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THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN THE MIDST OF THE NATION'S CRISIS

The Transfiguration of the Lord

6 August 1979

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14

2 Peter 1:16-19

Mark 9:1-9

Among all these priests who have come to express their profound sense of ecclesial communion, I want us to feel also the presence of a much loved priest who died prematurely at the hands of assassins. Father Alirio Napoleón Macías is laid out now there in his parish of San Esteban Catarina, but he is present with us now as he was on so many other occasions. (Applause)

Dear sisters and brothers, it is a true privilege for us Salvadorans to be called the Republic of El Salvador and to celebrate each year as our titular feast the mystery of the Lord's transfiguration. As Pope Pius XII reminded us in his brilliant greeting to our eucharistic congress in 1942, «It was not only the piety of Don Pedro Alvarado that baptized us with lofty name of "San Salvador"; it is the providence of God that gives each people its own name, its own place, and its own mission»¹. Every year on August 6 we hear, as we heard today in our church's liturgy, the voice of the Father proclaiming that our patron is the same Son in whom he takes delight (Mark 9:7) and that our duty as his people is to listen to him. That constitutes our most precious historical and religious legacy and gives rise to our greatest hopes as Salvadorans.

That is why a pastor feels that his primary duty on this day is to apply that legacy to our own times and to refresh our motivations according to the new circumstances of each August 6. This is the guiding principle of my fourth pastoral letter, whose first fruits I lay here at the feet of the Divine Patron and present to you, dear sisters and brothers, as a service to the people of El Salvador. This fourth pastoral letter is titled «The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis». (Applause)

As the Patron of our country, the transfigured Christ presents to us a permanent challenge, the challenge of transfiguring our people. Every year the divine transfigured One comes to challenge this people with the words: «What have you done with my mystery? Am I not bringing about the transfiguration of this nation?» The mystery remains the same as it was last year and as it has been for centuries: it is the mystery of the divine transfigured One. The changes that take place are in the circumstances surrounding this transfiguration that is celebrated each year, for there are always new situations in the country and in the church.

¹ PIUS XII, «Radio message to the First National Eucharistic Congress of El Salvador», 26 November 1942.

We can say of our people, who are one part of the great peoples of Latin America, what Puebla has said of all our countries: «The people of Latin America are journeying amid anxieties and hopes, amid frustrations and expectations. Seen from the perspective of faith, the anxieties and frustrations have been caused by a sinful situation that has very broad personal and social dimensions. The hopes and expectations of our people are born of their profound religious sense and their rich humanity» (P 72,73). In you, dear multitude that fills this park before the cathedral, I greet all our Salvadoran people, who possess a generous share of that profound religious sense and rich humanity. But I also greet you in your anxieties and frustrations, which have been caused by the sin among us despite our being a people so richly privileged by the Lord's love.

We also see new situations in the church herself. This year the church is present with new treasures to encourage what is good and to do away with what is sinful. But the church also has new sins because she is made up of human beings, and all of us human beings are sinners. This year I have seen the legacy of the new popes, John Paul I and John Paul II, arise from the tomb of Paul VI, who died one year ago today. This legacy has been synthesized by the present pope as «the truth about Christ, the truth about the church, and above all the truth about the human person»². This treasure and heritage comes to us from the previous two popes, those of the Second Vatican Council³. And joined to this heritage is the mature experience of our own archdiocese, which I have consulted in the course of writing this pastoral letter⁴. I have welcomed the maturity, the boldness, the preferential option for the poor, and the wealth of ideas that you have given me during this consultation. As the Council says, «The whole people of God, guided by the church's teaching authority, shares in prophetic charism of Christ» (LG 12). You and I together, enriched by these treasures of the universal church and especially by Puebla, have written this fourth pastoral letter.

The objective of our celebration this year and of this pastoral letter is to make an official presentation to the archdiocese of the totality of the spirit of Puebla. The pope has recommended that our communities quickly take into account and put into practice the directives of that historic conference⁵. After sounding the sentiments of our own church, our aim is to shed new light on our national crisis with the help of the light of Puebla. In this way we are fulfilling a duty that is incumbent today on all Salvadorans, on all organizations, and on all the vital forces of our country. No one is to remain passive. On this day the church is contributing what it is her duty to contribute: all the richness of the church, all the maturity of the diocese, all the convictions of priests and bishop and people. That is to say, from our identity as church we are expounding what we think and what we can offer our country at this critical time.

The pastoral letter has four parts: the first deals with the national crisis according the pastoral vision of Puebla; the second part presents what the church can offer; the

² JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

³ The reference is to John XXIII and Paul VI.

⁴ Before writing the pastoral letter, Archbishop Romero sent a survey out to the priests and the base ecclesial communities of the archdiocese.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, «Message to the Bishops of Latin America», 23 March 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (1 April 1979).

third sheds ecclesial light on some concrete problems of the country; and the final part explains how the pastoral guidelines of Puebla have become those of our archdiocese.

