim to—being only a humble servant of the vineyard of the Lord; but, at the same time I recognize that one of my pastoral duties, recommended and mandated by the Council Fathers is to set out, “*the ways by which are to be answered the most serious questions concerning the ownership, increase, and just distribution of material goods, peace and war, and brotherly relations among all countries*” (CD 12). From this mandate I take up and define the main purpose of my Letter: to reflect from the Word of God and from the Magisterium on the violence enveloping our country and to encourage my flock, and all men and women of good will to place their hopes, both contemplatively and actively, in the God of life, striving to respond with all their hearts to “*the challenge, made in love, of Christ’s transfiguration, which should lead to the transfiguration of our people,*” as set forth by Blessed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero in his Fourth Pastoral Letter: “*The Church’s Mission Amid the National Crisis.*”

4. I will divide, then, the contents of this Letter into three parts that I set out and briefly describe in the following lines:

4.1. Violence in El Salvador.

4.2. *God cannot be where there is violence.*

4.3. *Put your sword back into its sheath.*

The first is devoted to analyzing the issue of violence in our country from the Spanish conquest and colonization until today, showing that even though violence has been a constant scourge, that does not mean that it is an insurmountable phenomenon. In the second part I illuminate, with the aid of the Bible and the Magisterium the pressing problem of violence plaguing Salvadorans in general, emphasizing first of all the stance of the God of life, then the stance of Jesus, and concluding with the position of the Catholic Church of which I am unworthily a pastor. In the third and last part I invite everyone to take as models in their own lives the Eucharistic Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary—she is a teacher and disciple of fraternity—so that by their example we can become promoters and builders of peace. I conclude with a brief Exhortation in which I call on everyone to make a renewed commitment to work for peace.

PART ONE VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR

5. The magnitude of the effects of the current violence compels us all to seek immediate solutions, most of which cause us to forget that violence in El Salvador is a problem that is rooted in a past that, has either been ignored or concealed, or reported in a one-sided fashion, corresponding to the interests of those relating it and forgetting that only “*the truth will set you free*” (cf. Jn 8:32). As a result, we see the persistence of violence, not as a response to a stimulus that the physical or social environment casts on individuals, but as a mystery of iniquity where it appears as a structural and institutionalized sin. Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, SJ explained in 1973 that: “*violence is a symptomatic fact that demands reflection.*”¹ A serious and profound reflection, given that the actors and the context of Father Ellacuría’s time is dramatically different today, but the violence persists— under new symptomatic forms, but nevertheless it persists. Hence the importance of viewing and analyzing our Salvadoran reality in the light of Divine Providence in this first section.

1. An injustice that continues to cry out to heaven

6. In 1968, the bishops assembled at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín pronounced: “*Violence constitutes one of the greatest problems in Latin America*” (Medellin 2, 15). More than forty years have passed since the conclusion of Medellín and the situation of violence— specifically, in El Salvador—continues to cry out to heaven. Similarly, the Third Pastoral Letter of Blessed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, “*The Church and the Popular Political Organizations,*”² offers a serious analysis of the various types of violence that plagued the Salvadoran people in those years. The intention

¹ Ignacio Ellacuría, “*Violencia y Cruz*”. Escritos Teológicos III, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2002, p. 448.

² Numerals 115 to 125

of my brother Bishops, both in Medellín as in this country, has been to provide a word that will encourage the people of God, as well as men and women of good will, to overcome this scourge. Far from this laudable purpose being achieved, other forms of violence have emerged over the years, with a force of such magnitude that dozens of deaths are being caused every day, as if we were in the middle of a battlefield. This includes the violence generated by different criminal groups recently classified as terrorist organizations, which overwhelm the general population—although it is plain that not all the violence that pervades the country comes from them, a matter to be discussed below herein.

7. It is undeniable that the whole reality cries out because of the effects of this violence. The facts are alarming for a society that calls itself Christian and faithful. At the end of 2014, the IUDOP³ presented the results of its public opinion survey titled *Year-End 2014 Country Assessment*. In that document, 69.3% of the population said that crime increased in that year, which is born out in the figures below. For example, 23.2% reported having experienced unarmed robbery without aggression or physical threat; 10.8% experienced unarmed robbery with assault or physical threat; 23.1% complained of having been victims of armed robbery. Another 19.8% faced extortion, and 18.3% threats. As a survey-based study, the foregoing did not record the homicide rate which was calculated by the Coroner's Office at 68.6% per 100,000 inhabitants;⁴ it also did not reflect the number of cases of violence against women and *femicide*. It did not include the number of people who constitute a living exodus that reminds us of the hard years of the war when the most vulnerable people were forced by circumstances—as they are today—to leave their homes. Nor did

³ Public Opinion Institute of Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas", San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁴ Summary data on homicides from *InSight Crime* in 2014.

it contemplate the numbers of disappeared. Taking these things into account would cause the number of victims to ascend dramatically.

8. In 2015 the violence continued to increase, reaching alarming levels. According to reports provided by the IUDOP, on January 6 of the current year 2016, El Salvador reached an average of 104 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015, placing the country at the highest rates for homicide. The reports indicated, moreover, that according to the preliminary assessment of the police and forensic authorities the number of homicides rose to at least 6,670. This figure was compared with that obtained in 1983—during the civil war—when slightly over 7,000 homicides were reported. The disquiet caused by the atmosphere of violence, discord and death that reigns in the country was reflected in the results of the public opinion survey *Salvadorans evaluate the situation in the country at the end of 2015*. Some 82.5% believed that crime had increased in relation to 2014. Comparing the results of this survey with the previous year we can see how the statistics reflecting the onslaught facing Salvadorans have increased: 30% reported having been victims of armed robbery; 22.9% complain of having suffered extortion or made to pay “rent”; while other types of aggression have remained the same as in 2014.

9. Furthermore, in an editorial from the Central American University Jose Simeon Cañas (UCA) on December 1st 2015 it was reported that: “*according to the Ministry of Health, in 2014, 4,833 cases of violence against women were reported, and 4,686 were reported through October of this year.*”⁵ This does not include cases of assaults that go unreported out of fear or to protect a family member seeking to be shielded from harm. The woman thus becomes both victim and protector or concealer of her victimizer, whatever the type of violence to

⁵ UCA Editorial, “*Del lado de las mujeres y niñas violentadas,*” 12/01/2015

which she is exposed: be it femicide, physical, symbolic, psychological, emotional, economic, financial or sexual violence;⁶ and in any of the forms listed by the experts: communal, workplace, or institutional.⁷

10. The index of exodus was equally disturbing. A digital newspaper published during the month of November of the past year, reported that there was an estimated 288,900 Salvadorans⁸ whose sole option was to leave their home either because of actual threats received or for fear of being targeted by criminal groups. As for the disappeared, *“according to the statistics of the National Civil Police, from January 1 to July 21, 2015, 886 complaints were received from relatives of persons who had gone missing.”*⁹ Alongside these figures there are the facts of violence against children in the country which, I insist, is something that should shake us, not because it is ghoulish, but so as to counter this violence that is robbing us of our country’s best. On August 14, 2015, a digital newspaper¹⁰ reported that: *“Unicef statistics detail that the month with the most child homicides during the first six months of 2015 was June, with 118 victims. The report detail relates that 65 murders were committed in January, 49 in February, 89 in March, 92 in April, and 103 in May. Meanwhile, for the first quarter of 2015 (January-March) a total of 1,126 homicides were committed in El Salvador, of which 203 were victims under 19 years of age; one was less than four years old; 20 were between 10 and 14; and 182 were between 14 and 19 years old. Most victims were male. In the first half of this year alone, authorities have recorded the murder of 516 girls and adolescents aged between 0 and 19 years*

⁶ See: Article 9 of the Special Law for a Violence-Free Life for Women.

⁷ See: Article 10 of the Special Law for a Violence-Free Life for Women.

⁸ *ContraPunto* digital journal, “*Más familias obligadas a abandonar viviendas,*” November 10, 2015.

⁹ Data from *La Prensa Gráfica*, December 6, 2015.

¹⁰ The Digital Journal Salvador.com, “*El Salvador encabeza tasa de homicidios de menores,*” August 14, 2015.

old.” It is an inhuman picture that cries out to heaven for justice and which we all are called to commit ourselves to overcoming.

11. There are many other statistics to present on other crimes; but I want to touch on one aspect of violence not mentioned as often as it should be, since in addition to the violence generated by criminal groups to which much of the population is exposed, there are other types of violence in which that same aggrieved population becomes the active agent or instigator. We must not forget that violence is a phenomenon that is received and transmitted and vice versa, making it a difficult cycle to end unless each of the individuals who forms part of a society fights to eradicate it: “*since the human will is unsteady and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority*” (GS 78). Nor should we forget that this violence is a factor that negatively affects our daily lives.

12. We constantly receive violence in the media through films, music videos, children’s shows, TV series, and soap operas, among others. We receive violence through video games and through other media that technology produces. In them, we often see murders being planned, depictions of torture and in some cases where games are concerned, they reward those who kill or commit crimes against other characters, making these pastimes incitements to evil.

13. Unfortunately, violence is not only received but it is also generated. It is generated in the workplace when those in high places want to subjugate and humiliate subordinates or peers; when jealousy and selfishness clouds labor relations; violence is generated in schools or universities when students engage in bullying or school yard harassment, or when teachers use their positions to do their students harm. Violence is generated in homes when parents abuse their children; when the husband beats or abandons his wife and, in the worst case, when femicide is committed, producing not only the death of the

mother but sometimes her children, leading to even more elevated numbers of deaths.

14. The Church, incarnate in the Salvadoran reality, is not exempt from receiving and generating violence. As far as the former, is concerned the 2013-2017 Archdiocesan Pastoral Plan states that “*crime, violence and the great sense of insecurity were the main problems most mentioned by the deaneries, owing more to the fact that pastoral activity is directly affected or limited by this reality, rather than to any second-hand information.*”¹¹ That is to say, the process of evangelization is not easy in an environment of insecurity. Plans for mission and evangelization are seriously hampered by the fear of entering areas that have been overrun by crime.

15. In one of the parishes of my Diocese, whose name I will keep confidential, the parish community was, in 2015 alone, exposed to murder, persecution, exodus and extortion. Regarding the murders, I am in a position to state that six active members of the parish community were killed by stabbing, dismemberment or firearms. Two of the victims were women whose ages ranged from twenty to sixty-five. The remaining four were men between eighteen and twenty-five. To these we add the deaths of two residents, who, although not members of the parish community, are of no lesser concern to me. As for the persecution, the families are in shock because criminal groups are recruiting children to use as accessories to their crimes. In addition, the faithful know that they are being monitored in their comings and goings in their communities. The same applies to pastoral agents who are constantly watched to see which subjects they teach, and the time and place where they do it. The exodus of families is heartbreaking: Four communities made up of sixty people were dispersed. They

¹¹ 2013-2017 Archdiocesan Pastoral Plan, p. 24.

had to look for new neighborhoods in which to live—something that puts a brake on pastoral work and reduces the number of workers in the vineyard of the Lord. Another factor that distances the faithful from the parish is extortion. They do not want to attend for fear of being seen on their way to the place of worship. It is truly unfortunate and painful that the Church cannot work because of this atmosphere of insecurity and anxiety that shakes our beloved country. The same is true in other parishes whose clamor has reached me and because of them I have felt compelled to write this Pastoral Letter denouncing violence and urging everyone to seek to find viable solutions based on solidarity and Christian commitment.

16. In regard to the second point, about being producers of violence, within the Church there arise “*different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts*” (EG 100). There are frequent conflicts between movements, as if spirituality were synonymous with exclusivity. There also persist, moreover, old resentments between movements and theological trends.

17. Not to be prophets of doom, the panorama is hopeless in the opinion of many Salvadorans. According to data collected by the IUDOP in its 2014 report, 43.2% believed that by the end of 2014 the situation would be worse and only 14% believed that things would be better. That perception was further hardened in data from IUDOP in 2015. By then, 67.5% thought that the situation had worsened in the country and 28.2% opined that it had remained the same. Unfortunately, the negative perception here joins the evident lack of trust that people feel regarding the institutions responsible for justice and public security, which enjoy little credibility as reported by the IUDOP.

18. In this light I wish to underline to you my sisters and brothers two important considerations. First and foremost, we must place our trust in God as was once recognized by the apostle Peter: “*Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*” (Jn 6:68), God will never abandon our people. The Providence of the Father is with us: “*Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.*” (Lk 12:32) and “*behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*” (Mt 28:20). Second, is the need for all of us to commit ourselves to working for peace beginning by understanding its roots, continuing the search for human solutions and remaining committed to a life and coexistence of non-violence.

2. A legacy of the past

19. In the introduction I said that there has been violence in El Salvador since the Conquest and Colonization. I neither deny nor ignore the existence of certain types of violence during the pre-Columbian period. Surely there was; but I wish to start from the Conquest as the moment that generated our current societies, since it is my goal with this brief paragraph to make clear that the solution to the problem of violence should proceed directly to the roots and not seek quick fixes because it is not sufficient only to treat the effects. We must tear out the roots, which, if left alone will generate more and more victims, especially among the most vulnerable.

2.1. Conquest and colonization: Incubation of violence

20. The process of conquest and colonization carried out by Pedro de Alvarado and his men upon reaching the lands of Cuzcatlan [the pre-Colombian name of El Salvador] can be branded as cruel and harsh. The description that the Bishop of Chiapas, Friar Bartolome de las Casas records in his book *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* is sufficient documentation for what I

regretfully affirm about the inhuman treatment employed against the Indians whose lives, according to the imagination of conquerors, were less valuable than gold: *“this Captain requir’d a great Sum of Gold from their Lords (for that was the Load-stone attracted them thither) who answered, they were content to deliver him up all the Gold they had in possession; and in order thereunto, the Indians gathered together a great Number of Spears gilded with Orichalcum, (which had the appearance of Gold, and in truth some Gold in them intermixt) and they were presented to him. The Captain ordered them to be toucht, and when he found them to be Orichalcum or mixt Metal, he spake to the Spaniards as followeth. “Let that Nation that is without Gold be accursed to the Pit of Hell. Let every Man detain those Servants he Elected, let them be clapt in Irons, and stigmatiz’d with the Brand of Slavery,” which was accordingly done, for they were all burnt, who did no escape with the King’s Mark. I my self saw the Impression made on the Son of the Chiefest Person in the City.”*¹²

21. The inhumanity does not end here. In addition to the physical mistreatment to which they were subjected, the Captain forced them not only to watch but to commit crimes against men and women who were blood of their blood, brothers and sisters of the same ethnicity. Fear, hunger and violence forced them to it: *“It was the usual Custom of this Tyrant [Pedro de Alvarado], when he made War with any City or Province, to take along with him as many of those Indians he had subjugated as he could, that they might fight with their Countrymen; and when he had in his Army Twenty, or sometimes Thirty Thousand of them, and could not afford them sustenance, he permitted them to feed on the Flesh of other Indians taken Prisoners in War; and so kept a Shambles of Man’s Flesh in his Army, suffered Children to be kill’d and roasted before his Face.*

¹² Friar Bartolome de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.

They butcher'd the Men for their Feet and Hands only; for these Members were accounted by them Dainties, most delicious Food ... In all the Countries that they came they took this course, that immediately at their first arrival they committed some notorious butcheries, which made those Innocent Sheep tremble for fear."¹³

22. That was how violence was incubated in the Indian imagination in search of revenge and liberation. Abandoned to their fate, stripped of their belongings, their individual freedoms restricted, constantly offended, reviled and despised, they became silent and lowered their gaze. But their silence and humility were not a sign of approval of the social exclusion and extermination to which they had been subjected, but rather fear of repression, fear of abuse and fear of death. Their silence—ignored by some and approved by others—which should have been addressed, became the perfect breeding ground for future outbreaks of violence because the wounds caused by violence against them, were never forgotten or healed. Unfortunately, violence does not beget peace—even in a struggle for freedom—but more violence, as the bishops in Puebla warned centuries later: “*violence inexorably engenders new forms of oppression and slavery, usually more severe than those it intended to overcome*” (No. 532).

23. The Church did not escape this colonizing wave of death. Those who opposed the conquerors paid dearly for their Christian love for the weak, for the victims and for the poor. I wish to point out that the Bishop of Nicaragua, Friar Antonio de Valdivieso, O.P. (1544-1550) was assassinated because of his defense of the Indians: “*Among the soldiers who had come from Peru, malcontents to this land, there was one Juan Bermejo, a man of ill will. He became Governor of Nicaragua on behalf of the Contreras brothers ... He left accompanied by some ... and went to the house of the bishop, whom he found in*

¹³ Ibid.

the company of his collaborator Friar Alonso, and a good cleric, and forgetting respect for the sacred, proceeded to stab him.”¹⁴ He was the first bishop murdered in Central American lands for the sole reason of thwarting violence by Hispanics against the indigenous people through the application of new Ordinances enacted by the King. While combatting violence, he died a victim of it—and not to foreigners but at the hands of Spaniards.

24. In short, the indigenous peoples were exposed to a pedagogy of death where they were taught—with live demonstrations—how to kill, whom to kill, by what means to kill and for what reasons to kill. In other words, they were taught to kill, with impunity, anyone who opposed their will, with whatever means were at hand, and for whatever reasons they could proffer. Such teaching would devastate large populations, leaving their deaths justified and unpunished.

2.2. Post-independence period: First explosion of violence

25. The post-independence period was no different. The promises of freedom, more humane treatment by new leaders—i.e., the Creoles—created expectations in the poor and humble populace. However, violence against the people did not cease and social exclusion did not decrease. Both were kept on the rise, because what the Spaniards obtained through an invasive violence, now was obtained by a type of violence with a veneer of legality: “*(the Creole landowners) ... took advantage of the new freedom to seize the communal lands of peoples, protected by a decree legalizing the expropriation of land not adjudicated or not cultivated.*”¹⁵ Unfortunately, with that attitude began the institutionalization of violence. Legal structures did not defend the common good but the interests of a small elite who increased their wealth; but not the wealth that God wants for his

¹⁴ Enrique Dussel, *El Episcopado Latinoamericano y la liberación de los pobres* 1504-1620, pp. 335-336.

