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THE CRISIS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

**Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
24 September 1978**

Isaiah 55:6-9
Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a
Matthew 20:1-6

Dear brothers and sisters, esteemed radio audience, this day, the twenty-fourth of September, our church honors the Virgin under a very historical and very modern title: our Lady of Ransom. During the Middle Ages the Virgin under this title inspired an order of generous men who confronted the problem of slavery in Muslim prisons by organizing efforts to redeem the captives. Besides collecting great sums of money in Europe for this purpose, they made a vow to be held as prisoners themselves so that the captives could obtain their freedom. The defense of human rights is not just a contemporary concern; it has always been part of the Gospel message. From here, therefore, we greet all prisoners because today is the feast day of the patroness of penal centers. Today honor is paid to the Virgin through the prayer in those prisons, where there is much suffering.

Life of the church

Our Lady of Ransom is present today in the midst of the suffering of those imprisoned. She shines her light on who knows what cruelties, and she consoles those who are suffering in human isolation far from their families. She is the perfect symbol for our time. Yesterday I had the opportunity to celebrate Holy Mass and the sacrament of confirmation with a group of women in the Women's Center for Rehabilitation, commonly known as the women's prison. The presence of the Good Shepherd Sisters transforms that center into a true home of rehabilitation. The presence of a chapel in that community is like the presence of a sun shining into the shadows, and it almost doesn't feel like a prison. How beautiful is the presence of Christian hope and prayers of faith to illuminate harsh conditions as long as they are just! Prisoners have to pay for their faults, but they should find in prison a school to help them be reintegrated back into society. I want to congratulate the Good Shepherd Sisters for their work, which is a model for what should be done in the prisons of our country. May the witness of the Virgin that inspires holiness in those religious women as they minister to the prisoners be an inspiration to us all.

Also on the occasion of the feast of our Lady of Ransom, we celebrated in the church of María Auxiliadora the first communion for many children who had been prepared by the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. These sisters collaborate with us here in El Salvador in the Colegio Eucarístico, in the educational center of San Martín, and in the Colegio Eucarístico of San Vicente. So many generations have been educated under this wonderful devotion! We also send greetings to the sisters on this day of their patroness, our Lady of Ransom.

Last Sunday we were in Apulo, a village whose patroness is our Lady of Sorrows. The Carmelite Sisters and Father Fabían, who administers that parish, showed me in a very pleasant meeting what it means to be a church that is composed of ecclesial base communities. They showed me how people are made conscious of their Christian calling and how they develop a critical, Gospel-based awareness regarding the realities of our country. These groups are the ones that are often persecuted, dissolved, and terrorized, but I can assure you that their meetings are focused strictly on the Gospel. Naturally, when the Gospel is truly absorbed and digested, the people form critical consciences and object to the established order when that order does not meet the Gospel standards of justice. The Gospel collides with those realities that are opposed to it, but the church cannot stop using the Gospel to develop the consciousness of her Christians.

On the feast of Saint Matthew, Thursday, September 21, I also found much Christian awareness in Santiago, Texacuangos, where Father Teodoro Alvarenga and the Belgian Sisters of Saint Nicholas are forming a community that inspires great hope. These Belgian Sisters of Saint Nicholas also have another community in Cojutepeque, and that same day, Thursday, I was able to greet them and also their superior general, Mother María Javier, who is visiting El Salvador. I thanked her for the collaboration that the sisters have been giving us in these lands far from their homes. May God reward them!

Also, today in Aguilares the Sacred Heart Sisters and Father Octavio Cruz are holding a Christian encounter for the purpose of promoting ecclesial base communities, which are the formula not just for today but for always. In order for the Gospel to be meditated on in depth, people need that setting of small groups. But there is nothing subversive about those groups unless it is the subversion of the Gospel which denounces all that is unjust and which supports all that is just wherever it is found.

On Wednesday the people of Guazapa began to celebrate their novena in honor of Saint Michael, who will be honored there on September 29. There has been no lack of devotion in Guazapa. Even though the pastor was unjustly expelled during the fateful days of the military occupation of that region, the Carmelite sisters have worked hard to maintain the pastoral spirit and have tried to keep the activities strictly religious and Gospel-oriented. Some lay people are complaining about not having a priest, but I remind them that we're making every effort to make sure a priest is there. He will perform exclusively priestly ministry: Mass, confessions, and whatever the sisters and the lay people can't do. If there are some who are unhappy with this situation, I say to them, «Dear Catholics of Guazapa, what are you doing yourselves? You are church; how are you collaborating? Must the priest also dedicate himself to constructing material temples? That is not the work of the priest; it is the work of lay people. You should feel that the church is yours, and you should collaborate in those areas where you as lay folk have more competency than we priests do. I beg you, then, to be considerate and to continue collaborating eagerly with the community that the sisters are promoting there».

