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# CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR CHURCH

**Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
**21 August 1977**

*Isaiah 66:18-21*

*Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13*

*Luke 13:22-30*

My dear brothers and sisters.

The word of God is proclaimed in a concrete way for the community that is reflecting on it. By means of the radio this community is greatly increasing, and I hope that this word will provide light, hope, and faith in all the situations facing this great conglomeration of the Salvadoran people. As tragic and difficult as the situations may be, may the faith of our church help us to experience the true joy of being a part of this kingdom of God that is nourished by his word and that keeps walking steadfastly because we know that the Lord is our companion and we know where we are going.

### **Life of the church**

Certainly many things have happened this week, but I want to highlight just a few. I stress how grateful I am for the celebration of my birthday, which made me aware once again that my life does not belong to me but rather to you. In this sense, as was said on the radio, the celebration was truly an ecclesial event. The bishop is not a private person but a sign of unity. I am happy that this event, which means little on a personal level, was an occasion for people to express their solidarity, love, and unity with the church. So I want to thank you for all the ways you manifested your friendship and your solidarity. I receive them as your bishop, and I place all this homage at the feet of Christ so that it redounds to his glory. Because of the warmth and tenderness of their messages, I want to highlight the many little letters that arrived from the Escuela San Luis in Cuscatancingo. The letters are so delightful that I have entered them into a competition, and when they are judged I will go there to thank them personally and to award prizes for the best letters.

Another event of great importance for the diocese during this past week was the three-day period of reflection for priests and religious involved in pastoral work. They came from many places to Domus Mariae for the purpose of studying the pope's letter, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which is a modern document setting out guidelines for proper evangelization in today's world. We had wonderful attendance of about 100 to 125 priests and religious. We made an effort to place ourselves in line with the present-day church because the pastoral lines that we are following in the archdiocese are not impulsive, nor do they involve brainwashing, as many claim. We are simply trying to align ourselves with Vatican II and Medellín, which are the official guides and which are

ratified by the pope in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. This document states that evangelization of the world cannot be separated from human development. Thanks be to God, the archdiocese has proceeded in this direction for many years now. This has caused us many difficulties and conflicts, but it cannot be otherwise. We must continue promoting human beings, defending their dignity and their rights, and proclaiming a Gospel that does not turn its back on the world but rather engages the world. Our aim is not to become worldly ourselves but to sanctify the world. Our meeting this week produced some fine, effective conclusions, and we hope that little by little they will be put into practice. Indeed, this coming together of priests, pastors, and religious involved in pastoral ministry still has not ended. For me this gathering represents a starting point, a new initiative for implementing concrete ways of evangelizing our archdiocese.

One of the most concrete proposals concerns Chalatenango. Chalatenango is a rich mine of vocations. The priests and the religious from that area wisely agreed to meet together to seek specific solutions for that department. It was wonderful to see the great number of clergy and religious who are from Chalatenango; indeed, a large part of the general assembly was from there. The conclusion was reached, with the bishop's support, that there should be created there what is called an episcopal vicariate. That means that a priest would have episcopal powers over the whole department for the sake of organizing the church's forces and cultivating those fertile lands whose vocations provide hope for our clergy and our religious life. Father Fabián Amaya, who is from that area, was chosen for this position. He will be assisted by Father Efraín López, the pastor of Comasagua. This is not the time to go into great detail about these days of study. God willing, you will know about these matters as they are put into practice.

This week I also announce to you that Father Francisco Díaz will become the new pastor of Tenancingo. Also, Father Miguel returns as pastor of El Carmen. Despite his advanced age and illness, he bears witness that priests are not made for resting but for working. I thank him and wish him much success. Finally, Father Ernesto Barrera will become the pastor of San Sebastián in Ciudad Delgado.

This morning we will go to Jicarón in El Paisnal to visit the community there. On Friday the twenty-sixth we will go to Tres Ceibas in the area of Aguilares.

Yesterday and today the Commission of the Laity has been meeting together in Planes de Renderos. This commission of lay people was recently created to promote the ministry of the laity in all the parishes of the archdiocese. Lay people are all those persons who have been baptized but are neither religious nor clerics. Through baptism they have a true priesthood but one which unfortunately many do not exercise because they do not understand the meaning of baptism. Thanks be to God, the Vatican Council gave rise to a great movement to make the people of God more aware of their priesthood and their responsibility for the church. To develop this consciousness the Commission of the Laity is itself growing in awareness of its great responsibilities. We greet them and wish them much success.