¹⁵ Rodolfo Cardenal, *Manual de Historia de Centroamérica*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, El Salvador, 2007, p. 264.

children because in no way can we call “*wealth that which does not banish poverty, but increases it.*”¹⁶

26. The displeasure of the indigenous peoples could not be held back. Weary of the Spanish yoke and derided by their new leaders, the explosion of violence was uncontrollable. Anastasio Aquino led a strong insurrectionary movement with the support of both indigenous and Ladinos from different populations in the country. Unfortunately, the clamor of the indigenous peoples was ignored and they proceeded, instead, to crush the uprising in an operation carried out by other indigenous men extracted from the same poor populace. Once again the history of fratricidal violence was being repeated. Brothers killing and bleeding each other for the defense of interests that harmed their own. The new leaders continued the pedagogy of death implemented by the conquerors, teaching the people to kill each other, instead of starting a pedagogy of life where people learn solidarity, achieving a decent life by caring for one other—not for a small group but for the whole country. Anastasio Aquino was captured and killed in a sign that all acts of violence would be punished with more violence.

27. At this point, violence had become a rising spiral that should have reached its crescendo; but the opposite happened, because social exclusion was promoted by the pedagogy of death and not extinguished. In a repeating cycle, the first violence (institutionalized violence) exerted against the poor provoked the second violence (insurrectional violence) and this in turn ignited a third violence (repressive violence) that apparently ended the social unrest. The movement was crushed and the clamor was silenced; but the root of the problem continued and only later a new uprising would show that the spiral of violence had not come to

¹⁶ Restituto Bravo Sierra, *Doctrina Social y Económica de los Padres de la Iglesia*, cf., “Sobre la Primera Epístola a los Corintios” de San Juan Crisóstomo, n. 973.

an end but continued to climb without end; first because the effects of violence were not treated and secondly because the crimes did not lead to justice.

2.3. The Social Question and 1932: Second outbreak of violence

28. As the watchman on the tower foresees the arrival of a ship, so Archbishop Jose Alfonso Belloso y Sanchez predicted a strong outbreak of violence that not only could, but should, have been stopped ahead of time. In 1930 he published a Pastoral Letter in which he enumerated those points which should be addressed by political leaders and the owners of economic power to stop a barrage of social violence: *“the right to private property is denied; goods intended by nature for the common benefit are appropriated; equitable wages are betrayed; excessive profits are sought in trading and banking; exorbitant salaries are demanded, while theft and larceny presume disguised and even beneficial forms, invading small property with lawyerly cunning and abuse of consultants; desiccating the needy with barbaric usuries, pretending titles and falsifying accounts, from the top provider for the army to the measly traveling salesman ... the booming and devouring capital often destroys small businesses and even the larger ones; credit, which has doubled and tripled industry and economic exchange, becomes, the cruelest of usurers with banking institutions, and a trickster towns crier with the ebbs and flows of securities, and a political agitator, and pernicious gambler that privatizes stock exchange tournaments... Oh how much the wealthy spend on fancies and amenities ... They waste their own!; they do not sin against commutative justice when they squander what they have earned; but they do sin, sometimes seriously, against temperance and moderation in dealing with their own persons and against charity with others by not discharging the surplus, as God commands them, in charity and beneficence.”*¹⁷

¹⁷ Archbishop Jose Alfonso Belloso y Sanchez, Seventh Pastoral Letter: *Cuan necesaria sea en las presentes circunstancias la acción social católica*, Chapter III, n. 2.

To the description of a reality impregnated with poverty and social, political and economic exclusion that should be reformed, he adds an exhortation which implores the ruling classes, as he calls them, to make the necessary changes if they wish to avoid outbreaks of violence: “*As Bishop and Pastor of your souls, I admonish employers and capitalists to hasten to remedy social injustices introduced by the blind thrust of economic life and by the neglect of the moral aspect that inevitably involves all business and human action. This obligation to regulate wages according to justice rests with the community, and does not become effective but by mutual agreement. We propose, therefore, in the name of the Divine Savior of the World, that you convene in regional conferences or those corresponding to each of the crops or industries and thereafter in a general conference, seeing the question in all its many overtones, you establish by unanimous resolution a wage regime that is equitable, Christian and in harmony with the nobility and generosity of your Salvadorans hearts.*”¹⁸ The facts sadly demonstrate that Archbishop Belloso’s request was ignored by the majority and the spiral of violence gave way to social violence and to unjust death.

29. Between January 22 and 23, 1932, the peasant-indigenous uprising broke out and with it a wave of blood came over the most vulnerable areas of the country. There were countless crimes committed by both sides as expected; since not only did the social situation remain unfavorable to the poorest in the country but the political and economic leadership was the inalienable right of a social class to the exclusion of all others. There are documents that maintain that the causes of the uprising were ideological. It is something I will not stop to analyze; but what I do want to emphasize is the existence of conditions that actually may have allowed such ideological alignment because, in the words of Archbishop

¹⁸ Archbishop Jose Alfonso Belloso and Sanchez, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

Luis Chavez y Gonzales: “*the rapid advances of communism in our hemisphere are due to its pseudo-ideal of justice , equality and fraternity and ... to the lack of understanding and to the delay in establishing true social justice for a better distribution of the goods of this world ...*”¹⁹ In a thought-provoking essay on this subject we find the following facts on which I base my opinion about the existence of such conditions: “*the undoubtable indigenous impatience before their latest demand for annulment*” (of an electoral process tainted with indications of corruption)²⁰ “*confirms the speed with which events were unfolding. This evidence, combined with our previous knowledge regarding the economic contraction and the collapse of salaries resulting from the Great Depression, provides convincing explanations of the causes, both immediate and long-term, of the rebellion*”.²¹

30. Those who dared to rebel in search of better living conditions met a disastrous end. The death toll ranges between twenty thousand and forty thousand. The exact number has either been muted or perhaps it was never accorded the necessary importance. The truth is that if only one person had been killed, El Salvador should still have redirected its form of government, its economy and society in more humane directions, for, as Blessed Archbishop Romero said, echoing St. Irenaeus: “*the glory of God is the poor person fully alive.*”²² Fully alive means living with dignity, in an environment of security, peace and justice. Unfortunately, fear ended the uprising. The roots remained alive and ready for a resurgence of violence.

2.4. The Civil War:

¹⁹ Archbishop Luis Chávez y González, Twenty-Ninth Pastoral Letter, *Sobre los Peligros del Comunismo y la eficaz solución de la Cuestión Social*, 1961, pp. Four. Five.

²⁰ The clarification is mine.

²¹ Erick Ching, *Las masas, la matanza y el martinato en El Salvador*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2007, p. 91.

²² Blessed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Speech on the occasion of the honorary doctorate conferred by the University of Leuven on February 2, 1980.

New forms of violence

31. In the decade of the seventies, facing poverty, inequality, unfair distribution of wealth, social exclusion, impunity, the lack of individual freedoms, the lack of respect for human rights, among other conditions, propitiated and perpetuated by the country's leadership, the people became aware of their reality and started to become—or at least tried to—an historical subject, paraphrasing Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, “*they took charge of reality, were in charge of reality and became charged with reality.*” The streets were overrun by demonstrations claiming basic rights and demanding redress; full page ads ran in the newspapers expressing discontent with the prevailing situation, or demanding solutions, or putting forward proposals. Obviously, the transition from being a shapeless mass to becoming an organized people was highly disturbing to one group of Salvadorans. This was a small group who refused to support the National Congress of Agrarian Reform, refused to support a more equitable distribution of wealth; and only “[fostered] *discrimination among citizens ... [caused] harm to the majority ... [and instigated] conflict among campesino groups,*” as denounced by Bl. Archbishop Romero.²³ It was a small group that defended social injustice, embraced the absolutization of wealth and private property, the absolutization of national security, and the absolutization of the organization, all unmasked by our beloved Bl. Archbishop Romero.²⁴

32. In addition to the situation described here, the pedagogy of death continued to disfigure and to teach people new forms of violence. Bl. Oscar Romero listed such forms of violence in his Third and Fourth Pastoral Letters: institutionalized violence, repressive violence of the state, seditious or terrorist

²³ Blessed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Third Pastoral Letter: *The Church and Popular Political Organizations*, 1978, nn. 21-35.

²⁴ Blessed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Fourth Pastoral Letter: *The Church's Mission amid the National Crisis*, 1979, nn. 13 and 43-49.

violence, structural violence, arbitrary state violence, violence from the extreme right and unjustified terrorist violence.²⁵ These forms of violence can be subsumed under the name "first violence," because they act as triggers which generate violent responses in others, which our illustrious archbishop does not neglect to point out: spontaneous violence, violence in self-defense, nonviolent resistance and the violence of insurrection.²⁶ These are all forms of violence that could have been avoided if the ruling classes had opted for a model of state that was more inclusive, more just, equitable, Christian, based on solidarity, and promoting a pedagogy of life.

33. The pedagogy of death taught the people torture, repression, dismemberment, kidnapping, massacres, and multiple assassination techniques that were learned and apprehended by a people who, lacking a pedagogy of life or a decent education were unable to deconstruct such a macabre teaching. Submerged in an environment of violence and terror the people mimicked the patterns they necessarily had to learn and grasp so that could survive in such an adverse environment. What was not normal became normal and people forgot that "*all who take the sword will perish by the sword*" (Mt 26:52).

34. In conclusion, we should say that violence is a legacy that comes from the past. It is a spiral whose beginning dates back to the time of the Conquest and Colonization, increasing and transforming itself over the years and which must be healed and cut off at the root. We need to rid ourselves of the pedagogy of death—whatever the many benefits it may produce for those certain groups whom it behooves that it be maintained—and to set out again with a

²⁵ The first three forms of violence appear in the Third Pastoral Letter: *The Church and Popular Political Organizations* and the following four in the Fourth Pastoral Letter: *Mission of the Church amid the National Crisis*.

²⁶ Violence contained in the two pastoral letters already mentioned.

pedagogy of life reflecting the Jesus-centered Christian model, even though the process may be both lengthy and financially burdensome.

3. Violence in transformation

35. Looking at this history, although no more than in passing, we can conclude, dear brothers and sisters, that violence in El Salvador has not been a phenomenon with stable characteristics. Although it seems that the edges of the spiral touch each other assuring some similarity, the scenarios, players, methods and consequences have been gradually changing. Perhaps what has been perpetuated and enlarged are the roots of this painful misfortune and therefore, violence has presented itself with different profiles. I would like to pause to consider five of these profiles.

3.1. Dominative violence

36. This took place during the triple process of discovery, conquest and colonization by the Spanish foreign power of the territory of our Cuzcatlan, and extended through the rest of Latin America. The purpose of this violence was the appropriation of the wealth of the native peoples of these lands through the application of methods of a blank slate, destruction and repression. We could argue that this violence began with the discovery of Latin America and ended with the dawning of independence.

3.2. Usurping violence

37. Once the domination—not only by the Spanish but later by the Creole—was achieved, and political structures and economic power had been appropriated, the new ruling class that emerged after the emancipation of the Captaincy General of Guatemala proceeded to a violence of usurpation. This was still violence even though it may have been authorized by an official decree issued by the competent authorities. No indigenous person wanted to lose or give

up communal lands voluntarily. They did so because they were compelled by force and “*when this force is used, either without the control of the entire community, or, worse yet, to maintain power against the general will or to defend a legally established order that is substantially unfair, such force is strict violence, no matter how lawful it may be deemed to be.*”²⁷ It was not the *vox populi* that prevailed at the time of the forced surrender of their lands, far less the *vox Dei*, but the *vox potentum* for whom it was not enough to usurp the land, but applied methods of repression and coercion to crush the insurrection.

3.3. Social violence

38. At the beginning of the century, despite the fear that the repression of the second half of the nineteenth century had left among the poor of the country, there was an outbreak of social violence. It was social because it was not just one group provoking violence on the other—it was both. It was one provoking and the other responding to the provocation. Sadly, the usurping violence led to violence of a social magnitude and yet there was no-one to stop it. Not even the slaughter of 1932 managed to awaken the ruling elites of the country from their *lethargic sleep*.

3. 4. Ideological violence

39. The social changes indicated by Archbishop Jose Alfonso Belloso y Sanchez and his repeated warnings of serious consequences were ignored. His premonitions about the advent of a surge much greater than the furor of '32 are set down in writing: “*Who will deny that prudence requires us to adapt to the new condition of the times; that it counsels preventing the violent outbursts of the needy through a more equitable distribution of wealth; that it persuades us to preserve and increase social goods with deft legislation and institutions before*

²⁷ Ignacio Ellacuría, “*Violencia y Cruz*”. *Escritos Teológicos III*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2002, p. 454.

the revolutionary frenzy overthrows them?”²⁸ The protagonists of thirty-two—that is to say, the peasants and the leaders of the nation—disappeared and organizations of all types and social profiles emerged during the 1960s and 1970s to take their place, opposing the dictatorial form of government then in power. An ideological violence then arose; but it was, at the same time, polarized. One side—the smaller one—promoted an intense nationalism, while the other—the great majority—advocated ideologies of liberation from the regime, which in its discourse were typified as fascist, fascistic, imperialistic, unjust, inhuman or any other pejorative. The polarization did not prevent there being a variety of views and positions on the majority side.

40. Various types of primary and secondary violence were exerted both by government leaders as well as by those who believed that the military governments wielded an unjust power. Unable to make peace themselves through dialogue and concessions, both groups together generated colossal upheaval, in this way igniting the civil war. This was a war that left more than seventy thousand dead and painful consequences that today are still not healed. After the war nobody tried to establish the psychological reintegration of the former combatants or the people who inhabited the major combat zones. Such an important issue was cast aside—perhaps, without any ill will—in order to pursue others, such as the creation of a new police force, the creation of a human rights watchdog, the securing of personal liberties, among others. Such neglect has in turn had painful consequences for the country.

3.5. Diversified violence and criminal violence

41. With great hope Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* his congratulatory words for the changes in different

²⁸ Archbishop Jose Alfonso Belloso y Sanchez, Ninth Pastoral Letter: *Importancia económico-social-religiosa del salario agrícola en El Salvador*, p.6.

countries of the world, including in our continent: “*In the course of the 80s, certain dictatorial and oppressive regimes fell one by one in some countries of Latin America ... there began a difficult but productive transition towards more participatory and more just political structures*” (CA 22). Unfortunately, the transition has been slow, unrewarding and imbued with much violence and death.

42. I do not intend by this statement to deny or dismiss the many efforts that groups involved in the Peace Accords have promoted—and continue to promote—to overcome the effects of the recent civil war. However, there has been lacking a greater will and involvement in the search for and implementation of solutions that tackle the roots which generated the violence that I have previously discussed. I would like to think that there has been no ill will but a lack of clarity in understanding the real meaning of the Peace Accords. Fr. Juan Hernandez Pico, SJ makes a very helpful distinction between the meaning of the peace signed in those agreements and reconciliation: “*the peace contained in the signing of the agreements was the end of a process of negotiations to halt and end the war and it was also the design of a project of citizens living together once more;*”²⁹ while reconciliation is to set in place “*a process of human encounters to neutralize hostilities among citizens in El Salvador and to end their enmity.*”³⁰ Certainly, the agreements served to end the armed conflict; but not the social conflict whose manifestations remained—and still remain to some extent—evident. There was no reconciliation between the warring parties because polarization moved in waves on a war footing; the relatives of the victims were not compensated for their injuries because their crimes remain unpunished; and there was no reconciliation between the generations who participated in the armed

²⁹ Juan Hernández Pico, “*Una reconciliación frustrada y su superación*”, *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*, Theological Reflection Center UCA, San Salvador, p. 38.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 38.

conflict and post-conflict generations because impunity prevents the wiping out of the historic debt that older generations have to the young.

43. It is precisely this impunity—understood as concealment and failure to recognize the truth—which prevents adult generations from having the moral solvency to educate the new generations, who find in impunity the perfect pretext to continue the violence. The magisterium of the Church, in this situation, warns that “*The more people and social groups strive to resolve social problems according to the truth, the more they distance themselves from abuses and act in accordance with the objective demands of morality.*”³¹ But in this country there has been no morality, because impunity and the political and judicial structures that make it possible have covered up the truth.

44. Hence, violence has morphed from ideological to criminal. The pedagogy of death in tandem with impunity have produced their fruits—fruits of iniquity. The new generations have developed new forms of violence, having gone from being recipients of violence to being productive and reproductive agents and protagonists of a violence that is not only inherited from the recent civil war, but from an entire historical body that began more than five hundred years ago following the tripartite process of discovery, conquest and colonization, and from where every crime, every offense and every murder has either ignored or concealed the aggressor without ever bringing justice, as was recognized by the Latin American Bishops at Aparecida: “*the judicial system ... often sides with the powerful and fosters impunity, thereby jeopardizing the credibility of government institutions and increasing the mistrust of the people. That phenomenon goes hand in hand with a deep contempt for legality*” (Aparecida, 77). I am not reducing, of course, the origin of criminal violence simply to impunity because its

³¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, par. 198.

causes are many and should be studied in an analytical and comprehensive manner so that those causes are resolved. I will address some of them in the next section. But it is obvious nevertheless that impunity has encouraged many to walk the path of violence.

45. Finally, I do not wish to fail in this Letter to say that violence has not only become criminal but has diversified, as I tried to explain in the first section. Obviously, studies and reports from different social organizations have helped us understand this diversification. Patterns of conduct that were previously considered normal—due to the androcentric patterns that society is still struggling to overcome—have begun to be understood as violence in all its forms from the twentieth century onwards. I am referring to violence against women, violence against children, violence against the unborn, violence against the elderly, workplace violence, youth violence, school violence, and violence against mother earth.

46. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, refers to this last topic: “*The earth’s resources are also being plundered because of short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production*”,³² and for my part, in El Salvador, I add, also due to poverty and development plans that do not care enough to keep the forest areas safe. In May 2015, for example, one could read in a newspaper,³³ about the disappearance of four rivers: Guastena, Motochico, Chailaque and Chacahuaca—in its opinion, caused by deforestation: “*At the end of 2014 trees were felled and areas of the mountainous range were burned, affecting more than 70% of the hills of the municipality.*” However, we must point out that this affected not only the hills but also the villagers and the rest of the country. To

³² Pope Francis *Laudato Si'*, on the care of the Common House, par. 32.