I want to express again my congratulations to Bishop Rivera for his twenty-fifth anniversary of ordination, which was actually this past week, Tuesday the nineteenth. There in his native village, San Esteban Catarina, the people offered wonderful testimony of their respect and affection for the priesthood and the unity of the faithful. There I also had the opportunity of greeting the ten Vincentian priests who, thanks be to God, are fully restored to

their ministry¹. I want to commend them because during this ...[Applause] Many thanks for this applause that I don't ask for but you spontaneously offer. But I want to tell those priests that here in the Cathedral of San Salvador we understand their testimony of unity with and affection for the people. And I can assure you, sisters and brothers, that they are not communists. As we have said before, they are priests who are socially aware, and from their Gospel perspective they make demands which may be very easy to confuse with communism, but the Gospel is not communist; it is just and seeks social justice.

I also want to thank the Lord and ask your prayers of gratitude for the fifty years of priesthood and the fifty years of Redemptorist presence in El Salvador. I had the good fortune to celebrate on the twenty-second with Fathers Eladio Cuznego, Jesús García, Joaquín Mendoza, and Félix Palacios, and I once again extend my congratulations to them for their fifty years of priestly life. May the Lord reward you for all the good you have done in our parishes and wherever obedience has taken you.

I also want to express here the solidarity of the hierarchy of the archdiocese with the Colegio Sagrado Corazón that has once again become the object of facile criticism². They are being accused of Marxist indoctrination and tendentious criticism of the national hymn. How superficial the accusations of our critics are! When they say they're going to appeal to the Ministry of Culture to investigate the criminal action being perpetrated with these girls, they have forgotten that the Ministry of Culture itself in a recent seminar recommended that education should not be passive but should form the critical judgment of the students so that they know how to question even some versions of history. The national hymn is not a dogma. There is much in it that is beautiful and true, but this truth and beauty should be related to the reality of the country so that we're not singing about something that doesn't really exist. We should be working so that the beauty of the hymn is translated into the realities of our country. Let me tell you, sisters and brothers, that simplistic accusations about communism and communist indoctrination are ridiculous.

Here I want to remind you of some eloquent words that the priests and religious of Nicaragua addressed to President Carter about the situation there. In treating this point, they state:

The anticommunist argument is wielded today, like yesterday, to make it appear that the present situation is unchangeable. The Latin American bishops already warned us in Medellín that for unjust governments «it will be very easy to find apparent justifications that are ideological (for example, anticommunism) or practical (preservation of order) in order to consolidate their power» (M 2,6). The tragic reality that is the Somoza regime has deprived *campesinos* of their lands «so that the communists won't take them away from them»; it has kept low levels of employment «so that the communist won't condemn people to forced labor»; it has engaged in unfair competition with private enterprise «so that the communists won't receive financing»; it has sent dissident soldiers to prison «so that they won't be tools of communism». In Nicaragua it is very

¹ In March 1978 Pedro Arnaldo Aparicio, bishop of San Vicente, suspended from priestly ministry ten priests of his diocese for having signed a letter which questioned the actions of the apostolic nuncio, Emmanuele Gerada. The priests appealed to the Vatican and were restored to ministry in August of the same year. See *El Diario de Hoy* (23 August 1978).

² *La Prensa Gráfica* (23 September 1978).

difficult to find a social sector which the governing group has not accused in one form or other of being communist or an instrument of the communists³.

This letter, which is addressed to President Carter, goes on to say, «Here in Nicaragua it has even been said of your government, Mr. President, that it is in the hands of leftists»⁴. I want to add also that when Pope Paul VI wrote the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, it was called «warmed-over Marxism». Whenever people touch the wound that is the source of injustices and the reason for the lack of peace, it is easy to say, «They're communists». For this reason the church fully supports the work that the Colegio Sagrado Corazón is doing to help students develop a Gospel-inspired awareness.

On this feast of our Lady of Ransom, the Catholic Church of our archdiocese also rejoices at the conclusion of a youth encounter at the San José de la Montaña Seminary. Many young men soon to graduate from high school are reflecting there about the great problem every young person has to face: for what purpose has God given me life? Let us hope that their response is magnificent. Being a priest means giving a life to God. As Saint Paul tells us today, it is the most beautiful ideal human life can have. Even if you don't have a priestly vocation, remember that serving humankind as a married person or as a lay professional is also a worthy vocation. You should not view a profession only as a means to earn money and to gain political or social status. You must do what today's young people are doing: seek to serve humanity. The best return on one's life comes not from earning but from serving. What a beautiful thing youth is! From here we send an enthusiastic greeting to those hopeful vocations. Indeed, they will be giving us a problem next year because we no longer have space in the seminary to accommodate the great many vocations the Lord is sending us. But space is the least of our concerns. Generosity is what counts.

