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# THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST IN HISTORY

### **Feast of the Divine Savior of the World 6 August 1977**

*Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14*

*2 Peter 1:16-19*

*Luke 9:28b-36*

Dear brother Bishop Rivera Damas, beloved brother priests, dear faithful Salvadorans who fill this plaza before the mother church of the archdiocese, and all you who by radio are following with interest this homage our country pays to its Divine Patron.

I want you to have an idea about this event that was just proclaimed, the transfiguration of Christ wherein he is presented as luminous and dazzling, so beautiful and so attractive that Peter desires to remain there permanently with him: «How good it is to be here!» (Luke 9:33). To understand the meaning of all this we need only look at our own people. I want to tell you, dear Catholics, that all of us here as church are the transfiguration of Christ. We are a people enlightened by faith, encouraged by great hope, and united by great love. We are truly the glory of the Lord, especially when we recognize that the glorious name of our country is a gift of the Lord's predilection. Every year on the morning of August 6 we do our best to honor the Divine Savior, to give him a warm welcome, and to render him fitting homage. It is not poetic fancy to say that this people of ours is the transfiguration of Christ. This is the theological, evangelical reality of Christ's sublime ideal in forming his church.

On this beautiful day of August 6 I have the pleasure of gifting the archdiocese with my second pastoral letter, which has the title, «The Church, the Body of Christ in History». The thoughts I want to present to you today, sisters and brothers, are a summary of this pastoral letter, which even now I would like to recommend to your study so that doubts are dispelled and so that all who have adhered unconditionally to the pastoral lines of the archdiocese may feel more confident that we are walking in the ways of Jesus. The letter is also for those who still have some reservations, those who love the church but still wonder whether the bishop has become a communist and whether the priests are preaching subversion and violence. And finally it is for those who hate the church and malign her, so that they will know that they are maligning the Body of Christ and will be converted. We begin by asking whether these changes evident in the modern church are a betrayal of the Gospel or whether rather they are changes required of her in order to be faithful to the Gospel. What are these changes? We present them in two ways.

## **The church in the world**

In the first place, the church has understood that she was standing with her back to the world, but now she has changed and entered into dialogue with the world. The Second Vatican Council wrote a beautiful document called the «Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World» (GS 1). The church is no stranger to the world. Everything that is human touches her heart, and she feels that she must open herself to greater dialogue with this world. This world must be of interest to her for it is all of you, especially you who are poor, you who are suffering, you who are victims of assaults or exclusion, you who have no voice. The church identifies with this world of suffering but not exclusively, for she identifies with all people who are building the world.

And this is the second way to explain the present changes. Previously we seemed to be living two parallel histories that were joined together only after death. The history of the world and the history of the country were preached as realities we just had to accept, but they were not especially interesting in view of heaven. But as the church reflected on how the Bible is simply one people's history intimately tied up with the history of salvation and permeated by the saving plan of Christ, she concluded that there is not a profane history on one side and a history of salvation on the other. Rather, the history of every people is the concrete context in which God desires to save that people by means of his church. The church identifies with history, and the church moves forward with history. She tells Salvadorans, «We have to save ourselves by our own history, but that history must be penetrated with the light of salvation and Christian hope». The whole history of El Salvador— all her politics, all her economy, and all that constitutes the concrete life of Salvadorans—must be illuminated with faith. There must be no divorce. The history of the country must be penetrated with the plan of God so that it is a history lived with faith and hope, a history that will lead us to salvation in Christ.

How is it that the church has undergone these extraordinary changes? When the Council came to a close, even the pope recognized that some people were saying, «The Council has forgotten the Gospel and has been converted to the ways of humankind».<sup>1</sup> The same words are now spoken here in El Salvador: «The church has forgotten her mission. She is involved in politics and has become Marxist. She preaches revolution and hatred». The church is accused in a way that is most painful for her because the church's new language is precisely what is demanded of her by her fidelity to the Gospel and to Christ. We thank God that year after year on August 6 we are able to tell from the face of the transfigured Christ whether he is pleased with his church or rather rejects a church that has betrayed him. Today, on August 6, 1977, he finds a people drawn together by Christ in the solemn *Bajada* of yesterday afternoon, in the prayer vigil that filled the cathedral last night, and in this wonderful outdoor Mass today. In this way the parishes tell the church that they are walking on the path of Christ and that the illuminated face of Christ is like a pilgrim's compass showing them they are on the right path.