³³ <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2015/05/25/se-secan-4-rios-a-causade-la-deforestacion-de-area-boscosa>

these problems we must add the implementation of green mining, against which we have been vigorously opposed, and the destruction of many species of animals which “*for reasons related to human activity ... will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.*” No, we have no such right and for that reason cannot ignore that reality because “*This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen*”;³⁴ and yet things happen. Things happen and the population takes note. In its 2015 report, mentioned above, IUDOP reported that 57.1% thought that environmental degradation has increased. The state cannot ignore that crucial point and not implement adequate measures to prevent a tragedy of major proportions. This is why I maintain that violence has not only transformed itself, but has diversified.

47. In short, violence has been a phenomenon that has been escalating and its contours seem to increasingly widen, reaching an ever greater magnitude. Its causes are many, some of which I will turn to now.

4. Roots of Violence in El Salvador

48. At Aparecida, our bishops concluded that the causes of violence in Latin America—applicable at all times to Salvadoran reality—are manifold: “*worship of money, the advance of an individualistic and utilitarian ideology, disrespect for the dignity of each person, a deterioration of the social fabric, corruption even of law-enforcement entities, and lack of government policies of social justice*” (DA 78). I am not a specialist in any scientific field, I am just a shepherd of the Church, and as Archbishop Luis Chávez y González recommended, I acknowledge humbly that I have “*the obligation to take my sheep*

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* on care for Our Common Home', par. 59.

to the pasture of an "integral culture" which places God in the first place" (Spiritual Exercises, 1970). Therefore with that intention, I discuss below some of the roots which in my opinion are behind this intricate problem of violence without forgetting what was said in Aparecida.

a. Social exclusion

49. Undoubtedly, social exclusion stems from the lack of public policies for social equity; and therefore, I think that perhaps this is the first reason that Salvadorans have been resorting for these long years to violence as a means through which to achieve what neither the state nor any other entity allows them to achieve within society.

50. According to the book *Social Exclusion and Violence in Central American Urban Territories*, exclusion has four expressions: unemployment; wage labor without any social protection; self-employment without the ability to save; and unpaid work implicit in the three aforementioned activities.³⁵ These are four expressions experienced by family groups in our country that, as the authors of the book explain rather well, translate into: "*social exclusion but, more importantly, reflect processes of profound disempowerment,*"³⁶ wherein "*workers and smallholders do not benefit from the sense of social belonging that employment or the ability to save confer, which are basic mechanisms of participation in society.*"³⁷ Thus the most vulnerable groups in our country do not have access to adequate housing. They lack a sufficient and balanced diet. They cannot access an efficient health and a decent education system. Nor can they enjoy healthy recreation, and all this in a climate where public safety is not the norm of daily living. These aspects lead us to conclude that "*social exclusion in*

³⁵ Cf. Juan Pablo Perez Sainz, *Exclusión Social y Violencias en territorios urbanos centroamericanos*, FLACSO, 2015, p. 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. twenty-one.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

its primary manifestation is synonymous with extreme inequality.”³⁸ The picture described here leads us to think of “*conditions conducive to the development of certain types of violence.*”³⁹ Why violence? because “*violence can become an effective resource to achieve recognition and revenue, and to ensure security and access to justice; in other words, to be included and to belong socially.*”⁴⁰ The Holy Father Pope Francis explains it this way: “*today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion.*” (EG 53). In other words, it is an injustice that cries to heaven.

51. Social exclusion is not a phenomenon of recent times but an endemic evil which the Salvadoran people have endured since colonial times when the Indians were displaced by the newcomers. The problem was further exacerbated when communal lands were expropriated, leaving much of the population landless and without the right to its future possession. The alternatives created in order to alleviate the problem—i.e., becoming a farm hand or a laborer in any industry—were insufficient. On the one hand, the salaries offered were insufficient to meet the minimum needs of an individual and; on the other, the jobs available were not enough for all the unemployed people.

52. Today that dilemma remains the same, despite the many job insertion programs that various governments have initiated: “*human capital development efforts appear to be insufficiently recognized in the Salvadoran labor market. The cause lies probably not in the labor supply but in the demand since the Salvadoran economy has not generated enough qualified jobs.*”⁴¹ The origin

³⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 39.

of this deficiency surely stems from the mistaken anthropological concept of today's economy that the human being is at the service of the economy and not the economy at the service of human beings. Pope Francis rightly regrets that in the economy of exclusion: *"Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded ... It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'."* (EG 53). If we consider ourselves a Christian people and we love the Divine Savior of the World, we cannot continue on this path.

53. Today's society faces a huge challenge to be resolved, not through quick fix schemes but through humanized and humanizing solutions for the short and long term. Millions in investment will be required and we may not live to see the results but, one day, future generations will appreciate the sacrifice that we are able to make today. Otherwise we run the danger of passing on to the next generations a country that is even more drained of blood, and facing an ever more difficult crisis. It is never too late to start anew on the path of overcoming violence and implementing human solutions that establish the foundation for a peaceful, solidarity-based and truly Christian El Salvador.

b. The idolatry of money

54. The second cause of the use of violence in our country is perhaps the idolatry of money. This was one of the Temptations with which our Lord Jesus Christ was tested in the desert (cf. Lk 4:1-13), offering us the model of how to overcome it. One does not always resort to violence due to poverty or the urgency of meeting the basic needs that every human being experiences. The world offers a variety of vanities that we might call with Qoheleth the *vanity of*

vanities (cf. Eccl 1:2). The advertising media make us believe that such vanities are real and necessary, leading the vast majority into the snare of a fruitless quest in which the struggle to possess everything seems endless and futile. Surely, if Saint Basil came back to life in our time he would again exclaim: “*I cannot help but marvel at the invention of such useless things.*”⁴² Futile or not, human groups struggle to get them, for example, “*individuals who get involved in micro-markets for drugs seek power, prestige and money that cannot be obtained by other means because of their disempowerment in conventional markets.*”⁴³ We must confess that “*The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.*” (EG 54).

55. Unfortunately, the idolatry of money and power does not start with nor is it suffered only by those who consume the products or services offered by the consumer society but mainly by those who produce them, knowing that what they are bringing to market is superfluous. There is in this a relationship of convenient dependence for the owners of large manufacturing companies, who would obviously disappear if their products or services were not consumed. And it pains me to say that, perhaps this idolatry is the most sinful: “*The worship of the ancient golden calf has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose*” (EG 55). In a poor and Christian country like ours, there cannot be a throwaway economy which forgets that the main thing to supply is the basic needs of our poorest brothers and sisters. We cannot have an economy that

⁴² In: Restituto Bravo Sierra, *Doctrina Social y Económica de los Padres de la Iglesia, Cf., “Contra los ricos” de San Basilio*, n. 211.

⁴³ Juan Pablo Perez Sainz, *Exclusión Social y Violencias en territorios urbanos centroamericanos*, FLACSO, 2015, p. 39.

anesthetizes our minds and makes us want superfluous objects and accessories to our lives.

56. We need to have an economy of solidarity where job opportunities are increased considerably even if it means reducing profits for large national and multinational corporations. It is not possible that “*While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few*” (EG 56). Let us think, brothers and sisters, that this is what has led the people of this country to use violence as the only means to obtain what, through the lack of policies of equity, they have been denied: “*Money must serve, not rule!*” (EG 58).

c. Individualism

57. The third reason why the Salvadoran people often resort to violence is possibly the culture of individualism that: “*favors a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds*” (EG 67). In family, work, community, church and civic relations, personal interests too often trump the common good, making it impossible thereby to solve problems that require the unity, harmony and solidarity of all. It is a culture that is: “*characterized by the self-reference of the individual, which leads to indifference toward the other, whom one does not need and for whom one does not feel responsible*” (DA 46). The individual struggles to achieve his or her ideals, hopes and dreams repeatedly ignoring the way to achieve them; that is, the quest is “*pragmatic and limited to the moment with no concern for ethical criteria*” (DA 47). It does not matter if the goals are achieved by legal means or by illegal or criminal acts because in the minds of people who resort to the various types of violence, achieving personal well-being comes before the common good.

58. Christian men and women, and men and women of goodwill must not forget that “*Claiming individual and subjective rights, without a similar effort to guarantee social, cultural and solidarity rights undermines the dignity of all, especially the poorest and most vulnerable*” (DA 47). We cannot keep thinking about our well-being in a selfish and narcissistic way as if there were no others to be in solidarity with and in whom to find self-realization, because “*those who love their neighbor as themselves, possess nothing more than their neighbor.*”⁴⁴ Let us build a culture of solidarity with human and more humanizing relations where the common good outranks personal interest. Let the love of Christ our Savior and Redeemer reign in our hearts - and not a cold and calculating individualism. It is necessary to promote the culture of encounter that Pope Francis has so often recommended to us.

d. Impunity

59. The protagonists of the Peace Accords agreed to establish a Truth Commission in order to know “*The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, as the oath goes. The overall truth and the specific truth, the radiant but quiet truth. The whole and its parts, in other words, the bright light shone onto a surface to illuminate it and the parts of this same surface lit up case by case, regardless of the identity of the perpetrators, always in the search for lessons that would contribute to reconciliation and to abolishing such patterns of behavior in the new society. Learning the truth and strengthening and tempering the determination to find it out; putting an end to impunity and cover-up; settling political and social differences by means of agreement instead of violent action ...*”⁴⁵ The goal of both sides with the appointment of the *ad-hoc* commission was

⁴⁴ In: Restituto Bravo Sierra, *Doctrina Social y Económica de los Padres de la Iglesia, “Contra los ricos” de San Basilio*, n. 207.

⁴⁵ Truth Commission, *From Madness to Hope. The 12-year war in El Salvador, 1993*, p. 2.

commendable. Knowing the truth and the whole truth, illuminating what lay in the darkness beneath, and calling things and people—victims and victimizers—by their name was a task that El Salvador needed (and continues to need) not only to know the truth itself but to do justice and compensate the victims and construct peace along this path.

60. How correctly the Psalmist sings: *“Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss. Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven”* (Ps 85: 11-12). Peace is the fruit of justice and justice is the fruit of truth. No one can legislate on a lie; therefore, no one can do justice over falsehood, so this begets impunity. This is an impunity which sinks its roots down to colonial times. None of those who perpetrated crimes against the aboriginal peoples of our country were punished and the victims were never compensated. When land expropriation occurred, a certain kind of legalism was resorted to which was merely impunity. The victims were mocked again and there was never justice. After the well-known slaughter in 1932, the names of the masterminds of the repression were never concretely revealed and they were never punished—instead, they were shielded, leaving their victims to carry their pain and the burden of an injustice that was never redressed or compensated. After the civil war, many crimes went unpunished and victims are still crying out for justice even though some proclaim that, that page of history has been turned over. Surely! The page has been turned for the victimizers, but not for the victims. Today, impunity waves its flag over the victims, celebrating the victory of the perpetrators who are almost never identified, and so many crimes remain unsolved.

61. El Salvador cannot continue to maintain a judicial system that upholds impunity. It must end if we really want to heal past wounds. Moreover, it is necessary to conduct historical trials that redeem our history and the victims of

a past that some wish to relate in the grandiose terms of knightly romance without taking into account the hordes of victims lying between the glorified shadows of their victimizers. The country needs justice, otherwise no ruler, no prosecutor, no lawyer or person in charge of upholding the law will have the moral standing to demand their enforcement. We cannot continue with a judicial system that often *“sides with the powerful and fosters impunity, thereby jeopardizing the credibility of government institutions and increasing the mistrust of the people ... with a deep contempt for legality”* (DA 77).

62. No, brothers and sisters, our country needs to be healed from its past if we wish to overcome various wounds, traumas, and resentments, among other fruits of iniquity that institutionalized violence has produced among us. We cannot continue to approve of a system of rights that is not right. I know that many will find it painful to illuminate the shadows, because Truth is not easy to accept but it is healthy, for the one who seeks the truth will walk in the Lord who told his disciples: *“I am the way and the truth and the life”* (Jn 14:6). To walk toward the truth is to walk in Him and to find truth is to find Him, which is to find life and life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). That is why, with much love He left us that eternal teaching that prays: *“the truth will set you free”* (Jn 8:32). Hence, one who conceals his crimes is not free. He will be, though, when ending impunity or working to end impunity, he walks in the truth, that is, when he walks in the ways of the Lord who died for the truth.

Conclusion

63. In short, violence in El Salvador has roots that can be traced back to colonial days. It has been strengthened, diversified and transformed into an institutionalized phenomenon, making it a mystery of iniquity that must be fought by all. It is not a problem to be solved by a small group but by all the citizens of

this country as already mentioned; resorting to solutions that are human, humanized and humanizing because we are talking about the common good. The culture of solidarity must prevail over the culture of individualism. Understanding this requires, as I explained at the beginning, understanding the signs of the times; an obligation to which we are called as Jesus demanded of his contemporaries if we really want to put an end this scourge: “*Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?*” (Lk 12:56); and, of course, it requires solidarity and Christian commitment.

PART TWO

GOD CANNOT BE WHERE THERE IS VIOLENCE

64. Just as Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría explained, “*violence, understood as a raw fact that does not need further specification, understood as a present reality that is immediately recognizable, is present today as it was yesterday all over our human world,*”⁴⁶ to which I would add: under different guises. Unfortunately, my dear brothers and sisters, violence has been a phenomenon all too present in our world though we may not wish to admit it. The people of Israel were no exception. They repeatedly experienced various forms of violence from within, as we discover by reading Scripture. However, this is no reason to consider violence a phenomenon to be accepted. Rather, “*the universality of the phenomenon of violence is a symptomatic fact that demands reflection.*”⁴⁷ In other words, it is necessary to find and understand the causes that generate violence among us. The people of Israel had their reasons for resorting to violence, which does not justify its use, but it does illustrate the conditions that produce it and, therefore, they must be prevented if we want to avoid suffering—both human and cosmic.

65. The authors of the Bible describe, in their writings, a God who opposes violence even when its use may at times seem justified. Instead they describe a God of life, a God who teaches peace, and a God who is a defender of justice. These faces of God cannot be separated and must be seen as one. Jesus did likewise during his time on earth. He brought life, and life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10); he taught the ways of peace (cf. Lk 1:79); he prohibited the use of violence (cf. Mt 26:52); and he defended the poor (cf. Lk 4:18). The Church, guardian of the deposit of the Faith, has tried to present this image of God and the

⁴⁶ Ignacio Ellacuría, “*Violencia y Cruz*”. *Escritos Teológicos III*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2002, p. 448.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

praxis of His Son made flesh more than two thousand years ago. She has fought for the defense of life; she has taught ways of peace to humanity and in many cases has demanded justice for the victims and stood completely opposed to the ways of violence and, of course, to the pedagogy of death.

66. In the following section I want to throw some light on the actual violence taking place in El Salvador in the light of the tradition of the Old and the New Testaments and in the light of the Magisterium of the Church. I attempt, in the first instance, to understand both the symptomatic facts that led the people of Israel to the use of violence; as well as the ways and means that God used to eliminate its use; and also, the way Jesus indicated for us so that we, too, might be meek and humble of heart like Him (cf. Mt 11:29), avoiding the use of the sword. In second place, I wish to show that the Church, as Mother and Teacher, has taught humanity why violence should not be used and the means to follow if one wants to avoid it, imitating the Divine Master, the Savior of the World.

a. Violence in the Old Testament

67. In the Pentateuch, in the Historical Books, in the Wisdom Tradition, as well as in the Prophets, we find the God of Life, the God who teaches peace and the God who defends justice, repeatedly condemning violence in any of its forms as being outside his Divine Plan. At the same time, we see the people of Israel sometimes succumbing to the temptation to use violence as a way to deal with their problems. It was not that they found violence attractive, just that the existence of certain social, economic or political conditions pushed them towards a mistaken solution. It is therefore necessary to set out the symptoms that lead people to act in a certain manner and the ways God indicates that we might avoid violence.

A. The Pentateuch

68. The early chapters of the Book of Genesis contain the theological account of the fratricidal violence that Cain turned against his younger brother. Ordinarily this passage is understood as a violent altercation between brothers that unfortunately cost one of them his life. The story goes much further, because it is told in a mythical-symbolic language, as explained by the biblical scholar Fr. Luis Alonso Schökel, SJ. He comments that it could well represent two collective entities: shepherds and farmers, competing for God's favor. Unfavorable weather conditions for sowing were interpreted by the farmers as God's rejection of their sacrifices; and at the same time, it caused them to resent their brothers who dedicated themselves to raising stock. Their resentment eventually turned to hatred. They resented God for favoring the shepherds instead of serving only their own interests. In other words, they wanted to manipulate God to serve them. From the economic point of view, in the farmers' faction, we see a simple struggle for power, wealth and prestige. Their conduct is contrary to God the teacher of peace who rejects "*the human tendency to form collective entities that end up imposing their particular interests on others, without any concern that these are their own brothers.*"⁴⁸ In short, the desire for domination of some over others led these two collective entities of brothers to violent confrontation to the death.

69. God's attitude reveals much about his nature as a God of peace and a defender of justice. He calls Cain to account for the murder of righteous Abel, imposing exile as his punishment (Gn 4:13). He did not ignore the cry of the blood of Abel. Rather he imparted justice, avoiding, on the one hand, the revenge of Adam and Eve against their eldest son, and making possible, on the other hand, that peace which can only be the fruit of justice (cf. Isa 32:17). God's judgment served to root out violence, which was contrary to his plans. God's approach to

⁴⁸ Luis Alonso Schökel, SJ, *La Biblia de nuestro pueblo*.

Cain is remarkable. He does not kill him, but he obtains justice. He does not answer violence with violence. To compensate for the blood of his brother, he warns him that the earth will not produce any fruit for him, and he will wander the earth (cf. Gn 4:12). Nor, does he leave Cain exposed to a possible revenge for the crime he committed; instead, he marks him for protection, surely awaiting his conversion, and he promises him that if someone kills him, that person will have to pay for it sevenfold (cf. Gn 4:15). That is, he does not want more violence in exchange for the blood of Abel. He is satisfied with an exemplary punishment open to the possibility of conversion, because God does not lose faith in humanity. God knows that human beings are not perfect; but they can grow towards perfection.