I also want to inform you in this moment of church life that the new edition of our pastoral letter has also been exhausted and that a third edition is being prepared, to which we will add some annexes and questions to help in group reflections.

If we turn our gaze from the local church to the universal church, we now happily find the figure of the pope gaining more sympathy day by day. Yesterday he went to take possession of his cathedral as bishop of Rome. You know that the pope, besides being the universal pastor, is also the bishop of Rome. As the bishop of Rome his cathedral is not Saint Peter's Basilica but the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, which since the first centuries has been considered the residence of the pastor of Rome. When the pope first introduced himself in Rome with a discourse at which the civil authorities were present, he said that as pastor of the eternal city he would work for justice and peace in the city⁵. So you see that this theme of justice is not something invented to win applause. Rather, it is the church's right and duty to point out that we cannot allow the sources of world peace to be poisoned by injustice. The first role of the church is to work for justice as the source of peace wherever Providence sends one of her ministers, whether it be a pope or a humble country priest.

The pope also reminded the North American bishops that the family is the cornerstone of the Catholic Church and that divorce cannot be allowed to destroy the family. I would like to

³ «Letter of the Council of Priests of the Archdiocese of Managua to Jimmy Carter, President of the United States of America», 15 September 1978, in *Orientación* (1 October 1978).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ JOHN PAUL I, «Discourse to the Mayor of Rome», 23 September 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (1 October 1978).

take advantage of this news to make a call for stronger families in our society. How wonderful it is when each member of the society can say, «I have a well-organized family!» Dear sisters and brothers, this is also the basis for a more balanced, ordered, tranquil, and just society—a society with faithful families blessed by the Lord who gives meaning to families. I don't have time, but the pope's discourse, which came out in the newspapers⁶, points out many valuable ways for us to strengthen or restore our family life. Here we all have to work hard and make an effort so that our Salvadoran families become true Christian families.

In another discourse⁷ the pope insisted on the need for the church to get involved in the great problems of freedom, justice, and peace by undertaking studies and recommending solutions. He also stressed the need for lay Catholics to work hard to resolve these problems. He made a very useful clarification in saying that the political, social, or economic liberation that many people seek does not coincide with salvation in Jesus Christ. Let us understand this properly. In my pastoral letter⁸ I explain to you that one of the church's services is to support people's efforts on behalf of their just demands, and that the greatest service the church can provide is to share with the people her own criterion of liberation. When the pope says, «They do not coincide», he means that Christian liberation is not measured by earthly liberation. But he doesn't mean that those earthly efforts for liberation should be neglected; rather, as I say in the pastoral letter, they should be assumed and integrated into Christian liberation. To all those who work for a better world and more just society, the pope says, «All that work is good, but remember that it doesn't all end there. Human beings also have an eternal, divine vocation, and if we want to create for them a more just world as they pass through this earth, then let us not forget that the crucial thing is their supreme liberation, the liberation that Christ brought, the liberation that saves them from sin and elevates them in grace to be children of God who are to live eternally free». In this sense, then, we can say with the pope, «The two liberations don't coincide, but neither are they divorced from one another». Consequently, we cannot claim that we agree with the pope when we prescind from the things of earth in order to think only of the things of heaven. The pope also supports all the efforts on behalf of justice and freedom in the world.

Here is another wonderful aspect of our Catholic life today: the Polish church ordered read in all the pulpits of Poland a pastoral letter signed by all the bishops. The social life of a nation, they declare, requires openness and free expression of public opinion. The people who control the means of communication in both Poland and El Salvador have in mind only their own interests. In both countries, it can be said, we have the right and the duty to express our criticisms and our opinions. If these efforts on behalf of freedom are not valued, say the Polish bishops, that means that those who hold power are treating us merely as objects and their aim is to manipulate the citizens by depriving them of the opportunity to state their opinions publicly.

Look, sisters and brothers, in whatever situation the church finds herself—not only here where the situation is not communist but capitalist but also in Poland where the situation is not capitalist but communist—the church refuses to ally herself with either communism or with capitalism. Rather, she proclaims the freedom of the Gospel. As I've told you many times,

⁶ *El Diario de Hoy* (22 September 1978).

⁷ JOHN PAUL I, «Catechesis at the General Audience of 20 September 1978» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (24 September 1978).

⁸ *The Church and the People's Political Organization*, (6 August 1978) 27-28.

you must learn how to read the newspapers⁹ because what the Polish bishops are saying here is quite sad. They claim that the very media that have the duty to inform people and to satisfy the right to information that all people have often become instruments manipulated by political or economic power in order to distort or falsify the news, which then is no longer information but becomes instead expressly political.