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<sup>1</sup> PAULVI, «The Religious Value of the Council», Allocution at the closure of the Second Vatican Council (7 December 1965) 6.

Like Saint Paul the church turns toward Christ and asks, «Who are you?» (Acts 9:5). The church asks Christ, «Who are you so that I might follow you, so that I might lend you my feet to walk on the paths of my country's history, so that I might lend you my mouth to proclaim your message and my hands to work and bring about your kingdom?» If the church were to forget about Christ, then Christ himself would become present each year on August 6 and ask her, as he asked his disciples: «Who do the Salvadorans say that I am?» (Luke 9:18). And the church, with tears in her eyes, with spittle on her face, and with her virginal garment stained, would have to say, «They have treated me as a traitor. They have torn my garment. They have spat in my face with false propaganda. They have defiled me and said terrible things about me. They have accused me of being unfaithful to my marriage with you and of selling myself to foreign ideologies». Then the Lord will console her saying, «If you say this morning that I am the One who represents the Father, then you walk on the road of truth».

My sisters and brothers, we have just heard the word of the eternal Father: «This is my beloved Son; listen to him» (Luke 9:35). We know that in following the church of 1977 we have not separated ourselves from the beloved Son of God and that on this August 6 our faith is the same as on that first August 6 when Pedro de Alvarado founded this city which has now become a great metropolis. This is the same faith that came from Spain and was preached to people's hearts, the same faith that in 1977—naturally with the changes of Vatican II and the conference in Medellin—is saying that the true and authentic Christ continues to be the Christ of this church, the Christ who is both God and true man. As God he is the only one who can explain the beginning and the end of every human life, the one who knows better than anyone the mystery of the human person and the history of El Salvador. He is the king of our history. As man he became incarnate twenty centuries ago. He lived as a man in the history of a country dominated by a foreign power. He lived the history of Palestine and Nazareth as we Salvadorans should live our own history in El Salvador.

In this way Christ teaches us that his incarnation is precisely that message and that preaching synthesized by Mark in this succinct phrase: «This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel» (Mark 1:15). Be converted to the Good News! The Good News that Jesus brought was the announcement of great hope, the formation of a humanity where all would be sisters and brothers to one another and God would be seen as Father of all. In our effort to come to know the true God we will recognize that every sister and brother is the image of God, and in our effort to love one another and avoid being divided into social classes by hatred and vengeance, we will draw near to God.

### **The church preaches the kingdom of God**

This message of the approaching kingdom of God is the message the church continues to preach. The kingdom of God draws near, and when people understand this message of twenty centuries ago, proclaimed now by evangelizers in 1977, they love one another, they create community, and they detest differences. They know that the kingdom of God cannot be present where sin rules, and they say, «Be converted». Conversion is the word of order in the church. The church does not preach against the powerful with hatred or resentment but with the love of one who wants them to be converted and saved. That is why the Son of God has come. In the time of Jesus the rich were converted, maybe only a

few of them, but they were converted and used their wealth to create a sense of fraternity with others. Sinners were converted and found in Christ the joy of feeling that they were sisters and brothers without differences, that all were simply children of the same Father. The church continues to preach this today.

Therefore, when the church is accused of being subversive, when she is accused of preaching hatred and dividing the social classes, she is being slandered in the most painful and delicate part of her conscience. The church never preaches hatred. The church always preaches love. When she cries out against what the bishops' conference of Medellín called «institutionalized violence» (M 2,16), the church must speak forcefully as did the prophets who spoke forcefully against the unjust order of their time. The church does not preach violence. Rather, it is others who have provoked violence, hatred, torture, pain, and social inequality. Therefore, the church must use strong language because that is the language of Christ who, without hatred or vengeance, seeks to free souls from the reign of sin and place them in the kingdom of God.