70. This type of violence has not been a stranger in our beloved El Salvador. As in Israel, there have been many groups that have tried and are still trying to dominate others. That was the case with the Spaniards who conquered our lands; so it was with the Creole heirs and promoters of independence; so too, the economic, political and ideological elites during the twentieth century; and today, it is true of criminal groups which, unlike the previous three groupings, seek to overcome the disempowerment in which they have ended up as a result of the lack of economic equity. In their inner beings, even though they themselves are unaware of it, they seek to fulfill that for which they were created, since the human being “*was created to own the earth,⁴⁹ and destined by his Maker to rule;*”⁵⁰ He was not created to lose his human dignity. A sound anthropology tells us that human beings need to be recognized in their dignity, which implicitly

⁴⁹ Of course the word “own” has been criticized by many and many even claiming that the Church has allowed and promoted the destruction of the environment. That consideration is contrary to a well understood anthropology where man sees the earth not as an instrument of profit but as “*our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs*” (LS 1).

⁵⁰ In: Restituto Bravo Sierra, *Doctrina Social y Económica de los Padres de la Iglesia, Cf., “En el Ecclesiastes” de San Gregorio de Nisa*, n. 433.

leads to respect for their human rights and the satisfaction, at least, of their most basic needs. When these rules are breached, human beings are de-humanized. It is then that people will sometimes resort to violence as a means to secure empowerment and recognition of their dignity. In other words, it is as a way to become visible in a society that has marginalized them, excluded them, and made them invisible. Unfortunately, these groups that have almost always been excluded by the political and economic leadership structures, resort to violent methods, which, far from restoring their humanity, end up dehumanizing them even more. This potential dehumanization of human beings did not escape God's attention and he later gave his chosen people the Decalogue as a way to regulate social relations.

71. The years passed and Israel was subjected to the yoke of slavery in Egypt where it suffered oppression and death. Freed from the pharaonic power through Moses, God asked his people to be promoters of life, to love life and to imitate the God of life. He included in the Decalogue the commandment: "*Thou shalt not kill*" (Ex 20:13). But this was not enough, because he ordered the avoidance of any kind of violence against others: theft, adultery, selfishness, false testimony and envy. God also set a price on revenge through the primitive law of retaliation (Ex 21: 23-25) due to excessive use of it by Lamech in a fit of rage: "*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for bruising me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times*" (Gen 4:23-24). Unquestionably, the primary violence was not equivalent to the secondary violence employed by Lamech. When God saw the disproportionate use of violence by humanity, he decided to become a defender of justice, imposing laws so that they would not face such a painful excess in the promised land.

72. In our country, social relations have been harmed by the use of violence by some people who, to be clear, are not always members of criminal structures. There are several examples that illustrate the point: women killed by their own spouses after an argument; neighbors who have killed another over a parking spot; friends killing friends over personal jealousies; families killing each other over possessions; children killed for revenge against their parents; aged and elderly done away with for no apparent reason; children killed in the womb because they are considered a burden or hindrance; animals injured or killed because we do not care enough about the ecosystem—and this is just to illustrate a few examples of the ways of violence that we live , in the here and now. It is painful that in our country a small group of Salvadorans has sometimes ignored the voice of God who pleads: “*Thou shalt not kill*”, as if they did not understand that such actions dehumanize us; that they distance human beings from God our Creator in whose image and likeness we have been created.

73. The wonderful thing is that because God is the God of life, he does not only defend human life. The God of the Old Testament is so displeased by the use of violence that he condemns it even when it is committed against the cosmos. A donkey taught Balaam a lesson in a moment of anger. Endowed by God with speech, the donkey—normally, a beastly animal incapable of reason—invited the man to reason: “*What have I done to you that you beat me these three times?*” (Nm 22:28). Violence is the immediate response that man gives to a stimulus. To avoid it requires reasoning. Only when Balaam stopped to think at the invitation of the donkey did he open his eyes and recognize the angel of Yahweh. Every human being is called by God to go forward and leave behind the irrationality of an animal because he or she was made in the image and likeness of God; while the animal was denied this gift. Man should not act irrationally; he cannot respond to environmental stimuli instinctively. He must strive to find the logic of the

events daily lives. We are invited to think; indeed, we are obliged to think, so as to be free of future regrets. The donkey told Balaam how to do it when he asked: “*Am I not your donkey, on which you have always ridden until now? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way before?*” (Nm 22:30). His answer is in the negative; moreover, he had already hurt the animal unnecessarily. How many times does a person kill their equal, carried away by instincts or passions and forgetting that God gave them reason as a tool to discover the logic in the events of their daily lives. How many times do people destroy forest areas unnecessarily when they could have resorted to a system of urbanization that is more concerned for the care of nature. How many deaths have been wrongfully caused by man since the beginning of human history, my dear brothers and sisters!

74. Accordingly, the Pentateuch describes a God of life who primarily defends human life. However, he does not neglect the life of the cosmos. To this we add, that the Pentateuch shows us God as defender of the law, who imposes rules against the violent actions of human beings to facilitate fraternal and convivial community life and prevent bloodshed. It is not a God who forbids his children to live together in freedom, or keeps them in a child-like state by rules or laws, as some have wanted to portray it during certain periods of history. No, it is God the Father, teacher of peace, who shows his children how to use freedom and aggressiveness⁵¹ responsibly. Schökel explains that for an Israelite “*to benefit from this did not suppose tying up his freedom or losing his autonomy; quite the*

⁵¹ Father Ignacio Ellacuría explained that aggressiveness is an ambiguous force that we must learn to value and to use: “*it is certainly a positive and necessary value; but at the same time a force, a power with the imminent danger to spill over and drag man along with it, either in the form of demonic power, or in the form of diabolical power ... its true power diabolical, appears when it takes human form, without humanizing itself. Violence arises as rationalization of aggression. Rationalization ... in the sense that the destructive power of aggression is accreted and worsened by the cold calculations of reason.*” See: Ignacio Ellacuría, “*Violencia y Cruz*”. *Escritos Teológicos III*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2002, pp. 446-448.

*opposite ... it was showing them a way that would increase their liberty.”*⁵² Let us do the same. Let us not turn a blind eye to a legal system that has often based itself more on impunity than on justice, curtailing full human freedom through dread and fear.

B. Historical Books

75. In the First Book of Kings there is a passage that tells us how the people of Israel were tempted to use violence by their own rulers. It happened that in those days Solomon died and his son Rehoboam went to Shechem to be made king. The people of Israel were waiting, surely with the hope that the new monarch would be very different from the late King Solomon. When he arrived, the people gathered in Assembly gave him a petition, as the Salvadoran people often have done, though perhaps not in the same manner. This was its message before sadly resorting to armed uprisings as in 1832, 1932, and the seventies and eighties—laden with respect for and hope in its rulers: *“Your father put a heavy yoke on us. If you now lighten the harsh servitude and the heavy yoke your father imposed on us, we will be your servants”* (1 Kings 12:4). Rehoboam requested three days to think about how to answer his people, but instead of bringing good news to the ears of the people those three days brought bad news that plunged the already suffering people into further sadness. He replied: *“My father made your yoke heavy, but I will make it heavier. My father beat you with whips, but I will beat you with scorpions”* (1 Kings 12:14). The discontented nation responded: *“What share have we in David? We have no heritage in the son of Jesse. To your tents, Israel! Now look to your own house, David!”* (1 Kings 12:16). That was how the exasperated people separated themselves from their ruler, but not without first stoning Adoniram, one of the leaders appointed by Rehoboam. He finally

⁵² Luis Alonso Schökel, SJ, *La Biblia de nuestro pueblo*.

fled to Jerusalem by chariot, provoking Israel's prolonged rebellion against the House of David (1 Kings 12:19).

76. God did not approve the use of violence between brothers. He stopped the Israelites through the prophet Shemaiah: "*Say to Rehoboam, son of Solomon, King of Judah, and to all the house of Judah and to Benjamin, and to the rest of the people: Thus says the Lord: You must not go out to war against your fellow Israelites. Return home, each of you, for it is I who have brought this about*" (1 Kgs 12:22-24). Violence does not please God in any way. He is a God of peace who wishes his children to live in peace. Let us not abandon his outlook.

77. What the author of the Book of Kings relates should call our attention. We must ask ourselves: Is it not the governments and economic systems that sometimes push the people to resort to social violence or ideological violence as the only way to achieve some kind of empowerment that dignifies them as sons and daughters of God? Is it not the case that in El Salvador, since colonial times, certain groups have been imposing their will on others, prompting the subjugated to revolt with violence? Is it not conceivable that, in our country, some groups have ignored the clamor of the people pleading for greater equity, inclusion, solidarity, understanding, forgiveness, mercy, justice and peace, pushing them to walk the paths of violence and death as the only way to be recognized by the national and international communities? Could it perhaps be that the State has not created sufficient social welfare policies, and has thus facilitated the rise and institutionalization of criminal groups that initially sought only a better standard of life but now, tempted by a consumerist and hedonistic culture, look for prestige, wealth and power at the expense of the innocent?

78. These are questions to be reflected on, again and again, not to blame each other as we always do, making the pain and death of the people an

ideological or partisan issue that intensifies during election cycles. This is not an issue about party colors, flags or anthems. It is not about economic interests at stake. It is rather about the thousands of lives being snuffed out, while thousands of other lives, the offspring of our nation—children preferentially loved by God—are exposed to this pedagogy of death that will doom them to the future of a divided and bloodied people, as Israel was in the days of Rehoboam. I do not ignore the programs and plans implemented so far that allow for a more democratic and inclusive country, but they are insufficient. We need to continue working along the lines of obtaining greater benefits for the people. We must pursue human promotion and development for our poorest brothers and sisters. It is no coincidence but a function of logical causality that the poorest areas of our country are the areas of greatest violence.

C. The Wisdom Tradition

79. For its part, the Wisdom Tradition—based on the training drawn from daily living that we call the Wisdom of the People—praises the person who promotes peace, and shows us that the wisdom of life lies in being close to God from youth. It allows us to see that the origin of violence can naturally be fostered in the human heart by a personal history of pain, resentment or emptiness of God. First of all, the author of Proverbs recommends never doing evil: *“Do not plot evil against your neighbors, when they live at peace with you”* (Prov 3:29); nor to envy the violent person and imitate their behavior because *“To the Lord the devious are an abomination, but the upright are close to him”* (Prov 3:31-32). Ben Sira advises staying away from the violent man because *“he will kindle strife ... and inject enmity among those who are at peace”* (Sir 28:8-9), destroying the bonds of fraternal coexistence that the sons and daughters of God are called to live according to the designs of Yahweh from the moment of creation. However, the bonds of coexistence will be more fraternal if governments, which are

responsible for justice and the economy, promote a rule of law in which human needs are met even if only minimally— so that there is adequate food and health provision; decent education; reasonable housing with at least electricity and water services; and healthy recreation.

80. As for Qohelet, he denounces the impunity that often exists in the courts, permitting crime to continue to be committed: *“And still under the sun in the judgment place I saw wickedness, and wickedness also in the seat of justice. I said in my heart, both the just and the wicked God will judge”* (Eccl 3:16-17). Qoheleth describes a court of law not administering justice fairly. Nor does he approve delays in issuing judgments. He explains that this attitude perpetuates violence and crime: *This “also is vanity. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not promptly executed, the human heart is filled with the desire to commit evil—because the sinner does evil a hundred times and survives”* (Eccl 8:11-12). According Qoheleth, justice must be imposed without delay, because human beings often waste the opportunity to make a change. It is better to prevent impunity so that both the violent one and anyone who commits a crime, whomever they may be, can change. But better yet, says the author of the book, never to resort to evil, and to prevent not only harm to others but to oneself, *“Be not wicked to excess, and be not foolish. Why should you die before your time?”* (Eccl 7:17). Experience has shown Qoheleth that violence and evil return to the one who initiates it, so it is best to abstain from it: *“Whoever quarries stones may be hurt by them, and whoever chops wood is in danger from it”* (Eccl 10:8).

81. The wise, in his estimation, avoid violence and live their days in peace, hewing close to the Lord and sparing themselves future regrets: *“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years approach of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; Before*

the sun is darkened and the light and the moon and the stars and the clouds return after the rain” (Eccl 12:1-2), before death and pain snatch away one’s life and the life of a nation, disappearing into a process of growing dehumanization. He beckons us to humanize others and humanize ourselves: *“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this concerns all humankind”* (Eccl 12:13). For, this is what it means *to be human*, made in the image and likeness of God: since God cannot be where there is violence, nor should any person be the author of violence.

D. The Prophetic Tradition

82. If the Wisdom Tradition praises God for his Justice and Law, and invites humanity to be builders and promoters of peace, the Prophetic Tradition, started many years before the Wisdom Tradition, highlights God’s vision in contrast to the ambition of those who believe themselves owners of this world. It is a vision in which peace and justice, hand in hand with their servant, are synonymous with fullness of life for their children.

83. According to the prophets, God’s dream encompassed the Son of Promise prefigured in the Servant of Yahweh, who loves peace, is peacemaker and is a witness to peace: *“He will not cry out, nor shout, nor make his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow dim or be bruised until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching”* (Isa 42:2-4). It is understood that the Son of Promise was a peaceful man, a lover of peace and peacemaker. He would not even dare to extinguish the smoldering wick but would rather restore its light. He would establish right by means of peace, love, solidarity and tolerance. His ministry would give way to the new creation, where all signs of violence disappear: *“The wolf and the lamb shall pasture together, and the lion shall eat hay like the ox—but the serpent’s food*

shall be dust. None shall harm or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord" (Isa 65:28).

84. Isaiah proclaims that the Servant will announce the day of the vengeance of God (Isa 61:2). The paradox of the passage quoted here is the essence of the vengeance, which, does not consist so much in describing God's retribution against evil persons, as in administering justice. Therefore, the prophet explains that it is, "*to place on those who mourn in Zion a diadem instead of ashes, to give them oil of gladness instead of mourning, a glorious mantle instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of justice, the planting of the Lord to show his glory*" (Isa 61:3-4). The day of vengeance of Yahweh is the day of justice of Yahweh, as he himself proclaims: "*I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing*" (Isa 61:8). It is the day that God will empower those disempowered by economic systems that excluded them, marginalized them and made them invisible through social inequality; by legal systems that favored impunity; by criminal groups who, even though seeking self-realization, wrongly practiced criminality, killing their own brothers and sisters with cruelty and evil.

85. Unquestionably, as Schökel points out, the prophet intends the description of this day "*to inspire dreams, to make us yearn for something new and great ... But dreaming is not enough: we must move on to ... an effective engagement and a common struggle to achieve what we dream.*"⁵³ My beloved brothers and sisters, let us recognize this passage as the dream that God has for all of us. Let us make it real in our current situation. Let us not see it as an escape from the painful present, but as a goal to achieve as the People of God. In other words: overcoming violence in our country—crystallized in its bosom not as a fad but as a mystery of iniquity—will not be achievable unless we dream together of a

⁵³ Luis Alonso Schökel, SJ, *La Biblia de nuestro pueblo*.

better future with God at its foundation, and unless we work together for its attainment. Either we join all together or we sink together in a sea of pain and death as we have been doing up to now. Each person from wherever they may be, from wherever they have had to live in the story of salvation must struggle to save that story, denouncing what is wrong, supporting campaigns of social promotion and doing what is necessary to end practices, uses, customs, habits or vices from the pedagogy of death and begin implementing a pedagogy of life consistent with the will of God. A pedagogy of life seeks to set in place methods and techniques through which we learn to be brothers and sisters in Christ because we are sons and daughters of the same God.

86. Ezekiel, described God's dream with these words: *"And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd ... And I will make with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods"* (Ezek 34:23-25). God desires His children to have one shepherd to guide them and govern them along the paths of peace, extending their domain over the entire cosmos. God wants those called to govern, to rule, to be masters (in politics, economics, law, education among other fields) to imitate that pastor who was prefigured by the prophets. That is, that they should be shepherds who practice law and justice; shepherds who put the common good before personal good; non-violent, peaceful shepherds; shepherds who humanize rather than dehumanize; shepherds in solidarity with the victims and in solidarity in the fight against the root causes of the onset and perpetuation of victimization. The covenant of peace that God proposes is a resounding 'no' to the dominating violence of certain groups over others; it is a 'no' to the usurping violence of the strong over the weak; a 'no' to social violence provoked by the strong; 'no' to ideological violence; 'no' to

criminal violence; and a resounding ‘no’ to any other kind of violence produced by human beings. This is why he announced the coming of his Pastor of peace through his prophets, and what in past times Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea and so many other prophets had presented as the dream of God, was fulfilled in the New Testament. The shepherd of shepherds to be imitated became incarnate in human flesh so that each and every one of us would be one in him.

b. Violence in the New Testament

87. From the New Testament Tradition, I will take up the Gospels and some of the letters of Paul, James and John to throw light on our situation. Not so much to verify the various types of violence—which would essentially remain the same as those found in the Old Testament: dominant violence, usurping violence, social violence, criminal violence, violence against women, violence against children and violence against the cosmos—that struck Israel in those years, but to show the way we can overcome them from the Jesus-oriented message. That is to say, by imitating Christ who had God and the Kingdom as the pillars of his life, and did not permit the idols of death to supplant the one true God.

I. The Gospels

88. The Gospels contain the Good News of Jesus. It is a Good News that was not written as a mere historical record to be preserved for future generations, but as testimony that the man who walked the streets of Jerusalem doing good was the Son of the living God, whom we are invited to follow. John states it this way, near the end of his gospel: “*But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name*” (Jn 20:31). What John says at the end is noteworthy: “*that through this belief you may have life in his name.*” Not death, but life, because he is the Son of the God of Life, and life is not achieved through

violence but by peaceful means as He taught, being the Teacher of Peace *par excellence*. Something I intend to draw from certain New Testament passages in the following pages regards the course of his life, and I must point out that the lifestyle of Jesus was eminently countercultural.

a. The Annunciation

89. Jesus' birth was not announced exclusively to Mary, his father Joseph also was told who and how the child would be incarnated in Mary: "*For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins*" (Mt 1:21). Let it be noted that the name of Jesus—from the Aramaic *Yehoshua* and, in abbreviated form, *Yeshua*, which means "*Yahweh saves*"—is related to the verb the evangelist uses to describe the mission of the child when he grows up: he will *save*—and not: he will dominate, he will subjugate, he will oppress, he will judge, or other verbs applicable to the kings of the time. He would be the opposite of the rulers of this world (countercultural). He came to *save*, not to condemn, even when humanity was submerged in sin. The words that Matthew borrows from the prophet are equally revealing: "*Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us*" (Mt 1: 23). His name is *God with us* and not: God against us. This was not a God seeking revenge but offering mercy and salvation. It is a beautiful description of the mission of that Child foretold by the prophets, which would be a mission of peace and love for humanity.