This church, which is being built up with that mystical but humble presence that I have discerned in the realities of our archdiocese, is nonetheless surrounded also by a much more gigantic world, it seems. How often I am struck by the idea of poor David confronting Goliath! The church is David, but when Goliath made fun of him because of his small stature, David retorted, «You come against me supported by your armies and your might, but I come against you supported by the name of the Lord» (1 Sam 17:45). And in the name of the Lord the humble little shepherd David brought down the arrogant Goliath with a small stone flung at his forehead. The church has to confront the great giants of every age: the idols that people adore. How can this be done? I'll tell you toward the end of this homily, but before that I want us all to realize that the whole of this church is one and the same church. I just now made that point with you in speaking of the concrete realities here in the archdiocese, in Poland, in Rome, and wherever the church exists. On this Sunday, the twenty-fourth of September, in all her churches and chapels people are reading exactly what our young readers have read here today: chapter 55 of Isaiah, the first chapter of Philipians, and chapter 20 of Matthew. What magnificent discipline!

The Gospel of Saint Matthew has nourished the universal people of God throughout this year. As I told you, it is a brilliantly organized gospel. To the many people who asked for one, I have sent a copy of the outline of the gospel that is found in the Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels in the Jerusalem Bible. All the passages we've read on previous Sundays refer to the church and the kingdom of God as a community that is already beginning here among you, among us, among all who believe in Christ and follow him. In these chapters Matthew has given us the norms for what this community should be like, what perspectives it should have, and how its head and foundation is the pope. The gospel is now coming almost to its final part as the church year is also ending. Chapters 19 to 25 of Saint Matthew reveal to us the crisis that the church, the kingdom of God, must endure before it is definitively established. In those chapters you find magnificent parables, such as the one read today, that speak about the conflicting thoughts and the difference of criteria between God and human beings. This whole passage will end with the majestic discourse of Christ called the «eschatological discourse», where Christ tells us about the end of history and the beginning of eternity and where he also tells us about the final judgment: «Come, blessed of my Father, because all the good you did for my poor people you did for me. Depart into the eternal fire, accursed ones, because all that you failed to do, all your oppressive and unjust actions, all your exclusions of undesirables—all those times you despised the poor you were despising me» (Matt 25:34-41).

That magnificent discourse we are offered this Sunday ends this section of the gospel, and for that reason, since we're accustomed to presenting a synthesis of our thoughts, I will title today's homily, «The Crises in the Kingdom of God». In explaining the crises foretold in today's reading, my first thought is to investigate what God's thought is in those readings; the second is how God's thought provokes crises in the thoughts of human beings; the third idea is how Saint Paul portrays himself in today's second reading as a Jew who experienced that crisis

⁹ «Catholic Church Challenges Polish Government» in *Diario de Hoy* (18 September 1978).

but resolved it in favor of the kingdom of God, and how all of us are called now, like Paul, to resolve our own crises. If at this time, 1978, there are people who don't experience religious crises, then they are not in touch with reality. I'm not surprised that there are crises. Many people have already resolved them in the way Saint Paul did. Others have resolved them as Paul *might* have done, by hating the church.

What the thought of God is

But first let us look at the thought of God in today's readings. The Isaiah reading today ends beautifully: «My thoughts are not like your thoughts. As high as the sky is above the earth, so high are my ways above the ways of humans» (Isa 55:8-9). And the ending of Christ's parable today brings us face to face with the crisis that he himself is about to undergo in his own life—in this section the narrative of Christ's passion is already beginning. When the workers in the vineyard complain about their pay, Christ says that his payments are generous; the way he rewards people is not the way they think: «Just because you're grudging in your calculations, you want to think that I, as God, am not good?»

What is it about God's thought that puts it far above our human thoughts? May God be blessed that he does not identify with our human way of thinking! Many people indeed would like to have what that song calls «a pocket God», a God who fits comfortably with my idols, a God who is satisfied with the way I pay my workers, a God who approves of my atrocities. How can some people pray the «Our Father» to a God whom they treat as one of their servants or one of their employees?

Isaiah says today that God lets himself be found. «Seek God while he may be found» (Isa 55:6). He is a God who draws near so that we can call on him. He is a God «rich in forgiveness», always offering his mercy (Isa 55:7). Dear sinful sisters and brothers, I, the greatest sinner among you all, want to communicate to you the joy and the hope that I experience in my own misery when I realize that the God whom I adore is a God «rich in forgiveness» who calls me to be devoted to him. That I is why I try to draw close to him, not with arrogance and not wanting him to descend to my miserable state, but trying to repent of my sins and encouraging everyone to seek him. As Isaiah says today, «Seek him while he may be found» (Isa 55:6). A time will come when it will be too late, and I for one don't want to face that hour of God's judgment, which will be terrible for those who do not seek him when he can be found.