Throughout history the church has been preaching this, and she has the joy of knowing that she is faithful to Jesus Christ, even though at certain times in history she has not been so faithful and has had to ask forgiveness. Therefore, as the bishops stated in their message of March 5, «The one who denounces is also ready to be denounced».<sup>2</sup> I have stated very concretely that I am open to dialogue and that all those who find anything improper or unsuitable in our preaching or in the message that the church preaches should come to us, correct us, and help us to preach better. But even if there are some improper or imprudent things in our language or style, we are convinced that in the substance of our message we are on the same side as Jesus.

Like Christ, there is a preference for those who suffer. Without partiality we point out to everybody the road of charity and love, and we also tell everybody that the poor must also be converted. Indeed, the situation of social injustice that prevails in our continent is not the fault only of the rich and the powerful. It is the fault also of the poor who do not want to develop, who live in idleness, who do not try to remake their lives and live as children of God. They also are collaborating with this situation of social injustice.

The church preaches human development, and for preaching this promotion of people, for waking people out of their unhealthy state of conformity, and for urging them to be active in forging their own destiny, the church must suffer. The reason is that all those who want to keep the masses tranquilized and gullible, incapable of reshaping their lives and their own history, will feel that they are being deprived of this sad situation in which some people are able to exploit others. Therefore, when the church preaches this authentic liberation in Christ, she helps some people develop and urges others to put aside their selfishness. Like Christ in his day she tells everyone to stop sinning and to turn to God, for the kingdom of God is near, and we will be blameworthy if we do not collaborate in his construction of this world.

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<sup>2</sup> «Message of the Bishops' Conference of El Salvador on the Present Situation in the Country» in *Orientación* (20 March 1977).

## **The archdiocese of the Divine Savior**

And so we come, sisters and brothers, to the last part of this pastoral letter that I will soon offer to you and that this morning I offer to the Lord as a precious gift of the archdiocese. What is most beautiful about these hosts that will be offered to the eternal Father by myself and my beloved brother priests, collaborators in this difficult process of evangelization, is that these hosts represent an archdiocese, a particular church that can truly tell the transfigured Lord this morning that she is his beloved spouse. If she has in any way stained her garment, she can purify herself through penance and conversion and can return to him with love and faithfulness. All this slander against the church is unjust, and I call upon faithful Catholics to pray to God for the conversion of those who hate and malign her. The church preaches not hatred but love. If our word sometimes sounds violent, its purpose is to root out the reign of sin and turn people toward the Lord. The church is not Marxist, nor is she committed to any social system.

In speaking of systems the church is simply defending her religious ethic. That is why she holds that atheistic communism is incompatible with her transcendence and her faith in God. She has also said that the materialism of liberal capitalism is atheistic; it is idolatrous because it adores and defends money while despising and maligning the dignity of others. Capitalism is sinning gravely also. The church defends the ethic of her religion and her love of God, and that is what interests her in any system. Without becoming Marxist or capitalist, she urges Marxists and capitalists to be converted from their materialism so that with her they may adore the one true God and allow their social concerns to be changed into a sincere desire to build the true kingdom of God that makes us all feel that we are sisters and brothers.

The church does not get involved in politics because she has learned from the Second Vatican Council that civil authority enjoys its own autonomy and the church also has her autonomy (GS 76). Therefore, each one in its own field has to collaborate with the other for the common good. This is the sum of the church's politics: the common good. Because of her moral role in the world, she has the right to denounce political abuses and to tell the powerful that they are not God and that, if they have any authority to rule, it is because God has given it them. Therefore, they must measure their laws and their actions in accord with the law of the Lord. The early Christians told their emperors and their caesars that it was not licit for them to burn incense before them because they were not gods. It was the obligation of Christians, of preachers, of priests to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29) and not allow themselves to be bound by conditions imposed by civil authorities. It is God who has told us what must be preached, and this holy freedom will be best preserved by speaking boldly, not by consorting with the powerful or seeking honors, for those honors and privileges and powerful friends can compromise the church and cause her to lose the moral authority which she now has by the grace of God.