90. Zechariah, meanwhile, full of the Holy Spirit prophesied the gift of light and peace that the little Messiah brought to humanity: "*to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow, to guide our feet into the path of peace*" (Lk 1:79). The prophecy of the birth of the Messiah established the same thing "*from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel*" (Mt 2:6). It is

abundantly understood that he will care for him and protect him because shepherding is what the herders do with their little sheep; instead of subjecting them to violence under the yoke. That newborn child was definitely a King of Peace. Moreover, the shepherds heard the angels tell them announcing the birth: “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests*” (Lk 2:14). The child would bring peace, not expansionist wars, not invading empires, not usurping colonialisms, not the violence of arms. He would bring peace as the prophets had described in the utopia or the dream of God.

b. His Life

91. The entire life of Jesus is a testimony to the *pedagogy of peace* that distinguished him from his contemporaries. He began his public life, as a theologian would say, understanding the way he should fulfill his mission: “*in no way imposing on the people and dominating them, but identifying with all who suffer.*”⁵⁴ Hence at the synagogue he reads the passage from Isaiah stating that the prophecy was fulfilled in Him: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord*” (Lk 4:16-19).

92. His violence was the violence of nonviolence. In contraposition to fratricidal or dominating violence, he instructs us to forgive seventy times seven times (Mt 18:22); he renewed God’s command not to kill, adding the command to not be angered and not to offend a brother or sister (Mt 5:21); he replaced the law of retaliation with the principle of nonresistance before evil by turning the other cheek (Mt 5:39); and, finally, he invites us by word and by deed to love not only our friends but also our enemies (Mt 5:43).

⁵⁴ Jose Maria Castillo, *Jesús de Nazareth el Hijo de Dios*, Editor: Archbishop Romero Center, 2005, p. eleven.

93. His teaching was not left in words. He put into practice every counsel, every mandate that he gave, as a good teacher always does. Being consistent in his words and in his life, he was able to denounce the sinful attitude of the pedagogical Pharisees who claimed to be teachers and he warned his followers of the distance from the Gospel of that way of life, so that each of his followers could be a teacher of peace as He was; that is, in word and in deed. *“The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example”* (Mt 23:3). Far from that, he counseled, *“be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mt 5:48). Adding to these words, he warned the Pharisees and lawyers how the Wisdom of God had sent prophets and apostles so *“that this generation might be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who died between the altar and the temple building”* (Lk 11:49-50). Most likely, Jesus did not say these words to intimidate the Pharisees and lawyers, much less to condemn them with a definitive judgment. He said these things to make them reason and to motivate them to conversion and to abandon ideological violence through the teaching of sound doctrine.

94. He fought to end all violence directed at vulnerable groups, vindicating them in his teachings. With respect to violence against women, there is a passage that is full of love, solidarity, inclusion and understanding for all women. This is the passage where Jesus stopped a group of men who wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3). He did not encourage them to start the stoning. He challenged them to think empathetically: *“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her”* (Jn 8:8). In other words, he lets us understand that none of us can kill another, because we have no moral standing to do so. Not even He, who was the Son of God, would kill her; much less can

one of us, who are not God, resort to the destruction of human life. As the Creator of human life, he takes pleasure in it without destroying it. How can some people opt to destroy life? But, he also wanted to show that if the woman had fallen into sin, it was because, behind her, there was a whole male-centered society that pushed her into it. The mistreatment, exclusion, marginalization and invisibility to which women had been relegated led them to look for love, acceptance and affection where they should not. It was not so much women's fault, but an entire political, social, religious and cultural apparatus that did not take them into account.

95. In another passage full of tenderness and typical of the love of God, Jesus teaches that we must not be violent with weaker and more vulnerable groups, such as children. It is true that they do not make their voices heard as an adult does, but for that reason, they are the most cherished by God. He taught that they must be included and not subjected to violent actions reeking of superiority in the way that Peter and the other apostles acted when children wanted to see Jesus: *"Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these"* (Mt 19:14). To this gesture of inclusion, he added a special blessing to them by the laying on of hands on their tender little heads (cf. Mt 19:15).

96. He said something very similar with respect to the treatment of the cosmos. He permitted no violence or abuse or neglect for plants or animals. In his opinion, it was valid to break the Sabbath rest for the purpose of saving animal life. That break was no excuse to let one die: *"Who among you, if your son or ox falls into a cistern, would not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?"* (Lk 14:5). This reflects a Jesus-like posture, full of cosmic love—in addition to a daring comparison between a child and an animal. Anyone could accuse Jesus of

comparing a human to a beast. But it is the contrary. He is explaining that the life of an animal is also very valuable, little inferior to the human being. Accordingly, it is a very serious offense to let an animal die unjustly and cruelly, because it too is worthy of life.

97. On the other hand; Jesus strongly opposed dominating violence, the violence of the great masters who do not serve the people whom they have the privilege of leading. They use the people, usurping their land, taking their belongings or money by charging unfair and burdensome taxes. He recommended to his people to never imitate such conduct; that is, he asked his own to live counter-culturally without imitating the oppression and domination of the powerful: *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave”* (Mt 20:25-27). Lords should serve rather than be served; they should care and not dominate.

c. His Death

98. His gave his greatest testimony as a Teacher of Peace at the hour of his passion and death. Wanting to avoid arrest, Peter drew his sword and Jesus counseled: *“Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword”* (Mt 26:52). On the cross he forgave and asked for forgiveness for his enemies: *“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do”* (Lk 23:34). Ironically he died instead of a violent man, a dangerous thief: Barabbas, who had spent his life assaulting his own people, killing them when they refused to surrender their belongings while he was robbing them and committing countless crimes against his people and the soldiers of the Roman Empire. Jesus, on the other hand, spent his days doing good; but his fate was death on a cross. In other words, the judgment of God did not find Barabbas

deserving to die at that hour—an innocent died in his place: *Jesus*. Adding to this strange choice, he died next to two thieves (Lk 23:33), who had resorted to violence when snatching from their victims perhaps not only their possessions but also their lives. At that crucial moment of his life, the Pedagogue of Peace did not resort to any violence. He granted forgiveness and eternal life to Dimas: “*Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise*” (Lk 23:43). Before the authors and agents of criminal violence, he shows us that the most important attitude is forgiveness, an understanding of the perpetrators of violence, love for them and above all a witness to life to persuade these offenders that a world where love of neighbor holds primacy is possible. A better pedagogy of peace, a greater pedagogy of life, has not been given by any other human being on earth!

d. His Resurrection

99. Raised from the dead by His Father, Jesus appears to his disciples showing no signs or vestiges of hatred, rejection or revenge, for the abandonment he experienced after his arrest by the Jewish and Roman authorities. His greeting was peace: “*Peace be with you*” (Jn 20:19) and the gestures that followed the greeting are gestures of love. John notes that he breathed on them the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 20:22); while Luke reports that he asked for food. He wanted to take supper with them, celebrate a meal because he had returned to life with his family and would soon be with his Father. He gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Later, when alone with Peter, Jesus never speaks a word of reproach for the three denials on the night of his arrest. Instead, he entrusted a task to him: “*Feed my sheep*” (Jn 21:17). Did he deposit his trust in the one who had betrayed him? Did he entrust the care of the entire flock to the one who he had failed to take care of his Master? Did he not decline to take his revenge on the one who had denied him three times? Did he not refuse to protest his attitude? He did not humiliate him by

tasking John with the care of the sheep - why not? He acted as he did to show us how a Christian should act when he or she has been wronged, betrayed or mistreated: with love. He did it to show that he was a Teacher of Peace until the last day that he remained on earth. Now we are we called to become teachers, builders and promoters of peace who combat violence with the force of good. If we teach our sons and daughters to fight evil with evil, violence will be perpetuated much longer in our country. It is imperative to find humanized and humanizing paths in order to overcome this scourge, just as Jesus did in his time.

In conclusion:

100. The foregoing is an example of how God has banished violence from his plans. Even God's saving plan discarded violence as a means to achieve the redemption of humanity. Human beings used violence against God and against their neighbors. God, on the other hand, uses forgiveness and love and asks his followers to have the same attitude. He asks us to be aware that evil comes out of the human heart and thus from the lack of God within us: *"For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile"* (Lk 15:19-20). Such a heart can only be filled with iniquity because it has supplanted the true God, the God of life, the God of peace with the idols of power, wealth and fame, which are simply idols of death; idols that perpetuate violence, pain and revenge.

II. The Epistles

101. Undoubtedly, if Paul, James or John came back to life and came to El Salvador, they would point out that the roots of criminal violence—as well as other types of violence with which we are concerned—ultimately stem from the substitution of God (by certain social groups) with the idols of wealth, prestige and power opposed by Jesus. He was victorious against them in his confrontation

with the devil in the desert. To refer to these idols is not an attempt to objectify sin. It rather seeks to point out that God has been set aside, enthroning in his place wealth, power and prestige: “*For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be*” (Mt 6:21). I turn to these groups and ask—as I do to all of us who call ourselves a Christian country: Where is our treasure? In money? In the search for fame and glory? In the pursuit of power in order to subdue, dominate and subjugate others? Are we storing up treasures on earth for moths and rust to destroy them and thieves to snatch them away? Do we seek to serve two masters forgetting that no one can serve both (Mt 6:24)? One either serves God or one serves an idol. Whom do we serve, my brothers and sisters? Whom does the criminality in El Salvador serve? Whom does the State in El Salvador serve? Whom does the business system in El Salvador serve? Do they serve God or an idol? This is the challenge posed by several authors of the epistles of the New Testament.

102. When Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians he was forced to do so by the need to address certain warnings and moral exhortations to them. In chapter five of the letter, he reminds them that as believers they are called to freedom (Gal 5:13); commenting that liberty is not synonymous with license. It is a commitment to God and neighbor: “*do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'*” (Gal 5:13-14). Thereafter, he counsels them to be guided by the Spirit, not the flesh whose fruits are “*immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like*” (Gal 5:19-21). In his commentaries, Schökel explains that “*Paul views the human person as a*

*battlefield where two opposing forces wage war: the forces of instinct and the power of the Spirit. Instinct kills freedom and leads to slavery, dramatized by the long list of vices where we see rather starkly, on the one hand, sins that trample and destroy the freedom of others, making it impossible to have humane coexistence. These include violence, envy, factionalism, ambition, etc. Beyond these, lie the passions that enslave the individual to the tyrannies of sex, fornication, indecency and wantonness.”⁵⁵ It is up to us to humanize ourselves, letting ourselves be guided by the Spirit, or to *de-humanize* ourselves, becoming like irrational people who, lacking the capacity to reason, are overwhelmed by their instincts.*

103. I believe that James best illustrates this resemblance to animal attitudes when he explains to the members of the church throughout Asia and Europe the source of their discord: *“if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. Wisdom of this kind does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice”* (Jas 3:14-16). Man, therefore, becomes dehumanized when he sows discord and all kinds of violence, resembling irrational people. Like Jesus, James is convinced that the wickedness of man or woman comes from the heart: *“Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war”* (Jas 4:1-2). This is true. In El Salvador there is a violent struggle among brothers to grab the other’s belongings. People do not obtain things by the sweat of their brow, but by force. They have the false idea that it is easier to snatch, to extort from another, rather

⁵⁵ Luis Alonso Schökel, SJ, *La Biblia de nuestro pueblo*.

than to work. It is also true that many steal because they do not have jobs. We need the State, with the help of the economic or business sector, to create enough jobs to end the conditions of social exclusion that are causing so much damage to our people, especially the most vulnerable: the poor.

104. Finally, John, in his first letter, tells his community that they should not love the world. We need not be enemies of the world but we should avoid the worldliness that the culture of hedonism, utilitarianism and relativism would lead us to value something as good when it is bad; as just when it is unjust; peaceful when it is violent; straight when it is crooked; truthful when it is false; divine when it is profane: *“Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world. Yet the world and its enticement are passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains forever”* (1 Jn 2:15-17).

105. I ask those groups inclined to so: Do not give in to the temptation of violence. To those who direct politics and the economy: please do not allow the creation nor the survival of unjust structures full of iniquity, that lead the poorest of the poor to use violence. That is not Christian and if we call ourselves followers of Christ we must fight uncompromisingly for peace.

c. The Magisterium of the Church and violence

106. In the image of its founder, the Church has always condemned violence and called to the practice of right and justice, even if the practice of justice seems to run counter to the ambitions of those who practice injustice. To this end, from the beginning, a rich and strong current of thought called the Magisterium has been built up, from which I wish to draw some observations and

comments on violence and peace, which may help in understanding that the former should be eradicated from our country.

A. The Doctors of the Church

107. St. Augustine, commenting on Psalm 84(85) defines peace as the situation “*Where there is no war,*” where “*there is no contradiction, where there is no resistance, nothing to oppose,*”⁵⁶ and he makes this petition: “*Do righteousness, and you shall have peace; that righteousness and peace may kiss each other. For if you love not righteousness, you shall not have peace; for those two, righteousness and peace, love one another, and kiss one another: that he who has done righteousness may find peace kissing righteousness. They two are friends: thou perhaps willest the one, and not the other: for there is no one who wills not peace: but all will not work righteousness.*”⁵⁷ I wish to borrow two ideas from St. Augustine. First: peace is not merely the absence of war but a social state where there is no contradiction. A state where there is gender violence, violence against children, workplace violence, domestic violence, violence against the cosmos, etc., is not a country in complete peace. It may be a nation with the appearance of peace; but it could also be the cradle of future social revolts or uprisings. The second idea is that the prerequisite that allows peace to exist is justice. A state that allows impunity—as analysts have regularly commented, especially after the Salvadoran Peace Accords—is hardly a state at peace. There are victims to compensate, wounds to heal, facts to clarify, perpetrators to identify. Only the application of justice can give us the fruit of peace.

108. To the above definition I wish to add other definitions from St. Augustine on peace that I think we will help us conduct an examination of

⁵⁶ In Restituto Bravo Sierra, *Doctrina Social y Económica de los Padres de la Iglesia*, “*Enarraciones de los Evangelios*”, Psalm 84, n. 1623.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 1623.

conscience to discover whether we are living the peace in its various human dimensions or whether we are, instead, contributing to violence. *“The peace of the body then consists in the duly proportioned arrangement of its parts. The peace of the irrational soul is the harmonious repose of the appetites, and that of the rational soul the harmony of knowledge and action. The peace of body and soul is the well-ordered and harmonious life and health of the living creature. Peace between man and God is the well-ordered obedience of faith to eternal law. Peace between man and man is well-ordered concord. Domestic peace is the well-ordered concord between those of the family who rule and those who obey. Civil peace is a similar concord among the citizens. The peace of the celestial city is the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God. The peace of all things is the tranquility of order”*.⁵⁸ Does this state of peace exist in our own persons, in our families, in our communities, in our cities, in our Church? I think that such an equilibrium is lacking in a large portion of Salvadoran society, making it necessary for all of us to work hard and committedly if we wish to help society—and ourselves, in the process—to overcome this situation.

109. St. Thomas makes it clear that an agreement is not in itself peace: *“if one man concord with another, not of his own accord, but through being forced, as it were, by the fear of some evil that besets him, such concord is not really peace, because the order of each concordant is not observed, but is disturbed by some fear-inspiring cause.”*⁵⁹ Accordingly, like St. Augustine, St. Thomas contemplates an apparent and momentary peace that sooner or later will eventually break down through violent means: *“men seek by means of war to break this concord, because it is a defective peace, in order that they may obtain*

⁵⁸ St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter XIII, n. 1 and 2.

⁵⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, q. 29, a. 1.

peace, where nothing is contrary to their will. Hence all wars are waged that men may find a more perfect peace than that which they had heretofore.”⁶⁰ The State may therefore allow for the existence of an apparent peace, which is nothing more than concord; while its citizens are being violated silently and disguisedly in one form or another. St. Thomas therefore recommends striving for true peace, which consists of “*the perfect enjoyment of the sovereign good, and unites all one’s desires.*”⁶¹

110. On the other hand, St. Thomas Aquinas explains that war can be valid when it meets three conditions: “*the authority of the sovereign by whose command the war is to be waged ... a just cause ... [and] that the belligerents should have a rightful intention.*”⁶² However, he goes on to clarify that war can be made “*unlawful through a wicked intention.*”⁶³ Based on the above, I want to pause to closely examine criminal violence, because it causes most of the daily deaths in our country. The criminal violence that plagues our country is not a war *per se*, as we commonly understand the term. Two sides are fighting—perhaps unevenly matched in force capacity, but both are nevertheless armed. The main targets of their attacks are each other, and not the unarmed and unprotected civilian population. What we might validly be able to state in our situation is that we have some indication that we might be facing a kind of social war. Criminal violence, on the other hand, constitutes social discord.

111. So: Is the criminal violence plaguing our nation licit? As taught by St. Thomas Aquinas it is illicit violence for three reasons. First, because criminals do not have any lawful intention when they attack. Their attacks affect the most vulnerable civilian population (which includes members of the Police or the

⁶⁰ Ibid., Part II-II, q. 29, a. 2.

⁶¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, q. 29, a. 1.

⁶² See: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, q. 40, a.1.

⁶³ See: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, q. 40, a.1.

Armed Forces who have been killed while resting in their homes, not in the exercise of their duties). They kill anyone, through often grisly means, and their ultimate intention is not to establish a state of law that benefits the majority, but a state of law that benefits them; even though they employ methods such as extortion, murder and dispossession of their victims. Second, one does not perceive any just cause behind their attacks. It would be just if they were defending the rights of all vulnerable people in this country; but it is precisely against them that they direct their attacks. It is fair to conclude that this is one group fighting to impose itself over another, even if it means killing its most vulnerable sisters and brothers. It is true that they seek power, wealth and social recognition that have been denied by a system that tends to some extent toward social exclusion; however, they are not the only members of Salvadoran society to be marginalized. There are more people in similar circumstances who, despite their exclusion, do not resort to the use of these criminal methods. It would be as unfair to say that all poor people are bad as to say that all the bad people are poor.