With regard to our ignorance of baptism, remember that a series of talks and orientations starts tomorrow in the parishes of María Auxiliadora, Corazón de María, and Planes de Renderos. This is part of a movement called the catechumenate. In

ancient times people went through a course called the catechumenate before receiving baptism; only after receiving instruction were they baptized. Nowadays Christian families bring their infant children to be baptized, but they forget that there is a duty to educate the baptized child in the faith. Children grow up in homes where that duty is neglected, and that is why we have so many baptized persons who do not understand the dignity and the responsibility of their baptism. Therefore, another initiative of the Vatican Council was to reestablish the catechumenate (SC 64). Even if you have been baptized, you should become aware of what you have received. Inform yourself, then, about the catechumenate talks, and I invite you to take part in them.

I am very happy for those many communities where there is no resident priest or religious but where there are lay persons with pastoral concern who gather the community together in their chapels. At this very moment they are listening to me. I know this because they have told me how they tune in to the cathedral Mass. At Communion time, in accord with their pastors, they turn off the radio and have their own Communion service using the prayers of their district. This is an initiative that can be carried out in all the towns and villages where there are no priests. This is a way for the pastors to develop their communities by making use of this marvelous medium of the radio. For my part, I am very happy to be present by radio to so many communities that my beloved priests and I are responsible for serving.

Furthermore, sisters and brothers, we want to extend our sincerest condolences to the mother and the wife of Tomás Orellana of San Martín. They wrote to me with great sorrow. Not only was poor Tomás murdered, but some people seek to brand him as a subversive and a revolutionary. He was nothing of the sort. That is simply the kind of shameful calumny our mass media use to darken the reputation of a deceased person. I wish our newspapers would be more careful before printing stories that cause even greater grief to a family already in mourning. They would do better to keep quiet, but they should not remain silent about the truth.<sup>1</sup> Everyone already knows about this case. Our radio station has denounced the injustice committed against this poor man. We want his grieving family to know that the church sympathizes with you and will not cover up the injustice that has been committed.

Also this week a very dangerous bulletin has appeared,<sup>2</sup> and it contains facts that cannot be denied. These matters must be investigated so that justice is imposed on the true authors of all these crimes of terror and kidnapping. Who are the people responsible for this? How much longer will we continue to stain the face of our country? From this platform of the church I appeal to our nation's justice. Let justice be done!

It is along these lines that I want to locate our reflections on the word of God. From today's three beautiful readings I want to draw out three characteristics of our church. Let us feel that this is truly our church, dear sisters and brothers, dear radio audience. If we are truly Catholics, we should feel proud of belonging to a church that is first of all a missionary and a pilgrim church; second, she is an eschatological church

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<sup>1</sup> «One Terrorist Killed and One Policeman Wounded in Shootout» in *El Diario de Hoy* (15 August 1977).

<sup>2</sup> On 19 August 1977 the *El Diario de Hoy* published a manifesto of the RN-FARN (Resistencia Nacional and Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional) which accused members of the army of taking part in massacres, torture, and assassination of political leaders, as well as organizing and directing UGB, FALANGE, ORDEN, and other paramilitary groups.

(and I will explain this word); and third, she is a church that is in the process of conversion.

### **The missionary and pilgrim church**

Isaiah announced, six centuries before the event, what the church founded by the Redeemer would be like. He spoke of how all the world's peoples would come to Jerusalem. This would be the sign of the kingdom of God, a sign that passed on to the church founded by Christ. To those who came from distant lands and the ends of the earth God gave an order, as we read in the responsorial psalm: «Go out to all the world and preach the Gospel» (Mark 16:15). The list of places begins in Isaiah: «Tarshish, Ethiopia, Libya, Mosoch, Tubal, Greece, and even the distant coastlands that have never heard of my fame» (Isa 66:19). It is almost as if we heard here about the coasts of America that were discovered sixteen centuries after these words were pronounced. Or as if we heard here the very names of this church that now is on pilgrimage. It is the same as when I mentioned today Tenancingo, San Sebastián in Ciudad Delgado, El Carmen, and all those parishes and communities of the villages where people are gathered together in reflection. These names are being strung together as pearls of God's kingdom. To all these peoples and communities the kingdom must be brought.