In today's gospel God appears as the one who takes the initiative. He goes out looking for workers. Sisters and brothers, do you think that we are here in the cathedral by our own initiative? In one sense we are because we are free, and nobody has forced us to come. But this is how God's grace works: he made us free, and he follows up our freedom with his motivating grace so that we'll use this freedom to look for him. Therefore, the initiative to come to Mass starts with God who gave us freedom and who also motivates me to do what is good. People don't come to church to hold a meeting; they come to adore God. People don't come to church out of political curiosity; they come with devotion in search of God. How wonderful it is to know that the Lord is searching for us all the hours of our lives!

The vineyard owner went in search of workers as day was beginning to dawn, at the first hour according to the Roman way of keeping time. And he went out again at the third hour, around nine in the morning; then at the sixth hour, at noon; and again at the ninth and finally at the eleventh hour, as the day was ending. And still he was calling workers: «Come and

work. What are you doing standing idle here in the square?» «Because nobody has sought us out». «Come, and I will pay you what is just» (Matt 20:1-7). According to the labor system of that time, which naturally was unjust, the owner could pay whatever he wanted. But that is not what the parable is praising. What the parable wants to praise is the initiative and the generosity of God in giving the same pay to those hired at the eleventh hour as to those who came at the first hour. God's payment is generous. It may be that those who came at the first hour become angry with God because they think they are owners of the church: «We are the good people. You people who just arrived are the bad people. We want their pay to be less than ours. We feel that we have put God in debt to us».

We are before God, sisters and brothers, and here we are coming to know God. The God who reveals himself to us is a God who calls even the greatest sinner at the last hour of his life, and if that person returns with love and recognizes God.... Do you remember Dismas, the good thief? «Remember me when you come into your kingdom!» And Christ tells that thief who is being executed, «Today you will be with me in Paradise» (Luke 23:42-43). How rich is God in forgiveness and mercy! Before God we have no privileges or rights. If we have served God from our earliest years, then blessed be God! We have used our life well. But that doesn't give us the right to feel that we are owners of the church. Even if we are bishops, even if we are priests, we may be more in need of God's mercy than sinners who have just converted and who by their love are perhaps closer to God those who think they own the church. God is kind. No one can judge his initiatives. Appeal to his mercy; beg like the good thief just to be remembered, and God will do more than remember you.

I am trying to present to you the God of the Bible, the God of today's readings. That's what our God is like. Blessed be God who lets us know that he calls us at every hour and at every hour is ready to receive us, no matter what crimes we have committed. That is why, sisters and brothers, I repeat again what I have said here so often before when by the radio I have addressed those who are responsible for so many injustices and so much violence, those who have caused weeping in so many homes, those who are stained with the blood of so many murders, those whose hands are tarnished with torture, those who have hardened their consciences and feel no pain at seeing beneath their boots so many people humiliated, suffering, perhaps near death. To all of them I say, «Your crimes do not matter. They are ugly and horrible. You have violated the highest dignity of the human person. But God calls you and forgives you».

It is perhaps here that those who see themselves as workers hired at the first hour feel disgusted and ask, «How is it that I'm going to be in heaven with those criminals?» Sisters and brothers, in heaven there are no criminals. The greatest criminals, once they have repented of their sins, are now children of God. In Jesus' time the respectable folk kept pointing at the prostitute Mary Magdalene even when she was weeping for her sins: «Look, if he were really a prophet, he would realize who that woman is who is touching him» (Luke 7:39). But Christ came to her defense: «She is no longer a sinner for she has loved much and she has repented of her faults; she is already Saint Mary Magdalene» (Luke 7:47). The sins of the past no longer count; they dissolve. That's why Christian justification is called rebirth. That's what Christ told Nicodemus: «If you are not born again ...» (John 3:3). All those who repent of their faults leave behind the evil of their past lives as if shedding an old skin and donning a new one; they now have nothing to do with what was left in the past! Think of how the butterfly is born again as it leaves its cocoon and becomes a new creature. Blessed be God! This is the generosity of God.

We cannot understand it because all we know how to do is utter the cruel words, «I forgive, but I don't forget». That is not Christian. God forgives and forgets.

The thought of God provokes crises among humans

What kind of reaction does God's thought produce? The God who reveals himself as so tremendously generous finds people in conflict with one another. The parable says, «They grumbled against the master» (Matt 20:11). One of the most serious conflicts in the history of the church is the one that comes to light here in this section of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, and it's also a conflict that Saint Paul had to suffer in his own flesh. Paul realized that Christ had brought a new religion, but the Jews, who were living by the old religion preached by Moses, thought that it was necessary to continue to observe the Jewish laws. Meanwhile, Paul and those who preached to the non-Jewish Christians were telling them that it was not necessary to become a Jew, to get circumcised, or to keep the law of Moses. All they had to do was believe in Christ.