112. Third, because criminal violence is the discord created by a group that is trying to take advantage of the weak, at root it has an evil heart. That makes it a mortal sin because it is “*contrary to charity*,”⁶⁴ aggravated by its origin in the sin of pride: “*discord, whereby a man holds to his own way of thinking, and departs from that of others, is reckoned to be a daughter of vainglory*.”⁶⁵ We must not neglect to note that a number of people take advantage of this state of discord and violence to commit acts of revenge, thereby increasing the number of deaths.

113. From a Thomist perspective, criminal violence cannot be countenanced and must be combatted—but without ignoring the roots that cause it. It does us no good to attack the perpetrators of such violence if we do not pull

⁶⁴ See: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, q. 37, a.1.

⁶⁵ See: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, q. 37, a.2.

out the roots. The Salvadoran State, helped by the private sector, must promote social plans, combat impunity, create sources of employment with decent and real minimum wages—which compensate for inflation—combat the pedagogy of death and take care that cultural, social, and educational conditions will increasingly be to the benefit of a greater number of our people (even if it means bucking the neo-liberal visions in vogue, which is not being retrogressive but honest with our current situation) and not simply serve a miniscule portion of the population.

B. The Second Vatican Council

114. The Bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council recognized that *“Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice”* (GS 78). In El Salvador, as discussed here, we have had an apparent peace. Once the Peace Accords were signed, we thought that peace had arrived. We forgot that these agreements were not synonymous with peace but were only a ceasefire. This is not to start blaming each other for what was done or left undone since 1992. It is about starting now, while there is still time, to build a robust peace through the implementation of justice, heeding the call of the Conciliar Fathers to unite behind this mission, as the People of God, with the men and women of good will who form part of this nation: *“all Christians are urgently summoned to do in love what the truth requires, and to join with all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about”* (GS 78).

115. Among the solutions to the problem, *Gaudium et Spes* documents three possible paths. One, uproot *“the causes of discord among men, especially injustice, which foment wars”* (GS 83). Two, safeguard *“personal well-being ... and [let] men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner*

spirits and their talents” (GS 78) promoting, in this sense, the creation of institutions responsible for providing “*for men's different needs ... in the fields of social life—such as food supplies, health, education, labor*” (GS 84). Three, relentlessly promote “*the creation of organizations which will foster peace*” (GS 83), such as the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman in our country. But alongside this, and similar organizations that already exist, there must emerge additional movements that help “*to instruct all in fresh sentiments of peace*” (GS 82). They must fight the pedagogy of death by promoting a pedagogy of life which celebrates love of God—our National Patron is the Divine Savior of the World—love of neighbor and the practice of moral and civic values. Refusing to do so may sink our society into “*that dismal hour in which it will experience no peace other than the dreadful peace of death*” (GS 82).

116. The criteria of *Gaudium et Spes* clearly exhorts us to engage in a direct battle against the possible roots of violence in our country identified in paras. 47-62 of this letter; i.e., social exclusion, individualism, idolatry of money and impunity. This means to fight what threatens the common good; and to resist when we are “*sorely tempted to redress these insults to our human nature by violent means*” (PP 30), whose roots, in the words of our fondly remembered Pope Paul VI (applicable even though many years have passed and the world has changed), arise when “*nations ... cannot work toward a higher degree of cultural refinement or a greater participation in social and public life*” (PP 30). It is not enough to say that there are more poor people or that crime has increased. We must create new jobs and fight resolutely against the root causes of that violence. It is a task for each and every person in the country which cannot be delegated to a smaller group, passing our own responsibility onto them.

C. The Latin American Magisterium

117. The bishops of the Latin American Episcopal Conference, CELAM, in their synods held in Medellin, Puebla, Santo Domingo and Aparecida, have expressed wise words against violence and pointed out ways to overcome it, since our region has been characterized, as I discussed at the beginning, as a victim of violence either by outside nations, social elites, or, in recent years, by criminal groups.

1) Medellín

118. In 1968, the bishops of the General Conference of CELAM gathered in Medellin acknowledged that violence was one of the most serious problems in Latin America (cf. 2, 15). The origin of this violence stemmed, in their opinion, from economic structures that had allowed the impoverishment of the large majorities: *“If 'development is the new name for peace,' Latin American under-development with its own characteristics in the different countries is an unjust situation which promotes tensions that conspire against peace”* (2, 1). Indeed, underdevelopment prevented social and political inclusion of the most disadvantaged. Resolving this problem required wealth to be distributed more fairly.

119. None of the bishops thought—though many have sought to portray it this way—that violence was a viable way to solve underdevelopment. They warned the ruling classes of each country as well as the Christian faithful, tempted by poverty to resort to violence, that: *“Violence is neither Christian nor evangelical. The Christian man is peaceful and not ashamed of it. He is not simply a pacifist, for he can fight, but he prefers peace to war. He knows that 'violent changes in structures would be fallacious, ineffectual in themselves and not conforming to the dignity of man, which demands that the necessary changes take place from within, that is to say, through a fitting awakening of conscience, adequate preparation and effective participation of all, which the ignorance and*

often inhuman conditions of life make it impossible to assure at this time" " (2, 15). Unfortunately, neither political leaders nor the possessors of capital budged, at the opportune time, to design and implement plans in which social equity was paramount. Instead, their countries were plunged into civil wars that pitted brother against brother.

120. The desperate plight of the poor in the region made the practice of justice indispensable as *"a prerequisite for peace"* (2, 16). Justice was replaced by injustice whose iniquitous fruit was the institutionalized violence which the assembled bishops denounced, not to offend the political classes but to encourage them to initiate what they termed the promotion of peace: *"in many instances Latin America finds itself faced with a situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence, when, because of a structural deficiency of industry and agriculture, of national and international economy, of cultural and political life, "whole towns lack necessities, live in such dependence as hinders all initiative and responsibility as well as every possibility for cultural promotion and participation in social and political life," thus violating fundamental rights. This situation demands all-embracing, courageous, urgent and profoundly renovating transformations. We should not be surprised therefore, that the "temptation to violence" is surfacing in Latin America. One should not abuse the patience of a people that for years has borne a situation that would not be acceptable to anyone with any degree of awareness of human rights. Facing a situation which works so seriously against the dignity of man and against peace, we address ourselves, as pastors, to all the members of the Christian community and asking them to assume their responsibility in the promotion of peace in Latin America"* (2 16). They invited everyone to work for peace. That invitation continues to resound in our time, especially for us Salvadorans, as we face a new kind of violence. Let us

be part of those plans and projects that seek to eradicate violence. Let us refrain from criticizing those who willingly take up this work. I believe that if we do not work for justice and peace we should not be allowed to say: I do not cause violence! I have not killed anyone! Let us recall that the bishops in Medellin explained that: *“Also responsible for injustice are those who remain passive for fear of the sacrifice and personal risk implied by any courageous and effective action. Justice, and therefore peace, conquer by means of a dynamic action of awakening and organization of the popular sectors, which are capable of pressing public officials who are often impotent in their social projects without popular support”* (2, 18). Unity and harmony are necessary to overcome violence in our land. Division and discord must be rejected!

121. Today, we must force ourselves to review the economic, political, social and cultural structures of our country to determine whether the conditions that once allowed the emergence and establishment of institutionalized violence are still there. Time has passed and positive changes have taken place, especially since the Peace Accords. However, we have a long way to go. Injustice and exclusion, marginalization and social inequality seem to be gradually increasing, along with the temptation to resort to violence. Let us make our own the words of Bishops as they committed themselves to the promotion of peace, *“We will be able to understand their afflictions and change them, not into hate and violence, but into the strong and peaceful energy of constructive works”* (2, 19), - works by which to build up a new El Salvador.

2) Puebla

122. When the Third Episcopal Conference was held in Puebla in 1979, the bishops were conscious of the beginning of armed and ideological upheavals in some countries of the region. They called on the People of God to reflect on the dangers of resorting to violence: *“Violence inexorably engenders new forms of*

oppression and slavery, usually more serious than those from which liberation is sought to begin with. More than anything, it is an attempt against life, which belongs to the Creator. We must also emphasize that when an ideology appeals to violence, it thereby admits its own inadequacy and weakness” (Puebla, 532). This cry was not heard. Two years later, civil war broke out in our country.

123. They were pained to attest to the fact that part of the origin of such violence was due not only to extrinsic factors such as oppression, repression, torture, kidnapping, genocide, etc., which impelled it, but also to intrinsic factors; i.e. the evil in men’s hearts, as already explained by St. Paul, St. James and St. Thomas Aquinas, among others cited earlier: *“We must say and reaffirm that violence is neither Christian nor evangelical and that sudden and violent changes of structures would be deceitful, ineffective in themselves and certainly not in conformity with the dignity of the people”* (Paul VI, Address in Bogota, 8/23/68). Indeed, *“the Church is aware that the best structures and the most ideal systems will be dehumanized if the inclinations of man are not purified, if there is no conversion of heart and mind by those who live within these structures or govern them”* (Puebla, 534). We should not objectify our sin by projecting our own blame onto external factors when the source of discord is in our hearts, where we replace God with fetishes attractive to the world: power, prestige and wealth. It is imperative to eliminate these seeds of evil, which come from the heart and foster discord and violence, as the Puebla Fathers warned.

124. The paradox is that people usually claim to love God, whom they do not see, but they do not love their neighbor whom they do see (cf. 1 Jn 4:20). The bishops in Puebla devoted eight paragraphs to describing the faces of suffering in Latin America. *“Faces of children, poverty stricken before birth ... Young faces, bewildered by not finding their place in society ... Indigenous faces*

and often African Americans ... Faces of peasants who live relegated as a social group in almost all our continent ... Faces of often underpaid workers and difficulties [they face] in organiz[ing] and defend[ing] their rights; Faces of underemployed and unemployed, dismissed by the harsh demands of economic crises ... Faces of the elderly, more and more numerous, often marginalized progress society disregards people who do not produce” (cf. 32-39). Faces that should have summoned governments and the owners of capital to action and dissuaded them from being drawn into civil strife that negated the common good in society and created in the country a sea of discord that led in the end to pain and death.

125. What the bishops in Puebla said with respect to the conversion of the heart is still a valid recommendation for our time. This calls for solidarity in building structures and institutions at the service of the pedagogy of life; but it is also necessary for the conversion of hearts wounded by sin. We, too, need to examine our consciences. Even though we may not realize it, we have allowed certain patterns of violence into our minds. We have grown accustomed to using them in various contexts: personal, family, community, civic and religious. Let us carry in our hearts, given its great relevance, the recommendation of the Council Fathers: *“since the human will is unsteady and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority”* (GS 78). It is difficult, I know, especially for those now accustomed to these patterns, but the Lord promised: *“My grace is sufficient for you”* (2 Cor 12: 9).

3) Santo Domingo

126. The Fourth Episcopal Conference in Santo Domingo did not speak much about violence; but it did not neglect to mention the list of suffering faces extended by political and economic systems that are often contrary to the common

good: *“faces disfigured by hunger, as a consequence of inflation, external debt and social injustice; the faces disappointed by politicians who promise but do not deliver; faces humiliated because of their own culture, which is not respected and is even despised; faces terrorized by constant and indiscriminate violence; the anguished faces of abandoned minors who walk our streets and sleep under our bridges; the stricken faces of women, humiliated and neglected; the tired faces of migrants who do not find a worthy host; faces aged by time and work of those who have not the minimum to survive with dignity”* (Santo Domingo, 178). These faces that could not fail to call hearts to conversion and the abandonment of the iniquity that the love of riches or power produces in the more affluent. These faces exhort politicians and the owners of capital to remove those political and social structures that perpetuate social exclusion. This exclusion has gradually extended to nature. Neither plants nor animals survive on the continent because of the commercial market philosophy that swept through the land, during those years, ignoring the fact that the earth is a gift of God to humanity.

127. Santo Domingo also did not denounce the human losses that civil society and the Church, subjected to an unnamed persecution experienced as a result of the violence, but it did denounce the economic systems whose sinful structures worsened; and continue to make worse, the gap between rich and poor: *“the policy, of a neoliberal slant, which prevails today in Latin America and the Caribbean further deepens the negative consequences of these mechanisms. By indiscriminately deregulating the market, overturning important parts of labor law and dismissing workers, and cutting social spending that protected working families, the gaps in society have been deepened”* (Santo Domingo, 179).

128. Let us ask ourselves if today we are not sinning by promoting neoliberal policies that tend to exclude part of the population. We must be careful

not to be blinded regarding our well-being based on the satisfaction of needs that the market offers, as opposed to our real needs. Or if we are business owners, let us take care not to be blinded by the love of money and power. Let love for it not prevent us from being fully aware that while the needs of some are met, others are pushed to the use of violence, as we see every day, due to the lack of a welfare state that looks after their interests as much as it should. I do not underestimate the efforts made to date, which are many—but not enough. In taking this position, I do not intend, in any way, to justify the actions of criminals, much less encourage others to follow their paths. My heartfelt desire is to call political and religious leaders, the owners of capital, and the upper and middle class to a deep reflection; so they do not forget that those suffering faces are often the products of egocentric attitudes which, even when we do not practice them ourselves, we approve of in others.

129. These comments are in no way an invitation to promote a government or society of handouts, which will settle for the occasional delivery of food, toys, clothing and other donations. This welfare mentality does not dignify the human being, nor does it do away with the suffering faces, which multiply every day. Nor does it remove the roots of violence. On the other hand, work “brings together and firmly unites the wills, minds and hearts of men. In its accomplishment, men find themselves to be brothers” (PP 28). Work dignifies the person, empowers her, makes her visible, makes her feel included in society, identifies her with her Creator and, finally, with fellow human beings. An assistentialist state, despite the help that it generously provides, does not restore people’s self-worth; and indeed it obstructs their self-fulfillment. If we truly want to be rid of violence, let us attack the roots that produce it, distributing wealth equitably and creating jobs with a real minimum wage.

4) Aparecida

130. The bishops in Aparecida expressed their desire “*To make this continent a model of reconciliation, justice and peace;*”⁶⁶ and in pursuit of this ambition they denounced various aspects of our societies that continue pushing the poorest towards the terrible temptation of violence. I wish to single out a few of these aspects.

131. First, they denounced that the common good was compromised by the defense of personal and selfish interests: there is “*a tendency toward extreme affirmation of individual and subjective rights. This search is pragmatic and limited to the moment with no concern for ethical criteria. Claiming individual and subjective rights, without a similar effort to guarantee social, cultural, and solidarity rights undermines the dignity of all, especially the poorest and most vulnerable*” (DA 47). This type of argument has led our country to open the door to an economic system that frequently prevents state intervention to impose market rules, going to the point—if it is allowed—of privatizing those resources which God created for the use of all (e.g., water). They shift their taxes onto the poor; they themselves evade the tax collector; they delay paying their taxes—among other practices that ensure the protection of their individual rights but violate the rights of workers, consequently damaging social well-being. On the other hand, it has led our country to almost legalize abortion; to consider a return to the death penalty; to neglect the elderly in our family; to allow the transmission of extreme violence and pornography through various media without considering the damage we cause in children, adolescents and young adults. Finally, the idolatry of money or power has led our country to a heartbreaking violence in

⁶⁶ Aparecida document, "Final Message", introduction, par. 5(m).

which a small number want to impose their ideas and meet their needs at the expense of others.

132. Behind this problem lies a hedonistic culture: *“characterized by the self-reference of the individual, which leads to indifference toward the other, whom one does not need and for whom one does not feel responsible. There is a tendency to live day by day, with no long-term designs, and no personal, family, and community attachments. Human relations are regarded as consumption goods, leading to emotional relations without responsible and final commitment”* (DA 46). Behind this culture there are market policies vying to create false needs among people: *“Advertising creates the illusion of distant make-believe worlds where every desire can be satisfied by products that are of an effective, ephemeral, and even messianic nature. The notion that desires should turn into happiness is condoned. Since only the here-and-now is needed, happiness is sought through economic well-being and hedonistic satisfaction”* (DA 50). In such a world there is no time for the other. There is almost no time to think of the faces of the suffering. There is no time to remember that while we spend our money on superfluous things, others are excluded from these opportunities. There is no time to think about the common good. Let us bear in mind, dear brothers and sisters, that man was not made for culture but culture for man. Humanity creates culture therefore it can govern it. It is not a slave to it.

133. Second, the bishops denounced globalization: *“Led by a tendency that prizes profit and stimulates competition, globalization entails a process of concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few, not only of physical and monetary resources, but especially of information and human resources. The upshot is the exclusion of all those not sufficiently trained and informed, thereby augmenting the inequalities that sadly characterizes our continent and that keep large numbers of people in poverty”* (DA 62). This is why I said that policy

makers and the economic leaders of our country need to be honest about the exclusion, social inequality and disempowerment that leads to good number of people to violence as a last resort. They must promote an economy which allows the inclusion of those people, by creating more jobs, even if it goes against the grain of current economic systems, or perhaps against their interests by reducing their profits. Let them be honest and accept that just as social exclusion favors violence, so too, the love of money or power leads to exclusion. Consequently, by fighting against these forms of fetishism we would be dealing with exclusion and violence once and for all. Perhaps, this will require that social classes with the greatest economic resources will have to go without the income levels they have grown accustomed to. Perhaps, they will have to do without certain amenities that they have gained. But it will result in a good for the nation: avoiding a possible social war.

134. This is not to have a negative view of reality or say that we are on the brink of an apocalyptic end, but to be realistic faced with our reality. Violence increases daily; so too, the number of poor. Therefore, this social malaise, sooner or later, will find some escape valve. Many years ago, my predecessors Archbishop Jose Alfonso Beloso y Sanchez and Archbishop Luis Chavez y Gonzales made the same call. They pleaded for a more equitable distribution of wealth and land reform to provide for the livelihoods of the poorest of this country. Their calls were ignored and war exploded, snatching the lives of thousands of Salvadoran men and women, foreigners living in our country and not forgetting the lives of two bishops: Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero and Bishop Roberto Ramos. Let us not repeat today those attitudes, which were so contrary to the common good. Let us not substitute God with other gods. Let us not allow individualism and selfishness to rush our country into another war,

because if the current violence is very painful, how much more so would an open, declared war be.