The national crisis according to the pastoral vision of Puebla

I would synthesize the first point briefly in this way: the national crisis according to the vision of Puebla. Our vision is not that of political science or sociology or economics. That is not the church's role. Hers is a pastoral vision. Puebla worked hard to provide all the countries of Latin America with the basic elements for approaching the countries' problems in a pastoral way, and we have borrowed from Puebla's rich pastoral analysis what applies to our situation. This is not an exhaustive exposition, but we have kept in mind what you yourselves indicated in the survey.

First there is social injustice. That «muted cry» that was heard at Medellín, says Puebla, has now become a «clear, growing, impetuous, and at times menacing» cry (P 89). What Puebla calls «the most devastating and humiliating scourge» is the situation of human poverty seen in that long parade of concrete faces, the same ones I see in this multitude before me: children who have to earn their own living at a tender age, young people who have no opportunities of advancement, *campesinos* who lack the most basic necessities, workers whose rights are haggled over, people who are underemployed and living miserably on the fringes of society, and older folk who feel they have no place in history. All this grave social injustice is at the root of our crisis.

Second, added to this is the deteriorated political situation which institutionalizes this injustice. Puebla offers us a statement that we could well have written just for El Salvador: «Governments look askance at the organizing efforts of laborers, *campesinos*, and the common people, and they adopt repressive measures to prevent such organizing. But no such control or limitation is applied to the actions of employer organizations, which can freely exercise their power to protect their interests» (P 44). This discrimination appears clearly in the concrete situations of the past year. From January to July here in El Salvador there have been 406 murders; 107 of the victims were *campesinos*; not one was a large land owner. There have been 307 persons arrested, of whom 129 were *campesinos*; no large land owner was arrested. What can this mean except that those who hold power, in showing partiality for just one sector of society, have failed miserably in fostering the common good of the country? (Applause)

Third, Puebla and the archdiocese have pointed out many defects in this government, which is incapable of stopping the wave of violence and is even suspected of tolerating it, since the state of siege is not protecting the human rights of all but only the rights of some of the people. (Applause) The government shows contradictory attitudes despite its emphatic declarations condemning violence. Puebla denounces this situation when it speaks about «countries where often basic human rights are not respected or where there are constant violations of the dignity of persons» and other abuses typical of violent regimes (P 41). Citing the pope's speech in Mexico, Puebla states that the church is obliged by «an authentic gospel mandate to make her voice heard denouncing and condemning these injustices, especially when the officials or rulers responsible for them call themselves Christians» (P 42). There follows in the letter a short analysis that explains the economic and ideological bases of this situation of injustice and repression.

Fourth, there is a description of the moral deterioration of the country. Our survey revealed the truth about the terrible dominion that the mystery of sin has over Salvadoran society. Puebla corroborates this by pointing out the roots of corruption and disorder in government, in society, in families, and in individuals. These roots are the reversion of values, individualist materialism, consumerism, loss of family values, deterioration of public and private integrity, and perverse use of our mass media (P 54-62). The grave defects of our people are due to this tremendous moral collapse.

Finally, there is a crisis within the church. We want to be very honest here. Those who denounce must also be willing to be denounced, and if the church fulfills her duty of denunciation, then she awaits the denunciation that all of you can make of her. The church recognizes that there are many good things to mention: the presence of her lively communities; the presence of her priests working on the dangerous margins of our ministry; her Christians willing to give even their lives and often dying under a hail of bullets; and her communities persecuted for being communist and subversively political when they are doing no more than what the church is asking of them at this time: promoting true evangelization. Despite all these good things, however, the church of our archdiocese also admits that political factors sometimes weigh heavier than evangelical criteria. We sadly have to confess that many Christians have lost sight of evangelical Christian values and have preferred to follow only the criteria of political preference, thinking that their wisdom surpasses that of the Gospel and the church. (Applause)

With sorrow we must also point out the division within the hierarchy. We cannot hide it. For my part, I want to ask the church's pardon, and I want to explain to you the causes so that you'll understand them and perhaps help us to find solutions, for what is happening among us is a reflection of what is happening in our society. Just as for the rest of society, the most urgent duty for priests and bishops and all Christians is to be converted.

So that you can see that the origins of the church's sins are indicated in authoritative sources, let me cite Puebla: «Not all of us in the Latin American church have made a sufficient commitment to the poor. We are not always concerned about them, nor do we always stand in solidarity with them. Serving them demands constant conversion and purification on the part of all Christians so that we may achieve an ever fuller identification with the poor Christ and with our own poor» (P 1140). This conversion is necessary not only for bishops, priests, and religious communities but also for Christians generally. The way out of this crisis that the church is referring to is for us to be converted and to find Christ in the place where he says he is to be found: «Whatever you do for one of these little ones, the poorest and most distressed, you do for me» (Matt 25:40). Conversion toward the poor will also be the solution of our divisions within the church.