That is how the conflict arose that is reflected in today's parable. The aim of this parable of the workers in the vineyard reflects the earliest crisis of Christianity. There were Pharisees and other Jews who converted to Christianity, but they felt that they were the owners of Christianity since the Bible was Jewish and so was Christ. They claimed that they had been adoring God from long before— from the dawning of the day—and so they felt they had special rights. For them, these Gentiles that Saint Paul was finding and telling about the same Christ were only second-class Christians. But Saint Paul and the early Christian community argued that only in Christ was there salvation; Jews could not be saved by observing the law of Moses but only by believing in Christ. And so the Gentiles and the pagans were saved by Christ. Neither Jew nor Gentile had any rights apart from giving thanks to the Christ. And this was how the first community resolved the crisis, just as today's parable is resolved by paying all the workers equally. That is, the crisis was resolved when Christians realized that their God, as I just explained to you, is a God who does not recognize any privilege except the holiness of persons, wherever it comes from. For God, then, there are no social classes. For God there are no categories of human beings. The only category is believing in Christ and living in accord with that belief. We find the explanation for this in today's readings: «My thoughts are not like your thoughts» (Isa 55:8). «Are you envious because I am generous?» (Matt 20:15).

The present-day conflict in the church is similar to those earlier ones. People call themselves progressives or traditionalists. There are those whose spirituality makes them think only about heaven, and they consider all the church's earthly efforts to be communistic. There are others who are so preoccupied with the things of earth that they forget the transcendence of heaven. These conflicts exist today, but let us remember, sisters and brothers, what the Council tells us: the vocation of human beings is both earthly and heavenly (GS 11). And it is precisely today's first reading that gives us a framework for interpreting our present situation.

When Isaiah talks about seeking God while he may be found (Isa 55:6), he is not forgetting about the things of earth. To the contrary, Isaiah is preaching during the bitter exile, at a time when the Jews find themselves excluded from their homeland. Now the hour to return has arrived; the banishment is soon to be lifted. So Isaiah tells them that it is not enough to return to the homeland; they must return as a renewed people because God's punishment for a

people's sins is slavery. To return to the homeland and the freedom of God they must have a change of heart.

You can see, then—and this is something you can study in the pastoral letter—why I say that the church provides a very important service for people's just temporal demands by incorporating them into and pointing them toward the transcendental form of liberation¹⁰. This is a liberation that does not forget about that God whom we must seek. Any liberation that fails to take into account liberation from sin is not the liberation God wants. As the bishops of Medellín say—so that you'll see that they're not communists!—it is no use to change structures, governments, and situations as long as the human heart does not also change (M 1,3). What use is it to have new structures if the human heart is still selfish? We will simply have new people in old situations¹¹. What the church wants is interior renewal and a transcendent vision that seeks true freedom. Without the divine, eternal perspective of God, earthly liberations are of little or no use. Keep this very much in mind so that no one later claims that we are preaching communism and class struggle. What we are preaching is the renewal of human beings, the transcendence of God, and the love that comes to us from above, as hard as all this may be for us.

How the crises are resolved

Finally, then, how is this crisis, how are these conflicts resolved? I don't have time for what I would like to do, sisters and brothers, but you can do it yourselves. Open your Bibles and finish reading today's second scriptural passage. Today we read only three verses of St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, as far as verse fifteen. Saint Paul is in prison, wearing chains. There he is informed that some of his rivals are going about preaching Christ, as if to tell him that he's no longer necessary and might as well die in prison (Phil 1:13). Saint Paul responds, «As long as Christ is preached, even if it's done hypocritically, what difference does it make? What matters is that Christ becomes known. That gives me consolation in my chains because I know that you are being united to Christ and are praying for me, and I am bearing witness here in prison» (Phil 1:15-19). Paul is not afraid of death, but he claims that God has inspired him to believe that he will be freed again in order to continue working.

There are some exquisite verses in the first chapter—I mean the third chapter— where Saint Paul summarizes the glories of being a Jew: «The Jewish Christians boast, but I can boast even more than they. I am a Hebrew. I am from the tribe of Benjamin. I bear circumcision on my flesh. Nevertheless, I consider everything as loss for the sake of gaining Christ» (Phil 3:4-8). In today's reading Paul tells us, «I feel in myself a conflict between dying in order to be happy with Christ and staying alive in order to work for him on earth. Clearly it is better for me to leave» (Phil 1:23-24). See how true Christians desire death! See how they resolve their crises of faith in great hope and great joy! But they are not evading reality; to be thinking of heaven is not alienation. For Paul says, «Since I must choose between these two alternatives, it seems more useful for me to remain here preaching Christ to you, not for my own happiness but for your benefit. I therefore decide to remain. *Mihi vivere Christus*—for me to live is Christ» (Phil 1:21,25). What a beautiful phrase! Paul is saying, «My own life now has no other meaning than preaching Christ. I will honor him in my life and in my death. My eternity still awaits me, and I

¹⁰ *The Church and the People's Political Organizations* (6 August 1978) 27.