135. Third, their words, which, for space reasons, I paraphrase here, denounced the fact that the list of suffering faces has increased and diversified significantly: *“the indigenous and Afro-American communities ... many women who are excluded because of their sex, race, or socioeconomic situation; young people who receive a poor education and have no opportunities to advance in their studies or to enter into the labor market so as to move ahead and establish a family; many poor people, unemployed, migrants, displaced, landless peasants ... boys and girls subjected to child prostitution, often linked to sex tourism; also children victims of abortion. Millions of people and families live in dire poverty and even go hungry. We are also concerned about those addicted to drugs, differently-abled people, bearers and victims of serious diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV-AIDS, who suffer from loneliness, and are excluded from family and community life. Nor do we forget those who are kidnapped and the victims of violence, terrorism, armed conflicts, and public insecurity; likewise the elderly ... [and] the inhuman situation of the vast majority of prisoners, who also need us to stand with them and provide fraternal aid”* (DA 65).

136. An endless list has emerged, as the Bishops well recognized, not only through the oppression and exploitation that occurred in the twentieth century but also through a new phenomenon, I cannot omit to point out, my dear brothers and sisters, happening in our country: the social exclusion in which: *“one is no longer on the bottom, on the margins, or powerless, but rather one is living outside. The excluded are not simply "exploited" but "surplus" and "disposable”* (DA 65). One day we will be judged on love, and hear the words directed to us in sadness by our gentle Pastor: *“whatever you did for one of these least brothers of*

mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:45). The most important thing for God is love of neighbor, which must equal the love we feel for ourselves (cf. Lk 22:39).

137. Finally, they denounced a multiplicity of causes of violence that I will only mention briefly because I dealt with them in the first part of this Letter: “*worship of money, the advance of an individualistic and utilitarian ideology, disrespect for the dignity of each person, a deterioration of the social fabric, corruption even of law-enforcement entities, and lack of government policies of social justice*” (DA 78). All that is left for me to do, then, is to ask you: Let us unite to work with force and creativity against violence and its roots.

d. Some final considerations

138. By way of epilogue I summarize here some of the key points I have made about violence in the first and second part of this Charter.

139. **First:** the origin of violence in El Salvador sinks its roots into the past. Our conquest was marked by violence; it was an exceedingly violent colonization process; a society made independent from the Spanish power continued in violence, legitimizing it with a legal apparatus; liberation struggles that were violently quashed (in 1832 and 1932) despite the fact that they were undergirded by interests of the common good that were being assaulted by a minority; and, finally, a civil war with ideological overtones that sought to achieve a fair standard of equity, and social and political participation for all a conflict which ended at the negotiating table; but it did not remove the roots that led to war: “*true peace is never simply the result of military victory, but rather implies both the removal of the causes of war and genuine reconciliation between peoples*” (CA 18). Our history has been one marked by violence that we cannot allow to go on any longer; but along with this, our history has been marked by the existence of injustices that *Gaudium et Spes* counsels us to eradicate.

140. **Second:** Our country needs to be cleansed from the wounds of the past by combating impunity in two respects, for which the starting point must be the Peace Accords. **Toward the past:** It would be very good to have historical trials, not to condemn the dead in their graves—nor their living descendants— but to vindicate the victims and to know their victimizers, in order that others not feel encouraged to commit the same injustices. Perhaps this will involve demystifying many of our emblematic figures and role models, but it will be, at the same time, the effort of a nation to walk in the truth because the truth alone will set us free. **Towards the present:** this would involve opening trials against those who carry out the crimes as well as against those who design them.

141. **Third:** Violence in our country has diversified itself, a phenomenon that cannot be ignored because the numbers are increasing daily. These numbers are not produced only by criminals but by others who exploit the situation of discord and violence to carry out their own vendettas. This phenomenon should encourage us to snap into action immediately.

142. **Fourth:** We must create organizations that will strive with courage and determination against the pedagogy of death that permeates all the country's institutions, sometimes in disguised form. In its place, we should help create pacifist thinking which will come through a pedagogy of life. It is urgent to do so because otherwise the new generations will continue to pick up and learn the culture of violence that has characterized us from yesteryear. We cannot allow them to replicate the old patterns of death, now that we know the pain generated by this terrible scourge that plagues us daily.

143. **Fifth:** The fight against violence is synonymous with fighting the root causes behind it: social exclusion, idolatry of money, impunity and individualism. Here, it is important for me to pause to explain a point that I think might be controversial. In the first part, I have ranked the problem of social

exclusion as a primary cause of violence. **Let me stress:** Causes of violence. I have not addressed the causes of social exclusion in this Letter because the issue is so extensive that it would lend itself to the composing of another separate Letter. However, I would venture to say that the causes of social exclusion are primarily—in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola⁶⁷—the three steps that the ruler of Babylon invites his followers to climb: wealth, honor and pride. These are the three steps which, in the view of the Saint of Loyola, lead to the commission of all other vices. They are steps that Bl. Archbishop Romero described in several of his homilies and letters, as the worship of Mammon. No further explanation is necessary to understand that the fight against social exclusion is a struggle to come down the stairway of sin; climbing instead the three steps that our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ calls us to climb: poverty, humility and contempt for the privileges of the world. Or in other words: to end exclusion, which requires the abandonment of fetishism of money and power, pursued and achieved through political and economic means. To eliminate this will not only end exclusion—ergo, violence—but also other problems facing our country.

144. **Finally:** Let us all unite against violence. We cannot say that we do not contribute to it - because we all produce violence at some level, be it national, personal, family, community, or universal.

⁶⁷ Taken from the Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

PART THREE PUT YOUR SWORD BACK INTO ITS SHEATH

145. As this is the last section of this Letter, I wish to appeal to all Salvadorans to be promoters and builders of peace in a climate of hope and Christian mercy. Pope Francis reminded us on December 14 last year that God “needs men and women of hope, even in the midst of problems [because] hope opens horizons, hope is freeing, it does not enslave and it always finds a way to set a situation straight” (Mass in Santa Marta). I understand that the violence is painful. It produces countless victims every day and leaves their families in pain. The road seems insurmountable, but we cannot fall into despair, such as that reflected in the January 2016 IUDOP survey results. We are called to be men and women of hope with the creative ability to find viable solutions to the scourge that afflicts us.

146. Hope does not mean to live in a dream world or in the virtual reality presented by the fictional game world. It means placing ourselves in our time and social reality with faith in God to find the paths of solution for a reality to which we cannot close our eyes. The work must begin within each of us, while we simultaneously work for peace in our family, community and country. Pope Paul VI counseled in an apostolic exhortation, “Peace, therefore, actually begins within you, so that when you are peaceful, you will bring peace to others ... [The work against] violence cannot be delayed any longer nor can it be relegated to a small group within society as we might discharge our responsibility to clean the city or take care of nature, positing that municipal governments are the ones charged with cleaning or taking care of the ornamentation”.⁶⁸

147. Together with hope (in this Jubilee year) we must have mercy. It will help us overcome the roots that cause violence—and social exclusion—as

⁶⁸ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation [*Paterna Cum Benevolentia*], to the Episcopate, to the Clergy, and to the Faithful all over the world, On Reconciliation within the Church, par. 10.

explained by the Holy Father Francis in the Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*: “*It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty*” (at par. 15). It is one way to discover the world of social exclusion in our country which drives a segment of the population to use violence. Mercy—we hope—will be the way to hear the clamor of God in poor. If we heed that call we will prevent more people from joining the criminal groups in which they hope to find the recognition that society denies them. I do not intend to imply that the criminals are the victims. Yet, we must recognize that there is a social, economic and political situation that has pushed some to join criminal enterprises. On the other hand, some people fall into criminal enterprises because they experience an absence of God which springs iniquity in their hearts. In light of this, as I explained in other paragraphs, the fight against exclusion as a cause of violence will involve eradicating its causes. I propose two models or paradigms to follow in our personal, family, community and social life, in order to overcome both the patterns of violence introjected in our being, as well as the patterns of violence to which we are exposed in our daily lives. These models will help us return the sword of violence to its sheath. Let us, as Christians, bear witness that it is possible to live in fraternity—as sons and daughters of God; brothers and sisters in God—without any violence.

**I. The Eucharistic Jesus:
The Fullness of Fraternity**

148. The Eucharist is considered in our church as “*the center and summit*” of the sacraments (AG 9), and thus “*the fount and apex of the whole Christian life*” (LG 11). The mystery of this sacrament is as a source of inexhaustible wealth through which humanity reaches communion with God and is unified into one people around the banquet table. From my days as a priest, before being undeservedly named a bishop, I have believed, as I do today, that the

Eucharist is the utmost celebration in our Church. I placed both species in my shield on my episcopal consecration—in which the priest becomes another Christ, inviting the people to the fullness of fraternity. I have no doubt that the Eucharistic mystery can help us overcome all divisions, selfishness, envy, resentment, revenge, pride, and idolatry of money, if we understand its ineffable mystery. I will try to explain briefly why I think this and why I believe that the celebration of this sacrament may be the greatest model of life at our disposal, to achieve peace in our country.

**The Eucharist:
An invitation for everyone**

149. The sacrament of the Eucharist is a celebration to which all of us who call ourselves members of the Church are invited to participate, bound to her bosom by the sacrament of Baptism. Jesus gave us an example of this the night he celebrated the Passover with his disciples.

150. The gospel writers tell us that Jesus sent his disciples on the day of the unleavened bread, to prepare the Passover (Mt 26:17-19; Mk 14:12-16; Lk 22:7-13). When the hour came, he sat at the table with the twelve. None of the Gospel authors says that Jesus asked that Judas Iscariot be excluded from the celebration, even when they relate some episodes wherein Judas mutters about and sells his Master, even before they went about the preparations for the Passover. The first of these episodes is the anointing of Jesus at Bethany (Jn 12:1-11). Saint John, like the other evangelists, reports that Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with a pound of ointment of untainted nard, stressing that it was very expensive. Iscariot, annoyed or envious of this gesture for his master, muttered a few words of resentment: *“Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days’ wages and given to the poor?”* To which John adds: *“He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief and held the money bag and used*

to steal the contributions.” That is, Judas Iscariot did not have his heart set on God but on money.

151. The Fathers of the Church used to brand as *a thief and a plunderer* anyone who, having money, hoarded it for himself denying alms the poor, which they were due in justice. Not that Judas was a thief. He was a disciple of Christ, invited to establish the Kingdom here on earth, to lead the people to the heavenly Jerusalem; but he loved money or maybe idolized it to the point of taking from the poor what rightfully belonged to them and selling his Master for a few coins. This made him into a thief. Offended by the anointing of Jesus, he went to the high priests, who were conspiring against his Master (Mt 26: 1-5), to turn him over. His incentive was thirty silver coins and the restiveness of his heart. He lost the peace of Christ while *“he looked for an opportunity to hand him over”* (Mt 26:16). Another evangelist says that Satan came into him (Lk 22:3), to indicate that it was no longer God who dwelt in him but an idol of evil and death. Thirty coins were worth more than the Son of God to him. Even so, Jesus invited Judas to the celebration of Passover.

152. He invited him in order to symbolize that each and everyone is invited to celebrate the Lord's Supper, even sinners when, repenting, they approach the table of the Lord, to commune with Him. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: *“all who eat the one broken bread, Christ, enter into communion with him and form but one body in him”* (Catechism 1329). That is what Jesus expected of Judas, as he expects it of us and that is why he invites us. To form one body in full communion with Him.

**The Eucharist:
An invitation to reconciliation**

153. The Eucharist is the great light that always illuminates us, even in the midst of our darkness. Even though we may be going through a great dark

tunnel at this moment in history, now is when we should be drawing closer to the Eucharistic Jesus, drawing nourishment from His Body, illuminating ourselves from His Word, strengthening ourselves with his Spirit. The Lord is our Shepherd, let us put our trust in Him and we will not be disappointed. Let us say with the Psalmist, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”* (Ps 22:4).

154. I want the words spoken by the priest—a phrase from my shield and my pastoral ministry as a Bishop: **Take this, all of you, and drink from it** (*“Take this, all of you, and eat it/Take this, all of you, and drink from it”*)—to define my apostolic action, to bring everyone to Jesus. For those beautiful words, *“Take this, all of you, and drink from it,”* refer to everyone, without exception, because Christ came for all. He wants all of us to be with Him. Not some, not some others, but everyone; the bishop looks after everyone. God wants us all sitting at his table, he wants us all in his kingdom, without exception. He wants the conversion and salvation of the sinner, not his condemnation.

155. Let us participate, each and all, of the Eucharist. God wants us there even if we feel unworthy. It is precisely the patients that he came for: *“Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners”* (Mk 2:17). Pope Francis, inviting everyone to partake in the Lord’s Supper, reminds us: *“The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak”* (EG 47). He reminds us shepherds that confession should be the time where the flock finds inner peace, oil to heal their wounds and understanding: *“I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best”* (EG 44) and enables us to participate in the Eucharist.

156. The Eucharist is therefore an invitation to reconcile ourselves; to leave behind idolatries to false gods, envies, resentments, hatreds, thirst for revenge, among other vices that lead to violence in any form. According to St. John, it was that night when Jesus told his disciples: *“I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (Jn 13:34-35). It is vital to be reconciled with myself, with others and with God to participate in the Divine Mystery. Some would say, today, that this message is valid only for those in the Church or who observe a conduct more or less faithful to the Gospel; but not for criminals. But I say to you, that even if we cannot evangelize these people because we do not have access to them, or because they reject the message of love and mercy that God has reserved for them, let us try to convince them with our fraternal testimony of life. Let them, like the ancient Romans, say to one another upon seeing Christians: *See how they love each other!* May that impel them to seek the reconciliation that our Good Shepherd offers, and the love that He dispenses us in our brothers and sisters.

**The Eucharist:
An invitation to be servants of others**

157. In the second part, I explained that Cain was moved to fratricidal violence against his brother by his desire for domination. He wanted to dominate his brother Abel and God, whom he felt he could not control. Our Lord Jesus Christ challenged the desire for domination that humans exhibit when rather than serve God, they would serve another master, be it money or power. He said to his disciples, *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever*

wishes to be first among you shall be your slave” (Mt 20:25-27). He maintained the coherence between his life with his words, and showed us how to do likewise.

158. Saint John, in his Gospel, narrates a gesture closely related to the Eucharist that occurred during the dinner. Jesus “*rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist*” (Jn 13:4-5). It was a gesture of love; but above all, it was a gesture of humility and abasement—which mirrored his earlier action in the Incarnation—in which he became a servant of his own disciples. Jesus’ attitude of service is contrary to the attitude of Judas Iscariot because each served different masters. The teaching of Jesus is clear on this point: He who wants to participate in the Eucharist must serve God in others; that is, in his neighbor. Judas did not serve the God of Jesus but the god of money. Money does not allow its servants to serve others but demands to be served by others. It does not kneel to wash the feet of his neighbor. He wants his neighbor to wash his feet. That is why Judas could not tolerate the attitude of Jesus. He did not learn the lesson that his Master gave him from the desert: Jesus would not prostrate himself to the three gods presented to him there: Glory, Wealth and Power. Jesus knelt before the image of God: the human being, to show us that we must serve one another.

159. Schökel explains this Johannine passage in a very special way. I transcribe his explanation because I think that it can help us understand why the Eucharist should be understood by Salvadorans as an invitation to service: “*The washing of the feet is a revelation, a revolution and a challenge. Revelation: This is not a haphazard occurrence, but the supreme teaching: it is love that becomes servant and slave, kneels before humanity, willing to die on the cross every day, renouncing itself, giving its life. Revolution: he cannot allow any person to put themselves on top, that they violate, or oppress another with injustice. If God*

kneels before humanity and washes their feet, no human being—no matter how much of a lord they may be—has the right to dominate another and strip him of his human dignity. Challenge: this example should be followed by the Church, which out of love for Jesus should look solicitously to the poorest and become poor with them.” Upon instituting the Holy Eucharist and dying on the cross like a vile criminal, Jesus served the whole of humanity. There is no greater example of humility and service than that given by the Master on the cross. Kneeling before a human being is a sign of the infinite love he has for us. None of us, then, has the right—as Schökel says—to take away the dignity of another, either by the institution of laws that violate the rights of the poorest, pushing them to social exclusion, marginalization and invisibility; or through violent means like those employed by criminal groups who wish to gain recognition, money and power by illegal methods, contradicting any rule of fraternal coexistence. Finally, if we are members of the Church, if we call ourselves Christians, let us work in the cause for the poor not to give them handouts, but to create an economic system that fosters laws for social welfare and inclusion which protect the poorest and the excluded, recognizing their rights and thus their human dignity. If we do this, we will understand that the Eucharist is an invitation to serve others; and therefore it prevents us from serving ourselves from others. We also have understood that the relations of domination where a few have served themselves from the majority in our country must be uprooted because it is a seed of violence and discord. It is time to banish in ourselves those behaviors that have plunged our country into suffering and death.

**The Eucharist:
Fraternal celebration of the now, but not yet**

160. Jesus, in His infinite love for us, instituted the Holy Eucharist to allow us to enjoy from *now* on, while we are still on earth, the first fruits of the

Kingdom or the New Jerusalem of which we are *not yet* part, when all come together to be present at the wedding feast of the Lamb. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clarifies that one of the names of this sacrament is “*The Lord's Supper, because of its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his Passion and because it anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem*” (1329).

161. The pilgrim Church enjoys the possibility of joining the Church in heaven thereby signifying that one day we will all be together forming the great family of God. When we stop attending the Eucharist, we lose the opportunity not only to enter into communion with Jesus and our brothers and sisters, but also to enter into communion with those who have preceded us to heaven where they already enjoy the ultimate peace in the Lord: “*Celebrating the Eucharistic sacrifice therefore, we are most closely united to the Church in heaven in communion with and venerating the memory first of all of the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, of Blessed Joseph and the blessed apostles and martyrs and of all the saints*” (LG 50).

162. The Eucharist is, then, the agape where Salvadorans can and must fraternally celebrate the presence of the Kingdom among us. We must be signs of the Kingdom, when we become peacemakers and promoters of peace; when we become members of the Church who fight against the signs of the anti-kingdom whose fruits are iniquity and death; when we become subjects of our history and confront everything that prevents the fraternal experience of the sons and daughters of God, and when we transform the pedagogy of death into the pedagogy of life for those around us, and for ourselves.