My sisters and brothers, the archdiocese can now offer to the eternal Father, together with the transfigured Lord, a united church. Thank God for our unity. The presence of these priests here, seldom seen in the history of our church, is a sign that we preachers of God's word are in accord with the bishop's direction. Our pastoral plan is not something we are inventing today; it was inherited from my venerable predecessor, Bishop Luis Chávez y González. Our plan comes from the Second Vatican Council; it

comes from the changes needed in a church which as the Body of Christ in history must ask Christ, «How do you want me to speak at this time in history?» And Jesus tells me, «You must speak differently from the way they spoke four centuries ago or in the Middle Ages or in the first years of Christianity. I am Christ who walks with you. I need your mouth to preach to men and women of 1977 in the language that they need».

This unity, sisters and brothers, has made itself felt in many ways. I have just arrived back from a trip abroad to meet with my brother bishops of Central America. Those bishops, as well as letters from the whole continent, have manifested a heartening solidarity with this church of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. The bishops, together with the humble letters of our people and the letters of professionals and university students, are telling us that they are all gathered in support of this evangelical church which, far from betraying the Gospel, is today truly the church of the transfigured Lord.

We also tell Christ that we offer him a church that is stained with blood, a church whose white garments are stained by persecution. There has been persecution, and there is still persecution because theologically persecution means obstructing the church's message. This has indeed occurred. The authentic message of the church has been obstructed. They want to put obstacles and limits on our preaching. Our calling is to listen to Christ, just as the eternal Father has told us this morning: «Listen to him; what he tells you is what you must preach» (Luke 9:35). We have suffered the persecution of the priests. It is not necessary to repeat this. Everyone knows and is aware that the church is also being persecuted in those who receive her message, in her people, in her *campesinos*, in her reflection groups, in those places where fear and terror are sown and many people are afraid to come together. In honest language, all of this must be called persecution. But this morning the church raises her eyes to her Divine Spouse and says, «I give you thanks because my hope in you and my surrender to you give my children greater courage in this time of persecution». May all of us be willing to lay down even our lives to defend this faith that we must profess.

Finally, my sisters and brothers, this is the church of hope. The church has inspired great hope in our hearts precisely because she no longer finds her power in worldly realities and because she is now lacking the support that people offer her out of self-interest. She has learned to be free of all that in order to be faithful to the Gospel. Now in her poverty the church knows that she is with the poor, and all those who want to live with her and share her hopes must find support in the weakness of the derided Christ, in the weakness of the church as spouse of Christ, in her poverty, in her Gospel, and in her authentic following of the Lord.

In this way we feel, like Saint Paul, that in our weakness we are strong (1 Cor 1:25) because Christ the Almighty is stronger than all the powers of the world. We have this hope, and we want to extend this hope as patriots because we are all children of one nation. How can we not be sad, sisters and brothers, that our country reveals such an ugly face to those who live in other lands? I have just had proof of this. While the church shines forth in beauty and fidelity, our poor country is suffering from an ugliness of aspect that needs to be repaired. The church wants to offer her cooperation in defense of human dignity and human rights and in respect for God's dignity among the people. Only by respecting the law of God can our nation, the land of the Divine Savior, proudly

display once again both her truly beautiful face, the face she received from Christ, and her most glorious name, El Salvador.

Let us preserve this hope, not only the hope that the church will continue working in all her authenticity, beauty, and unity, but also the hope that this church, made more beautiful in persecution, may be understood by the persecutors themselves to be free of hatred and resentment. May the church know how to apply all the rich potential that Christ offers her to sanctifying family life, to sanctifying politics, to sanctifying the economy, and to making it possible for Christ to say also in El Salvador, «The kingdom of God is near. Be converted!» (Mark 1:15).

Divine Savior of the world, through the intercession of your most holy Mother, the Queen of Peace who is also patroness of El Salvador, we ask that this hope of the church, these people who today represent your transfiguration, may know the joy of having their hopes fulfilled. So be it.