¹¹ Romero possibly meant the adjectives to be reversed.

will live eternally with him». Sisters and brothers, this is the best way to react to the crises of faith and to all difficult situations.

I already told you to read the whole of that letter to the Philippians—there are only five chapters—because Saint Paul spells out there some norms about the courage we need today to confront situations that are very similar to the ones he experienced. Paul is not the least bit cowardly. Even the prison chains make him joyful, he tells us, because «I am making Christ known here to the praetorian guards» (Phil 1:12-14). It's as though someone who was chained up here in a prison of the National Guard were to say, «I am making this Christ in whom I believe known to those who want to listen». Many praetorians were converted by Paul because God calls everyone. Even the torturer is being called by God. Christ will be the answer to all our human crises, but some people have not found Christ, and no one can be happy except in finding the Lord. So then, sisters and brothers, let us experience the crisis of our church not in cowardly fashion but by being ever more true to our faith, to our Christ.

So this is one thing that I insist on, that we live true to this church that is nourished by these Gospel principles, whatever the circumstances around us. But let us not make the church consist in relations with the powers of earth. If those relations are good, blessed be God! If they aren't so good, well, we're not bothered about them. If Saint Paul is free, he will preach Christ. If they have him in chains, he is also preaching Christ. «The word of God is not chained», says Saint Paul (2 Tim 2:9). That's why the word of God is our strength. For us the solution to our crises is believing in Christ, loving Christ, and not being afraid of the truth Christ offers us because of what others think.

Events of the week

This church does not live for herself either; she lives for the world. I think I've run out of time, but I must tell you, sisters and brothers, something about the realities affecting our church so that we truly experience the reality of our world.

The main news today is Nicaragua. You're all informed already about this situation. I only want to tell you that we are in solidarity with the Nicaraguan bishops. Bishop Salazar has declared that, along with the people of León, he is deeply offended by the methods being used by the government forces. The bishop of León stated that in that city there is no freedom and that the people should be given back what is rightly theirs. Likewise, Archbishop Obando of Managua met with President Somoza to ask him not to bomb the city, but despite that, said the archbishop, three churches were destroyed and whole neighborhoods were bombarded, «when it was not necessary to do that». We are in solidarity with the bishops, then, and with the excellent letter that the priests and religious of Nicaragua addressed to President Carter with regard to the situation in Managua¹². It was a very courageous letter that agreed with an editorial from West Germany that was read on the Voice of America today. The whole situation in Nicaragua is the fruit of policies that supported only business interests and had little concern for the people. Let us hope that this lesson will be studied here.

I want to tell you, sisters and brothers, that as a way of entering into deeper solidarity with our sister republic, we're going to have three days of prayer here in the cathedral; they will be tomorrow Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, at seven o'clock in the evening. We will

¹² *Orientación* (1 October 1978).

have three holy hours to ask the Lord for the needed graces, for the eternal rest of so many who have died by violence, and for inspiration for those who are able to resolve this situation. We also want to ask you the faithful for economic assistance. Aid is already coming from the churches of Germany, the Church World Service, Caritas of Spain, the Central American Church, and several ecumenical movements. I am therefore going to ask our beloved priests to collect cash donations from their faithful because we cannot send food or clothing. Instead we will send to the Archbishop of Managua whatever amount our church collects. Let us hope that for the next meeting of the clergy, which will be the first Tuesday of October, the priests will be able to bring whatever they have collected for Nicaragua in their various communities.

We can call this week that is ending a week of violence; so many things have happened. Yesterday a list of the crimes came out in the press¹³, but the list is still not complete because on Sunday the seventeenth in Zacatecoluca they killed a *campesino* while he was shopping. On Monday the eighteenth two guards died at the National University. The incidents at the university this past week, according to a great many students, were provoked by the university guards who are keeping that educational center in a state of upheaval. On the eighteenth several people saw the university guards chasing students, even beyond the area of the campus. That same day the dean of the faculty of economics, Doctor Carlos Rodríguez, was gunned down and killed. There has been much speculation about this deed, but it still remains clouded in mystery. A clandestine group calling itself UR-19 spoke on a city radio station and claimed responsibility for the crime, but this same group, UR-19, also denied involvement. This arouses suspicions that the story is being manipulated in order to cover up something.