What the church can offer

The second part of the pastoral letter discusses what the church can contribute to the process of our people's liberation. The first thing, naturally, is evangelization. This is the church's task; this is the reason for her existence. According to Puebla and John Paul II, action on behalf of justice and projects that promote human wellbeing are indispensable for true evangelization. Sisters and brothers, let us be clear about the mission of the church, which is evangelizing and working for justice. That mission should not be confused with subversive campaigns. It is something very different—unless, of course, you want to call the Gospel subversive, since it

does seriously question the foundations of an order that should not exist because it is unjust!
(Applause)

The second collaboration of the church is maintaining her ecclesial identity. Beloved communities here present and all those sharing this reflection by radio, this should be your major concern in reflecting on the Gospel: being the church that Christ wants and doing only the things that the church should be doing. Even when people malign us, we have a tranquil conscience because we are doing what the church must do; we have serenity enough not to meddle in areas outside our competency except to illuminate them with our light and the identity proper to our church.

The church's great third contribution in this national crisis is her teaching about the human person. If human dignity is being assaulted in our present situation, it is because the state and those who worship idols have forgotten that what is most important is not the idols but human beings. The church seeks to restore the dignity of all people, including the poor folk, the tortured, the imprisoned, the slaughtered. (Applause)

The fourth contribution the church offers—one that is now evident among us—is the prophetic denunciation of all that is sin. Not denunciation by boasting, not denunciation as demagoguery, but denunciation as a call to conversion, which is what the church desires. The church denounces sin in order to root sin out of the world by converting sinners. I think that this is what we've always tried to do in calling attention to disorders, murders, and injustices. Certainly we have cried out against the atrocities committed, but at the same time we have invoked the mercy of God and appealed to the conscience of the criminals so that they will be converted and saved.

Another major contribution of the church is her conviction that the only way out of the crisis is by the conversion of our people. This may appear idealistic or utopian—when will all sinners be converted?, some will ask—but the church will proclaim it always. As long as El Salvador, from the highest sphere to the lowest, fails to enter into the path of conversion indicated by God's law, there will be no solution to the crises that hold our people in their grip.

That is why the church also collaborates in the unmasking of idolatries. In my pastoral letter I focus mainly on three of them, which I call «absolutizations» because they are things that people have made absolutes in their lives.

For some people it is wealth and private property. The church says that wealth is not anything absolute and private property does not have an absolute meaning. The pope has spoken quite clearly about this: «There is a social mortgage on private property»⁶. What is important is the welfare of all the people, not the wealth of a handful or the private property of just a few. (Applause)

A second form of idolatry that engrosses many Salvadorans is what is called national security. Puebla calls this «the prevailing form of capitalism in many countries of the Americas and the main reason for the repressive structures in many countries». Precise words of Puebla! In the name of national security hundreds of lives are immolated and citizen's rights

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Opening of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla», 28 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

are violated. It's ridiculous, but in the name of security the people are made insecure! «The ruling regime» (Applause)—I'm still reading Puebla—«The ruling regime unconstitutionally usurps the political instances which should be making democratic decisions in the political running of the country»⁷.

There is still another absolutization in which many well-intentioned Salvadorans indulge, and it's good for us to keep it in mind as we unmask our idolatries before the one Lord, Jesus Christ. (Applause) Here we need to be very careful, dear ecclesial base communities of our church, for I am talking about the absolutization of the people's organizations. Here also there is fanaticism, there is sectarianism, there is idolatry and elitist pride. No individual and no organization of the people must ever commandeer the good sense of the people. The organizations provide the people with the means to express themselves, but let us respect the people. Let us respect their options and never impose on them our individual or group options as if these were the only solutions. The country is more important than the organization, not the reverse. (Applause)

Ecclesial light shed on some concrete problems of the country

The third part of the pastoral letter that I'm giving you a glimpse of is the application of the church's doctrine to certain concrete problems. I can't spend much time on them here, but you can read this part for yourselves.

First is the problem of violence. I emphatically restate what I said last year but bring it up to date with details of recent events.

Second, there are the conditions for a true national dialogue. It must be open, not one-sided. It requires confidence and credibility, not an atmosphere of repression. It must not avoid discussing the urgent need for a change of structures. Also, there must be respect for freedom of organization and openness to hearing what the organizations are saying. (Applause).

