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RETURNING HOME¹

16 February 1979

Dear fellow priests and faithful, for those who love their homeland, the most beautiful thing about a trip is coming back. I feel proud, satisfied, and profoundly happy to be with you again. This is returning home. I thank Father Cortés for his sincere words. I think they have faithfully interpreted the sentiments conveyed by your generous and spontaneous applause.

Dear sisters and brothers, as I return from Puebla, many ideas are racing through my mind. What I experienced there is so intense that I can't possibly relate it all in this short and emotional encounter. Nevertheless, allow me to weave my feeble ideas around a few thoughts: first, in Puebla I felt that I was the representative of a diocese at prayer; second, in Puebla I had no need to say a lot because I was preceded there by the testimony of our priests, our religious, our base communities, our parishes, and our faithful, for all of these created an aura around my presence in Puebla. And a third thought I would offer you is this: I bring from Puebla a heart and a mind enriched by the contact with so many pastors and with the pastor of pastors, the pope; they all lavished on me their experiences, their solidarity, their best wishes, their words, their greetings—all of which I now I present to the archdiocese.

In Puebla I felt that I was the representative of a diocese at prayer

In the first place, I want to thank you profoundly because I have felt more than ever the power of prayer. The church is built with prayer. As the kingdom of God among men and women, the church is pleasing to the Lord. I could feel your prayer as an impulse, as an inspiration, as a reality. Your prayer was not just the movement of lips that open to say «Our Father» in diverse forms; it was sincere supplication like that of the people in Egypt, a cry of anguish and pain before the Lord. It was prayer that trusted that that meeting of pastors of the Latin American continent would reveal an answer from God and would offer words to direct and strengthen and encourage the people.

I felt that God was responding to this supplication for he inspired those of us working in Puebla to compose a document which we will make known to you little by little. It is a pastoral masterpiece. Despite all that might be said, the Holy Spirit has triumphed. The Holy Spirit has responded to the prayers of many peoples, for it was not only my archdiocese—it was the whole continent at prayer. In God's eyes, this prayer has great power, for as Saint Augustine said, «Prayer is the weakness of God and the power of humans». I ask you, therefore, sisters and brothers, to continue to intensify the prayer that has risen up from this diocese. Let us convert the situation of our archdiocese by the power of prayer. Let us always respond to the

¹ On Friday 16 February 1979, Archbishop Romero returned from Puebla de los Ángeles, Mexico, after traveling there on 22 January to attend the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops. After being received at the airport, he went to the Cathedral of San Salvador to celebrate the Eucharist and greet the people. Before the homily Father Cristóbal Cortés said a few words of welcome. See *Monseñor Óscar A. Romero, su diario*, San Salvador 2000, 111-112.

harsh realities of our lives with a sigh toward God, just as the Israelites in Egypt cried out and God heard their cry. Let us continue to be a diocese at prayer.

In Puebla I had no need to say a lot because the testimony of the archdiocese said it all

Second, sisters and brothers, there is your own testimony. I want to thank you most sincerely, for as Saint Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, «There was no need for me to preach because you yourselves are showing how you have learned to respond to the Gospel of the Lord» (1 Thess 1:8). The experience was marvelous! I want to commend our beloved priests, the religious communities, and the faithful in general for the amazing testimony our diocese is giving at the level of the continent and of the world. I recall one morning when a bishop from France gave me a box containing five folders. He told me, «In fifteen days we collected twenty-two thousand signatures in France for the Diocese of San Salvador. Here they are». (Applause) These are the signatures of bishops and communities in distant France that marvel at the Christian faith of our communities.

Just the day before yesterday, there in Mexico, they invited me to a congress of base ecclesial communities. These Christians coming from all parts of Mexico asked me to tell them something about our experience in San Salvador. Let me tell you, sisters and brothers, I left that gathering satisfied. The theater of the Colegio México, with a capacity for almost a thousand persons, was completely full; they followed my words with great attention and then asked me about the reality of the church of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. I bring with me some letters they improvised on the spot, and I also bring with me the memories of those embraces and handshakes. So I can tell the beloved people of this archdiocese that the communities of Mexico are in full communion with this community of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. (Applause)

They know a great deal about us, sisters and brothers, and so I invite you tonight to respond to their expectations if you wish to do so. Let us be worthy of the good name the archdiocese has been gaining everywhere. I remember that on one of the first nights of the Puebla meeting, I met Bishop Helder Câmara, Bishop Proaño, and Cardinal Arns of Brazil. When they learned that I was the archbishop of San Salvador, they told me, «You have a lot to tell us, but we already know a lot. Your people are admirable. May they remain as faithful to the Gospel as they have been until now».