This week when some professionals and politicians brought before the Assembly a petition for the repeal of the Law of Public Order, they also denounced the reports blaming the guards for most of the crimes being deplored at the university. The president of the Assembly responded that that was the information received from other sectors. I have also had very reliable reports stating that Doctor Carlos Rodríguez had already had some very unpleasant encounters with the guards and that it was not impossible that they were responsible for this crime that they're now trying to cover up. We want to say that the university security force originally consisted of seventy-five members: seventy guards, one director, and four supervisors. Now they say there are about 300 individuals who are terrorizing the university. Once again I hereby call upon the Supreme Court of Justice. This is another crime that must be investigated; it should become one more of the many mysteries that injustice is concealing here in El Salvador. I also express my condolences to the family of this esteemed professor.

On that same day, the eighteenth, the car of the treasurer of the university was attacked near the Colonia Nicaragua; as a result, one person was killed, and a young woman was wounded and taken to the hospital. We have information from the hospital that this young woman, Cristina Salguero Arriaza, 15 years of age, was wounded in the left thigh by a G3 bullet. She was taken to the hospital by the National Police, whose agents stated that she had been involved in the incidents that occurred that day at the entrance to the Colonia Nicaragua. At the present time she is in the custody of security agents and two detectives. The patient is concerned that when released from the hospital she'll be taken to the police station, and she wonders what will become of her there. She says she has no relatives who can intervene on her behalf since she lives alone with her mother in a small house in the San Antonio neighborhood. Her income comes from washing and ironing clothes for families. We suppose that since she is

¹³ *El Diario de Hoy* (23 September 1978).

in custody she will be brought before the courts, as is the right of every citizen, so that her case will be judged fairly and not become another mystery of injustice.

On Tuesday the nineteenth two treasury police were gunned down and killed, and several posts of the National Police were attacked. A number of cases have been brought before the courts of persons accused of violating the Law of Public Order. Dead bodies are also appearing on the road to Apulo, and so on.

I want to tell you, sisters and brothers, that as we analyze this terribly tragic week, we can only conclude that it is the product of the moral disintegration of criminal groups. They attempt to solve this problem of violence by battling against it, increasing the repression, and intensifying surveillance; they are also threatening to suspend the present guarantees. That is not the way to keep peace. We have said this so many times! When the lawyers along with a political party presented the petition of amnesty to the Assembly and another petition for repeal of this law, they also presented there the conclusions of Doctor Donald Fox¹⁴, a representative of the Human Rights Commission. I mentioned those conclusions on another occasion, and for lack of time I won't go into them again. But Doctor Fox says that this situation cannot be controlled with violence and repressive laws, and in his legal analysis he argues that this law cannot lead to democratization or bring solutions to the nation's problems.

A call is going out to the families of disappeared persons for them to go to the Red Cross. You can find information in the papers, and if you need any information from the archbishop's office, we'll be happy to give it to you.

We have also received a request for help from those depressed neighborhoods where the flooding from the recent storms has left many families homeless. So I beg you, just as we were asking for help for Nicaragua, so also any charity you can offer for these situations will be especially blessed by God.

The campaign of repression continues against the right of workers to organize unions. Yesterday a letter the pope wrote when he was a bishop was read on YSAX; it is a courageous defense of the right of workers to unionize¹⁵. This morning I also received from the Ministry of National Education in France a letter expressing solidarity with the teachers of El Salvador¹⁶. The letter, which was given to Doctor Astacio while he was in Paris, asks that the teachers of our country be respected.

Dear sisters and brothers, you see how intense our life is. Meanwhile, our church tries to shed the light of the Gospel on these harsh realities; she cannot ignore all that is going on. I don't think I have strayed from the message of the Gospel. From my own position as one who illuminates the faith, I also illuminate those realities so that each of you can see all the good things that can be supported and all the evil things that must be repudiated. The church would not be fulfilling her mission in society if she were, as the prophet said, simply «a mute dog» who did not guard her Lord's inheritance (Isa 56:10).

¹⁴ «Report of the International Commission of Jurists on the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order. Report of Donald T. Fox», *ECA* 359 (1978) 779-786.

¹⁵ *Orientación* (1 October 1978).

¹⁶ Letter of Jacques George, national secretary of the General Union of National Education of France, addressed to Doctor Julio E. Astacio, vice-president of the government of El Salvador. See *Orientación* (15 October 1978).

For this reason, sisters and brothers, our Eucharist today will join with our Lady of Ransom, a beautiful image of the church as a voice for freedom in the midst of captivities, in praying to the Lord, «Lord, give us a nation that is truly worthy, a nation illuminated by the light of your Gospel». Let it be so. [Applause]