Another problem very current among us is Marxism. It's a complex problem. It's not enough for Catholics just to say Marxists are condemned. Not at all. We have to weigh many things. According to Puebla, there is Marxism as an ideology that may influence people's behavior, but there is also the possibility of collaboration between those with a Christian ideology and those with other ideologies. We also need to distinguish between a scientific system of analysis and the activity of political organizations which are struggling for power and which may resort to means that we Christians cannot use. In the survey I found a very wise statement by someone: «There's no reason to fear Marxism. We can outshine them by taking seriously the preferential option for the poor». That seems to me a great insight. (Applause) Working for the poor and defending the poor should not be viewed in the way fanatical anti-communists see it: «That is communism!» No, that is Christianity! That is Christ, who said, «Everything you do for the poor you do for me» (Matt 25:40). That's why the best way to be anti-Marxist is to work for the poor. (Applause)

The pastoral guidelines of Puebla are now those of our archdiocese

⁷ We have not found this quotation. Puebla speaks of national security in numbers 49, 314, 547, 549, and 1262—texts which Archbishop Romero quotes in his pastoral letter.

The fourth part of the letter is a little treatise on pastoral theology which I titled «The Pastoral Guidelines of Puebla Are Now Those of Our Archdiocese». I did so because our guidelines are nothing more than the guidelines of Vatican II and Medellín, the same guidelines that our beloved predecessor, Archbishop Chávez, with the help of Bishop Rivera and the clergy, tried to introduce into our pastoral ministry out of a desire to keep up with the latest norms of the church. I have done nothing more than accept this legacy with love and try to develop it among us. (Applause)

First of all there is an attitude of seeking, as the pope said in Mexico, «Mary is great because she had no assurance except her faith in God, and she sought in faith the paths of her life»⁸. We can say about the archdiocese the same as Puebla said: «The things that yesterday were accepted from the pulpit or in the school rooms are now not so easily accepted» (P 76-77). There are many changes and a need for new languages and new attitudes, and that is what the new style of the archdiocese is about: an attitude of seeking.

Second is the preferential option for the poor, which means understanding the mechanisms that produce poverty, struggling for a most just world, supporting workers and *campesinos* in their demands and in their right to organize, and simply being closer to the people. (Applause)

Third, dear sisters and brothers, is the need for united teamwork in our pastoral ministry. Here we distinguish between our apostolic spirit and the pastoral work itself, which is like the difference between a river and the channeling of the river. All the movements of our diocese possess a great apostolic spirit, but not all of them have a pastoral sensitivity. We draw on the richness that comes from the movements, the congregations, and diverse charisms that the Spirit gives us, but we need to let ourselves be guided by a team approach to pastoral ministry. No community should feel isolated from or superior to other communities. Rather, let us all feel that we are one single work of God in the midst of the people.

Finally, I am pleased to offer you the idea of creating and intensifying in the archdiocese a pastoral ministry of adaptation, mainly along three lines.

First, pastoral attention to the masses, such as the multitude we have here right now in front of the cathedral: a multitude that cannot be neglected. (Applause) Another example was the beautiful *Bajada* of August 5, which was given pastoral direction by the Catholic radio station; what we accomplished yesterday was truly a work of ministry to the masses. I speak of «masses» in the urban sense, where the problems are very different from those of the rural areas.

Second, the ecclesial base communities. These are the small groups where, as the pope says, the Gospel becomes more friendly, more simple, more intimate.

Third and finally, the ministry of accompaniment. This is especially urgent now because there are many Christians who say that they must get politically involved with an organization, but many of them lose their faith as a result. The church cannot abandon those

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City», 26 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

Christians who, because of their sincere commitment to the Gospel, want to support a political party or organization. We have to accompany them with our pastoral ministry and guide them in the ways of the church so that, wherever they go, they are Christians carrying the kernel of the word, the seed of salvation, the light of the Gospel. (Applause)

Dear sisters and brothers, forgive me for giving this lecture while you and my dear priests are standing there—along with me—under the sun in such uncomfortable conditions, but all this has a meaning. It means two things.

It means, first, that the feast of the Divine Savior of the World bestows a transcendent meaning on all of our efforts to apply the spirit of Puebla to the archdiocese. Through his transfiguration Christ is telling us that this is our goal: to become new, transfigured men and women, clothed in God, people of whom God can say, «My beloved child with whom I am well pleased» (Mark 9:7). In the first reading Daniel saw the figure of a man surrounded by the glory of God (Dan 7:13). Scripture scholars say that this figure is the glorified Christ, surrounded by all those who are saved. This is the transfiguration we long for: a church that will be glorified but that never loses sight of her exalted destiny while still on pilgrimage.

And the second thing we want to say today is that each one of us, according to his or her own vocation, should accept this challenge that the Divine Savior of the world presents to our people. All of us who are church should be more identified as church within our particular charisms, within our own congregations, within our personal vocations as married or single, rich or poor, professional or laborer. Let us incarnate Christ's challenge to us so that each one of us collaborates fully in the transfiguration of our homeland. Let it be so. (Applause)