**The Eucharist:
An invitation to living the Gospel**

163. The preceding requires that we as Christians should not forget that the celebration of the Eucharist is not something that ends when the priest gives the blessing and everyone returns to their home. The Eucharist encompasses the coherence between faith and life: “*the partaking of the body and blood of Christ does nothing other than make us be transformed into that which we consume*” (LG 26). Whoever eats the body of Christ and drink his blood must undergo in themselves, little by little, a process of conversion or transfiguration we would say—because our patron is the Divine Savior of the World—to become more like Jesus. If we attend the Lord's Supper, we cannot remain the same. Taking his body and his blood compels us to the daily living of the Gospel. Therefore, the Council says that participation in this mystery transforms us into that which we consume; that is, it causes us to resemble another Christ, whom we are invited to follow. We will be his reflection to the extent that we imitate the pedagogy of peace, of life and of the love that always characterized him.

164. After the Last Supper, Jesus went to Gethsemane taking Peter, James and John with him (cf. Mk 14:32-33). While he prayed, the Jewish authorities arrived accompanied by Judas Iscariot. Peter drew his sword and struck a blow to the ear of Malchus (Jn 18:10). Immediately, Jesus invited Peter to imitate Him, to be witness to peace, fraternity, tolerance and forgiveness. He said, “*Put your sword back into its sheath*” (Mt 26:52). He asks, not for violence against the violent, but to turn the other cheek. He explains that if he wanted to, he could resort to armed violence; but he does not do it, not because he cannot, but because violence begets violence, grief and death: “*Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels?*” (Mt 26:53). He did not bring violence but the paths of

peace as Zacharias had exulted in his song (cf. Lk 1:79). He practiced what he preached, even in the most crucial moment of his life.

165. A few hours earlier, he had washed their feet, had given them His Body and His Blood and Peter still had not understood that he should be as his Master? That he must serve the other to the extreme of giving his life, if necessary? Had he not understood that no one can take the life of another? Had he not understood that having taken the body and drank the blood of Jesus, he had to do violence to himself, taking up his cross and dying on it at the hands of others? We cannot say that we take the body and blood of Christ and act in a manner contradictory to him because that would make the Eucharist a ritual devoid of meaning for us. Father Rutilio Grande explained in the homily of the third festival of the corn, on August 15, 1976—in that folksy and plain language that characterized him when he would address his beloved people of Aguilares—that the Eucharist is *“the quintessence of Christianity: so my friends, I say to you that this will be the hallmark of those who become committed. That they have understood the essence of the Eucharist as the quintessence of the Christian values: the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. That is, this profound change of dying to oneself and bringing out what is new that transforms humanity ... it is not enough to come here with senseless rites, as if you were going to take a piece of angel food cake in your mouth and go out there to pray the Magnificat to find your missing ox. That is detestable, it is a caricature of religion. Life is the Eucharist. We have said that all this is linked to the Gospel, to life.”*

166. *Life is the Eucharist*, Father Rutilio said. The signs that are manifested there: solidarity, unity, brotherhood, reconciliation, forgiveness, love, life and peace must be translated into the daily life of a Christian. How I can participate in the feast of love and continue the violence against my family? How I can participate in the banquet and manifest violence against the ecosystem?

Against children, usually from my own home? Against women? Against my workers? Against my subordinates? Against my students? Against the elderly? How I can partake of the Lord's Supper and continue worshiping other gods? Is that not hypocrisy? Is that not a false living of the Gospel and a false practice of the Eucharist?

In conclusion:

167. The Eucharist is the fullness of fraternity because it denounces through its signs, in its rite of celebration, all kinds of non-fraternity of that criminal groups, as well as those groups in society that are not fighting for justice or for the implementation of an economy of more solidarity and inclusion, practice in their daily lives. If we are Christians, let us truly live in the fullness of fraternity to which we have been invited by our Lord Jesus Christ, by fighting against violence from its deepest roots. Let us not exclude ourselves from the banquet, as did one of his disciples, because He never tires of inviting us to his table with these words that include us all: TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND EAT IT!

**II. Mary: Model of fraternity
The handmaiden who lives fraternity**

168. Saint Luke is the only evangelist who narrates the beautiful action of fraternity of Mary with her cousin Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel announces the birth of Jesus together with the news of her elderly cousin's pregnancy. Nothing stopped Mary's—not her own pregnancy, not Joseph, nor any of the dangers she could face in her journey. The evangelist does not specify the name of the town where the wife of Zechariah lived; but it is very likely that it was somewhat far Nazareth. Even so, Luke writes: "*During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah*" (Lk 1:39). The distance to the place

was promptly crossed by Mary, as if she herself were the one in need, in order to share cousin's joy with her pregnancy and to help with whatever may be needed.

169. It was a gesture of supreme fraternity. Mary was not called by Elizabeth. She went on her own initiative. It is she who offers her help, her love and solidarity: "*Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home*" (Lk 1:56). How solicitously she must have cared for her cousin and the newborn! Obviously, she learned this sense of fraternity at home with her family. Her father and mother let her go because they were surely the models of fraternity that the maiden of Nazareth emulated. Her attitude is a call to us, to be sons and daughters of God who care fraternally for their sisters and brothers because that is what the Divine Savior of the world expects us to do. It is also a call for us to be models of fraternity so that those and those who stain with discord the fraternal relations that should prevail in our country may imitate us, knowing that our model is Mary of Nazareth.

**The Mother:
Master-Disciple of Jesus in fraternity**

170. Mary learned at home to live in solidarity and to maintain fraternal relations with all those around her, teaching her son Jesus to do the same. Mary was a teacher and a disciple of Jesus, something that stands out in two passages of the Gospels. The first appears in the fourth Gospel: St. John tells us that Mary and Jesus were invited to a wedding in Cana, in Galilee. It was surely a newly married couple who celebrated their wedding with simplicity. The wine ran out and they had no way to get more. Mary, attentive to the needs of others, told her son: "*They have no wine*" (Jn 2:3). In other words, she asked her son for a gesture of fraternal solidarity with this poor couple, who with sacrifices, as you can imagine, made preparations for their wedding, thinking that the wine they had purchased would be enough. Jesus, for his part, did not disobey his mother. He knew well that this

was her spirit and that she asked him to be likewise in generosity and fraternity. Only mothers and fathers can put that seed of brotherly love in their children because the home is the first school for them. Let parents always imitate the behavior of Mary. Do not delegate your responsibilities to other institutions. Some trust that the school or the church will put that seed in their children when they begin their studies or attend catechesis, overlooking the fact that the first school is the home. The other institutions are responsible for the children's formation, but if the first educators were not models of fraternity, it will be harder for their children to learn what they were never taught at home.

171. The second passage is from Luke. It is Jesus on the cross. After being whipped, beaten, spat upon, insulted with offensive expletives, crowned with thorns and nailed to the cross, he does not ask for vengeance, and neither does his mother. When we read this episode from Luke, we can imagine Mary lost in tears, unable to utter a word. The lacerated and naked body of her son overwhelms her in pain. It is Jesus who then declares in a loud voice, doubtlessly to reassure his mother: "*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do*" (Lk 23:34). At this moment, Mary becomes a disciple of Jesus in full fellowship with sinful humanity. It is her son who asks her to forgive, evoking in her mind the words of Simeon, "*and you yourself a sword will pierce*" (Lk 2:35), thus becoming a co-redeemer with Him. What infinite love for fellow man! He died in peace; he died forgiving mankind, bringing to life the fraternity of daughters and sons of God to which we are called to live. With those words, Jesus—who had no need of it—reconciled Himself with the world, reconciling the world to God. Consequently, if we imitate Mary and her son, the world will be reconciled, we will be reconciled with him and all will be reconciled with God.

172. Let us learn and teach our children that we need forgiveness and solidarity in order to have fraternity. Revenge and violence must be banished from our relationships with others because they perpetuate and prevent fraternity, filling the environment with discord and annulling peace.

Assumed Queen and Mother who watches over the fraternity of her children

173. Finally, I want to conclude by recalling that, when Mary was taken up to heaven, she did not forget their children on earth. Our Mother Church has been blessed, enlightened and strengthened by the Marian apparitions in different parts of the world. In her appearances the Virgin Mary has asked for our fraternal communal coexistence with our fellow human beings, for penance and for the recitation of the Rosary. It is a sign of her concern for us and of the vision that God has for us: To be a great family—the family of God. Let us always bear this in our hearts: Jesus in the Eucharist is the fullness of fraternity, and Mary is our model to build a fraternal, violence-free El Salvador.

FINAL EXHORTATION

174. In concluding this Letter I wish to address:

175. The Catholic people, to our brothers and sisters of other religious denominations, to men and women of goodwill: to encourage you to resist with your hope fixed in the Lord. I know the current state of strife and violence appears to be a dark cloud that prevents us from seeing the light; but it is not so. He promised us: *“I am with you always, until the end of the age”* (Mt 28:20). We are a noble, hardworking, cheerful, friendly, peace-loving, caring, understanding, tolerant and forgiving promptly people. This is a people whom I love and whom encourage to continue as I have encouraged so far: to pray and work for peace in their homes. However, let us be vigilant that violence does not come into our hearts, into your families, into your labor relations, into your leisure time, into your parish communities, institutions of study and in all other activities that go on. And if violence has entered one way or another, let us banish it, obeying the command of the Lord: *“I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (Jn 13:34-35).

176. To the apostolic movements and associations, ecclesial communities and base communities, to lay missionaries and all pastoral agents. I want to express our gratitude for all the good they do and at the same time ask them to continue with their apostolic work, integrated into parish and diocesan pastoral ministry. From the faith and without neglecting your evangelizing work, may you work tirelessly for peace, fighting for justice, in defense of the rights of victims. May they raise awareness of the need for all to work in achieving peace.

177. To the rulers: to ask—but, not before congratulating your efforts made to date—not to immerse yourselves in partisan or ideological conflicts

among yourselves, but to ensure the common good, for the welfare of the majority. May you design policies that develop a state of social wellbeing that removes from the people any temptation to resort to violence. May you make El Salvador a totally inclusive country and banish social exclusion and inequality.

178. To those who hold economic power: to beg you for an economy with more solidarity, not throw-away minded, and against the grain with neo-liberal models that allow the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few. May you create more jobs rather than increasing layoffs, including of young people, young adults, adults and even seniors. Perhaps this will mean a reduction in profits for you; but God, incarnate in the poor, will repay you. They will have work and, consequently, enough to support their families to survive, not at mere subsistence levels, but in dignified conditions. May their needs for food, health, housing, education, recreation, a pension system, among others, be provided for with standards of quality, through a salary that meets the demands of today. By providing more jobs you will make sure that more and more people do not enter the criminal structures of this country.

179. To those in charge of the legal system: to ask you not to allow impunity and injustice in any form. Do not be partial when applying the law, but assure that there is true justice. Such practices only cause you to lose credibility, and encourage others to commit crimes.

180. To the security forces: first, to stand in solidarity with you and your families for the loss of so many of your members in this fight against violence. Second, to encourage you to continue caring for and protecting the people. God will reward you, and your Salvadoran brothers and sisters will be grateful. I also ask you to monitor that injustice does not penetrate your ranks and not to allow corruption among your members.

181. To the middle class, that has stable and reliable living conditions, so that you may be in solidarity with the most poor. Remember that they are lacking many things of which you have left-overs: “*whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me*” (Mt 25:40). Do not squander your assets in things that are superfluous.

182. To educators so that you may foster moral and civic values in your students, which promote a friendly climate in interpersonal relations. You can help raise awareness among your students’ families on the need to do away with violence by teaching them that dialogue is the right way to solve interpersonal conflicts. Finally, may you encourage the pedagogy of life, of love and of care for nature through school gardens and reforestation projects.

183. To the indigenous people: to ask you for forgiveness for our treatment, that is often one of exclusion. We need to learn from you the love that unites you with Mother Earth and the cosmos, as well as the very supportive bonds of coexistence of your culture.

184. To our Catholic education centers, to our Catholic schools, to our universities of Catholic or Christian inspiration: I appreciate everything you have done and continue to do to form our Salvadoran children and youth in the best way. I ask you not to lose heart or collapse into fatigue; but rather to intensify efforts to form protagonists of cultural change. Make every effort not only to provide the best quality scientific education in your institutions, but most of all to develop people of great human and Christian qualities that are truly authentic and who possess the ability to play a part in the transformation of our society, changing it from a society with a culture of death to a society with a culture of life, a truly just society that overcomes social exclusion in all its members, which does away with the idolatry of money, individualism and impunity. Let us be

concerned with forming our future political leaders in even better and more genuine ways, so that they may serve society from politics with a truly righteous spirit committed to the common good.

185. To young people: to encourage you to follow the ways of the Lord. Shun violence, foster relationships between you that are full of respect and fraternity. Do not be swayed by programs, movies, games or forms of entertainment that undermine harmony, unity and peace among human beings. Be active some parish or church youth group to which you belong. Follow the example of the Apostle John. At an early age he left everything to follow the Lord, becoming a fisher of men. In his following after the Shepherd, he lost nothing, everything was a gain: *“everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life”* (Mt 19:29). Follow Jesus, the Master! Cultivate your faith and all human and Christian values so that you may respond in the best way to the great challenge of creating a new society—a more just and peaceful society.

186. To the victims of violence, both of the armed conflict, as well as the current situation of violence, and also including all Victims of violence throughout our national history: to all I express my full solidarity with the demand for the just redress of grievances, and our commitment to provide our full support to obtain justice fulfilled in your favor, in the process of restoration and healing of the social fabric which our country must carry out. Rest assured that the Church, in her nature as a mother, will always accompany you and make common cause with you. And God, who is infinitely just, will do justice blessing you and being infinitely just, He wills that we, too the—Salvadoran people—do justice by you.

187. To migrants I also express my closeness and full support in this terrible Via Crucis that you must live in your exodus, risking all kinds of

violations of your human rights, and our full support to demand that your rights are respected and that you always receive the dignified treatment you deserve.

188. To those sheep in the shadows: to ask for your conversion and distancing from the paths of violence and crime to which you have turned. Jesus desires your conversion. In this Year of Mercy he offers you through the Church His loving hand to heal your wounds and take up once more the path of love, peace and brotherhood that He taught us through his life, death and resurrection. He forgave Dismas, the thief. He will forgive you, also, if you seek him with repentance.

189. To the priests: my beloved brothers, I ask you to continue to accompany the people in their pain, especially our brothers who are suffering the most, as you have done up through today. Encourage them to wait on the Lord, console them in their pain, denounce those actions that can be detonators of violence within their parish communities and preach the Good News, that a world of peace and fraternity is possible if we all unite for its construction. Carry forward all possible initiatives that enhance and enable in your parish community in a cultural change so that we move from the culture of death to a culture of life, from a culture of violence to a culture of peace. Let us form the children, the youth and adults in this new mentality. I encourage you to encourage reflection on topics aimed at the prevention of violence and the opening of schools of theology for profound meditation on current issues from the Word, Tradition and the Magisterium to help lay men and women know how respond, from a Christian position, to historical reality that they have had to live. May you establish courses and Bible circles that allow our brothers to study and increasingly put into practice the Word. Let us favor human development in every parish and if possible try to have an office to ensure the human rights of the most poor. May

you help the laity understand that faith does not ignore the historical reality—the time and space in which we are called to live. Rather, “*faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human*” (GS 11).

190. To the seminarians: I ask you to strive to educate yourselves in the best way possible in all areas (spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and human). Deepen your knowledge of our own Salvadoran history in order to have a positive and effective influence in it, being protagonists of its transformation, so that the culture of death in which we live becomes a culture of life, where justice, truth, respect for the rights of others and the defense of the weakest prevail. Educate yourselves in a true spirit of service to others, detached from yourselves, with a genuine concern for your poorest brethren, the marginalized, the excluded and discarded by society, seeking to vindicate their rights and personal dignity. Be people of deep prayer and at the same time effective action.

191. To the dear sisters and beloved brothers religious, who do so much good throughout the country and this diocese: to thank you for your presence in the communities where you work collaboratively with their parishes, or developing plans and projects within some population segment, or working in schools and education centers. I encourage you to continue to work with strength and hope in God our Lord. In addition, I ask you to encourage the biblical or theological training of the laity, from children to young adults and seniors, so they know how to avoid the culture of violence and instead become promoters of a culture of life and peace, of the pedagogy of life. I ask you the same thing I ask the priests: teach the laity that faith does not ignore human history. It saves history through “*solutions which are fully human*” (GS 11).

192. For my own part, I am called to appeal through the media, in any way I can, for more immediate and committed action for the resolution of the

problem of violence, as well as to encourage those responsible for the political and economic power to create policies and measures to ensure inclusion, equity and welfare of the majority, especially for the economically disadvantaged. It is my duty to denounce those actions or corresponding attitudes that do not pay to contribute to the resolution of the problem of violence. It is also my duty to encourage and give hope to my Flock, my priests, men and women religious.

193. I cannot end this letter without proposing to entrust the protection of our beloved country to the Divine Savior of the World and the maternal intercession of Mary Queen of Peace and our Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero with the following prayer to help us fight violence and achieve the peace we so desire. That they may help us to have hope and to hope against hope that this wave of crime, discord and violence, this dense cloud of darkness, will pass. Let us fix our gaze on Him; let us seek Him and we will find Him because: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shone”* (Isa 19:1). The light is already in our midst. It is the Prince of Peace, it is the Divine Savior of the world. Let us wait and trust in Him, being contemplative in action and active in contemplation.

**PRAYER FOR PEACE
TO THE DIVINE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD**

Divine Savior of the World, we ask you to guide us with your wisdom, so that we may be peacemakers in our country.

Lord Jesus, look with pity on this people that bears your name, fill us with your light, cover us with your mercy. Make our energy, Lord, base itself in faith, truth, justice and love, to grow and harvest abundant fruits of brotherhood and peace. Give us the ability to build, with your favor, a new, just and reconciled society; free from violence. A society in which rights and dignity of all are respected, one in which we are all truly brothers.

Oh Lord, that your presence accompany us today and every day of our lives. All we ask this through the intercession of Mary Most Blessed, and our Blessed Archbishop Romero.

Amen.

San Salvador, March 24, Feast of Blessed Oscar Romero, 2016.



José Luis Escobar Alas
Archbishop of San Salvador