When today's gospel presents us with Jesus walking toward Jerusalem—«he walked through towns and villages» (Luke 13:22)—it is the pilgrim church that is being announced; it is the church that is the Body of Christ in history, as I say in my pastoral letter that will be published and distributed this week. The church is Christ who continues walking toward Jerusalem, passing through towns and villages. It is wonderful to think, sisters and brothers, about this church as a missionary and pilgrim church, for this gives all of us who are members a sense of being on pilgrimage. No one can just settle down. All of us have to keep walking, holding our pilgrim staff. Of course, we have to bring happiness to the earth on which we live, but we know that we are only passing through. Today we occupy the earth; yesterday it was occupied by our ancestors who no longer exist; tomorrow, a future generation will occupy it, and we will no longer exist. Humankind is a continual pilgrimage, and Christ wants to walk with our history, with the history of all times. Just as Christ was with our ancestors, he is now with us, and he will be with future generations. But we continue on our pilgrimage, and one of the primary concerns of the church must be establishing the church in all parts of the world—or in that precious phrase of Isaiah: «even unto those unknown coastlands» (Isa 66:19).

The pope has already issued his message for the next Mission Day, which is always celebrated on the next-to-last Sunday in October.<sup>3</sup> He has called upon all Catholics to develop their missionary awareness because being a missionary does not necessarily mean being called to the frontlines of the missions. Those are some heroic persons—priests, religious, doctors, nurses, all kinds of people—who go and spend years in dangerous mission posts. They are there, and if someone wants to join them, there is room there for everybody. But we do not all have the fortune of serving in those missionary vanguards. We may not know the languages of those lands, we may be afraid of new customs, or we may not be able to adapt. We have to admire missionaries for their

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<sup>3</sup> PAULVI, Message for the World Day of Missions (29 May 1977).

ability to adapt. But we still have to be missionaries as part of the rearguard of this army that conquers the world for God and for the faith. Remember that the patroness of missions is Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, a contemplative nun who never left her cloister in Lisieux, France. Yet here we find the secret of being a missionary even in the cloister, in the home, in the store, in the market stall, in professional work. It means offering all your sorrows, your duties, and your sacrifices for the missions, as Saint Theresa did.

When that poor woman, who was suffering from tuberculosis, took her walks in the patio of the convent, she would become tired, and she would sit on a stone bench and pray, «I offer my weariness to the Lord for the missionary who at this moment is walking through unknown lands». How beautiful it is to be a missionary, sisters and brothers, and to know that many souls who do not know Christ now will come to know him through the preaching of the Gospel. And we make our contribution through prayer, through sacrifice, and by offering our infirmities for the missionaries and for those who are not yet Christians. Missionaries are all those who believe that the church must be established throughout the world because of the command of Jesus: «Go and preach everywhere» (Mark 16:15). That is why the pope in his message for this coming Mission Day states that missionary education and a missionary sense are not mere options for Christians but pertain to the very constitution of our faith. One cannot be a true Christian and ignore this missionary vocation, especially when one's own country is a missionary land. Probably the savage things that occur in El Salvador do not occur even in missionary lands.

Let us begin, therefore, to make our nation a missionary witness. This is the great problem with Latin America: even though officially called Christian, the continental community is not a torch of faith because its Christians have become perverted. They are pilgrims traveling through the desert on their way to the Promised Land, but like the ancient Israelites they have returned to Egypt, the land of slavery, and they continue eating from the fleshpots of that land (Exod 16:3; Num 11:5). They continue to adore the idols of money and to abuse their authority in gruesome ways. Is this how we are going to be light to the world? It is sad to think that many of those who murder and torture and disgrace the nation are Christians. They need to be reconverted, as do we all.

My sisters and brothers, I would like all of us to take seriously the scripture of this Sunday for it gives us a sense of how Christ went about planting seeds of Christian faith, hope, and joy everywhere, proclaiming the Gospel and his message of peace. Even if we don't go to foreign missions personally, let us try to be missionaries in our country and in our homes. Let us be missionaries in our professional work and in the public posts we hold. How much good would be done by government officials, workers, teachers, and professionals if they all felt that in their daily labors, even as they were earning a living, they were also accomplishing a mission and being missionaries among their own friends!

### **The eschatological church**

And what will we preach as missionaries? The second of today's readings presents us with a church that is eschatological. What does that mean? It's the idea that provoked

the question asked of Jesus in today's gospel: «Will only a few people be saved?» (Luke 13:23). This is the concern of eschatology. Eschatology is a characteristic of this church whose hope makes her realize that history does not reach its fullness on this earth. Her hope enables her to see new heavens and a new earth where justice, peace, and love will reign (Rev 21:1).