I told them about our painful experiences. I especially remember the impression left on them by the photographs of our fellow priest Octavio Ortiz, with his face crushed, and of those who died with him. And I remember that the news they had heard was often distorted with misinformation. Viewing those photographs, they truly felt the pain of our archdiocese as their very own! So profoundly did they feel it that they offered prayers so that the community of the archdiocese would remain faithful in these trials the Lord has put us through; they prayed that, despite everything, the diocese would follow the lines traced out by the Gospel.

Sisters and brothers, I don't think our archdiocese will find anything surprising in the Puebla document, which, I can tell you, is a treasure house. The document describes very well what we've already been doing. It is a Gospel call summoning the diocesan communities of Latin America to respond to the needs and the anxieties of people who have often been unjustly treated. Nevertheless, the document urges the church to accompany the people's

struggles, as Paul VI told me, «without violence, without hatred, without rancor». The strength of our community is in love. Let us continue to bear witness.

Sisters and brothers, I was extremely pleased to know that the message of your archbishop has been understood and that this humble seed sown in hearts as fine as those in our communities is bearing fruit. Indeed, it is flowering in a true epiphany of the Lord. Our diocese truly deserves our love, and each one of us should work for it by giving Christian example. We are not moved by worldly vainglory. When they asked me, for example, how I felt about being postulated for the Nobel Prize, I told them, «I don't work for that. I work for the Gospel». (Applause) The best decoration for me, dear sisters and brothers, much better than the Nobel Prize, is what I'm seeing right now in my cathedral: it is you! You are my joy! (Applause)

As Father Cortés said, I closely followed the life of the archdiocese while in Puebla. And now that I'm telling you how people in other places feel about the diocese, I can tell you how proud I felt when news reached me, for example, about the parade of priests and sisters and about the impact that the call to reflection had on our people².

I also felt joy at the solidarity of the clergy with their bishop. I was happy to be able to work tranquilly there in Puebla, knowing that here the authority of the church was well represented and loyally expressed by the vicar general, the vicars of the dioceses, and all the pastors. They have ably led the diocese as it should be led when everyone is inspired by the Gospel and when no rivalries or conflicts exist because we love only the great figure of the Good Shepherd. From the archbishop to the pastors and all the pastoral agents, we say with John the Baptist, «We want nothing more than to see Christ increase and ourselves decrease so that the Good Shepherd might be praised» (John 3:30).

Accept these words, then, in gratitude for your good example, your readiness even for martyrdom, and your spirit of solidarity and love, for these will join us together ever more closely. I want to bear solemn witness here to my affection for, my gratitude to, and my solidarity with all the priests. I have always defended them in stormy times, and I have insisted that it is false that my priests are sowing violence. (Applause) The Jesuits and all of us working in the archdiocese know that our inspiration comes from the Gospel. We recognize our deficiencies and our human defects, but we can never be blamed for being agents of hatred and violence. We are messengers of the Gospel. (Applause)

I bring from Puebla a heart and a mind enriched

Finally, sisters and brothers, I want to develop my third thought. Forgive me for going on so long, but when one returns from a journey, a family conversation can go on all night. Still, I'm not going to abuse your patience. If there was anything I brought to Puebla, I was simply serving as a tray on which were heaped great gifts of archdiocesan prayer and testimony and life. I felt that my archdiocese was enriching the reflection at Puebla even without my speaking. I know that my presence there embodied the presence of all of you, my priests, my

² On 30 January 1979 more than 500 priests, sisters, and members of the Christian communities of the Archdiocese of San Salvador and other dioceses walked in silence through the main streets of downtown San Salvador; they carried a banner saying, «¡Basta ya!» («Enough is enough».) *Orientación* (4 February 1979) and *La Prensa Gráfica* (31 January 1979).

communities. If any word needed to be spoken, it was strongly reinforced by your own reality; even silent testimony was sufficient because you were the force behind my presence in Puebla.