Christians know that, no matter how hard they work, the well-being of this earth will always be transitory, passing, provisional, missionary. We must keep working without expecting fulfillment on this earth but only in eternity, where God's kingdom is perfect. That is eschatology: the perspective of eternal salvation and of God's kingdom consummated in glory where the church has her arms stretched out and her eyes raised to heaven—that is the eschatological church.

That is why the church can never agree with any ideology that claims to create here on this earth a kingdom where people will be completely happy. That means the church cannot be communist. But neither can the church be capitalist because capitalism is also myopic in its vision, finding its happiness, its passion, its heaven in palaces, properties, money, and the things of earth. People want to be permanently installed, but that permanence is not what the church is about. The church is eschatological, and therefore the church turns toward the poor and tells them. «You are the ones who are most able to understand this hope and this eschatology».

So we turn toward the poor, but we do not make them conformists, for eschatology does not mean putting people to sleep but making them look to heaven. In this regard also communism falsely accuses us when it says that we are giving opium to the people and discouraging them from struggling here on earth by telling them about a kingdom in the hereafter. One has to wonder who really encourages people more, whether communism or the church. The church preaches hope in heaven, but she tells people that heaven must be won by working here and by fulfilling their duties; only thus will they be awarded life for all eternity. Those who fulfill their obligations to the best of their ability will be given a richer eschatology and a more expansive heaven. No one is more ambitious than saints and Christians, for they do not seek a kingdom on this earth where people die but rather a kingdom for eternity where people will forever experience the joy of having collaborated and anticipated here on earth the kingdom of God.

Here in El Salvador the enemies of the church are scandalized when they are told that our task is to establish now on earth the kingdom of heaven and that the church is the beginning of that kingdom. It is not necessary to wait until death in order to be happy. God wants us to be happy here on this earth. He wants the new heaven and the new earth to be reflected even during our earthly pilgrimage. The church visualizes a beautiful heaven during her pilgrimage, and the earth must become a reflection of that heaven. Today Jesus' word teaches us that the kingdom of God has already begun on this earth and that only those who enter by the narrow gate will find their way to its definitive foundation (Luke 13:24). But those on earth who have not struggled to enter this kingdom will remain outside; those who have not worked for the kingdom of God during their lives will find at the hour of their death that the narrow door to the kingdom is closed to them.

Pay heed to today's gospel: «You will stand outside knocking and saying, "Lord, open the door for us". He will say to you in reply, "I do not know who you are". And you will say, "We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets". Then he will say to you, "I do not know who you are. Depart from me, all you evildoers!"» (Luke 13:25-27). It is not enough just to know about Christ; it is not enough simply to bear the name of Christian while living like a pagan and then present oneself in heaven, saying, «Jesus knows me». Here Jesus tells us that he does not recognize those who have not made their title of «Christian» a way of life.

We are called as Christians to live this eschatology, this hope, this heaven. The Vatican Council and the documents of Medellín have shed wonderful light on the meaning of the church's eschatology. It is an invitation to men and women to work on this earth from the perspective of the risen Lord who is now part of world history and to contribute to building that kingdom which will be fully realized in eternity. But the risen Christ in whom we believe already links together our earthly obligations and our eternal rewards. If we truly believe that the risen Christ awaits us and that when he comes in glory he will reward us and all those who have worked with him, that means that we must commit ourselves to that Christ, sisters and brothers, and work hard. All those who obstruct this work of the kingdom are betraying their vocation as human persons.

The Council has stated, «The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God and jeopardizes his eternal salvation» (GS 43). Let us respond, then, to the question they put to Jesus: «Lord, will only a few people be saved?» (Luke 13:23). Christ seems not to be interested in the number, because what follows is his great teaching about the narrow gate and the need to live fully Christian lives. Let us say the same: whether there are few or many is not important. What is important for us is that we fulfill our obligations here on earth, that we try to enter through the narrow gate, and that we avoid the wide paths of vice and selfishness and injustice. From this follows the third consideration, and here I will conclude my thoughts. Today's readings present us with a church that is in a process of conversion.