But I do bring back gifts from Puebla. When the pope arrived at the Puebla meeting, the corona of bishops gathered around the altar of celebration in the Palafoxiano Seminary. I sensed how the pope was truly the link that connected together all of us other links, the bishops. With the pope there in the Puebla meeting and with everyone taking part, we felt that every diocese was benefitting from what each bishop offered.

It was truly marvelous. During those days in Puebla, sisters and brothers, I experienced the church as I have seldom experienced her before. You know, not all of us could attend the meeting in the Puebla seminary. There were 350 participants in all, but outside the seminary there were groups of theological reflection. I visited these groups because we bishops needed the advice of theologians, sociologists, and people who could give us the benefit of their expertise, their experience, and their wisdom. I can tell you that I found the church truly authentic not only among the bishops meeting inside but also in the groups outside, which were providing a wealth of consultation. There was a sense that the whole of the church on the continent was concerned about evangelization and the richness of the Gospel. The bishops there gave me great strength, as did the presence of the pope and his marvelous discourse, which was completely in the same direction as the one our diocese is taking. The pope and the bishops have left a definite mark on this your pastor and servant, and now I feel truly empowered to serve you better to the extent of my poor abilities.

As evidence of this, I bring with me a letter that came out of one of those nighttime meetings when a group of bishops was reflecting with the theologians³. It's a beautiful letter of solidarity in which the bishops treat me as a brother and so use the familiar form of address. In the letter they tell me that they «understand how the Lord has placed on your shoulders a heavy cross of martyrs and misunderstandings, of exiles and sufferings, but you know that you can count on the support of your brothers and the communities we represent. Convey to your people the encouragement of these brothers of yours, and tell all the priests, religious, and faithful that we are in full communion with the Archdiocese of San Salvador». (Applause) This letter was a twin to the one that was sent to the bishops of Nicaragua, in which they said that the bishops at Puebla understood well the difficulties they faced in defending the people and that they were in full solidarity with the pastors of Nicaragua.

The final document of Puebla is very dense; it contains twenty-one chapters. All the realities of our America are expressed there. Those who were hoping that Puebla would take a step backward and censure Medellín have proven quite mistaken because Puebla has been a ratification of Medellín. (Applause) The harsh realities of our Latin American countries are fully reflected in the document. You can also find there the evangelical orientation that is demanded of pastors in Latin America, especially in countries where they must bear witness to the solidarity of the God who liberates peoples and who hears the cries and groans of those who suffer and cry out to the Lord (Exod 3:7). (Applause)

Sisters and brothers, little by little we'll be telling you more about this document because the riches of Puebla are riches of the Holy Spirit, and as Christ said, the Spirit will give

³ This letter, dated 10 February 1979 in Puebla de los Ángeles, was signed by Archbishop Helder Cámara, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, Bishop Leónidas Proaño, and twenty more bishops. *Orientación* (25 February 1979).

the words we need to respond to each circumstance (Luke 12:12). I have earnestly prayed to the Spirit of God concerning this treasure that he gave us in Puebla. At the closing Mass we placed the document at the feet of the Virgin of Guadalupe so that it would go forth from there to all the other countries under the various titles the Virgin has in those lands. The profusion of titles by which our peoples cry out to the Virgin is such a beautiful litany! I especially rejoiced when mention was made of the Virgin of Peace and the documents of Puebla were placed at her feet. We Salvadorans should learn to find there, under the protection of the Virgin, the response of the Spirit of God.

I won't tire you any longer, sisters and brothers. Thank you for having come. (Applause) And all of you in that great multitude who couldn't fit into the cathedral—many are perhaps listening to these words through the anonymity of your radios—I want you to know that I bring my heart, as always, full of love for everyone. (Applause) I harbor no resentments toward anyone. That's not something I learned in Puebla. I'm happy to have felt that way always. The evangelization that we studied in Puebla for the present and the future of Latin America must be carried out on a solid foundation of love. The evangelization is meant for everyone because no one is excluded from the call of God. But the Lord does set down one condition, «Be converted», because only those who are converted to the Lord and only those who abandon the false idols that alienate us from God will receive the gifts of evangelization. So be converted! (Applause)

My final request to everyone is that we pray sincerely so that all of us who are pastoral agents will know how to evangelize the world on the basis of love, justice, and peace. Let it be so. (Applause)