### **The church in the process of conversion**

I will never grow weary of shouting out this word «conversion». It's unfortunate that we often speak and think that we understand one another, and it turns out that the simplest words are sometimes not understood. It was a great revelation for me this week when a humble soul asked me, «What is conversion?» I am thankful when someone doesn't understand some word of my poor preaching and has the confidence to ask me about it.

Conversion is something like making an about-face. In the military the terms «right face» or «about face» are used for turning troops to one side or the other. Conversion means turning toward God and becoming ever more directed toward God. Christ was talking about conversion when he said, «Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect» (Matt 5:48). When will we be perfect like God? Christ's purpose is to inspire a movement without limits, which is conversion. Conversion means asking at every moment: what does God want of my life? If God wants the opposite of what I might fancy, then doing what God wants is conversion, and following my own desire is perversion. What does God want, for example, of the political power in a country? He

wants those forces to create sound laws and moral unity of will among all citizens for the common good. God does not want that power to be used to assault and to beat people or to attack cities and villages; that is perversion. What does God want of capital and of those to whom he gives money, properties, and other things? Again God seeks conversion. That means that people should bestow on the things created by God the destiny God ordains for them, which is the welfare of all so that everyone might have a share in happiness.

This is on a large scale, but the same is true on a small scale: what does God want of your home life? God wants your union with your wife to be blessed in the sacrament of marriage. What does God want in the intimacy of the conjugal relation? Procreation. If people maliciously interrupt procreation through artificial means, then they are blocking the will of God. They need to be converted. What does God want with regard to alcohol? He wants us to abstain and not abuse it. God wants us to use it correctly and not abuse it. Abuse of alcohol is always a sin. Conversion is needed. Conversion is a call that is alluded to in the second reading, which is taken from the letter to the Hebrews: «You have also forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons: “My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when reproved by him”» (Heb 12:5).

Sisters and brothers, the church herself must also fulfill this obligation because she also is in the process of conversion. I who am speaking with you am in need of continual conversion. All of us—sinners, religious, Catholic schools, parishes, pastors, communities, the church herself—all of us have to be converted to what God wants at this moment in the history of El Salvador. Some people live a type of Christianity that does not fit with our times, for it does not denounce injustices, it does not courageously proclaim God’s kingdom, it does not reject people’s sins, and it colludes with the sins of certain classes in order to win their favor. Those who live thus are not fulfilling their obligations but are sinning and betraying their mission. The church is placed here to convert people and not just to tell them that they do everything well. Naturally, therefore, people will not like the church. We are resentful of anyone who admonishes us. I know there are many people who resent me, but I also know that I am liked by all those who sincerely seek the conversion of the church, which is all of us.

Considering this, sisters and brothers, I call everyone to conversion. In the publication that came out this week many crimes are denounced. Who has committed these crimes? Will their names remain hidden in darkness? From human justice, perhaps. It seems that so many crimes remain a mystery, such as the assassinations of Father Grande and Father Navarro and so many other murders and disappearances and other awful deeds. But I know that certain people have committed these crimes, and unless they are converted they will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

This life will pass away; human power and life will pass. Everything will pass away, but the church will remain as an eschatological sign that says: eternity will not pass away, and what is truly worthwhile is being saved. But salvation begins here on earth because those who struggle here to establish the kingdom of God in the midst of society and history will also be part of the kingdom of God in heaven. And those who here oppose and reject the church and the kingdom of God, those who repudiate her ministers and her preachers, are obstructing the kingdom of God. They persecute the church by impeding her ministry.



And so, dear sisters and brothers, let us conclude our message today, which is not some invention of mine but the word of God, with our resolve to be a missionary and pilgrim church. Let us not install ourselves permanently on earth. Let us take care to walk with Jesus. Reflect on the significance of the whole of this gospel text from which today's reading comes. Saint Luke wants to describe Christ's mission as a journey toward Calvary. The church also walks toward Calvary, toward the cross, but she knows that after the cross, three days later, there is resurrection and joy and the kingdom; there is a new heaven and a new earth. Let us walk with Jesus then. Let us be without fear of the hardships on the way to Calvary. Let us renounce sin and all that is opposed to the kingdom of God. Let us not be content with finding happiness and salvation just here on earth or just in heaven. Let us find that wise and wonderful balance that allows us to fulfill the law of God here on earth so that we might merit the reward of heaven. Let us therefore be courageous Christians, for these characteristics help the church to sow hope and joy in the hearts of all Salvadorans and to keep them strong.