

## **161**

# **JESUS, TEACHER OF TRUE RELIGION**

**Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
**2 September 1979**

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8  
James 1:17-18,21b-22,27  
Mark 7:1-8a,14-15,21-23

Dear sisters and brothers, I have the impression this morning that you and I are projecting the image of the pilgrim church. Outside the sky is gray, and it is raining; it's a sad day. We don't have a cathedral where we can celebrate our Eucharist. We were planning to celebrate Mass today in the church of El Rosario, but we can't do it there either because it is occupied. We therefore come to seek hospitality in this basilica of the Sacred Heart, and we are grateful for their willingness to receive us. So our church today resembles the people of Moses as they traveled through the desert, raising their tents for a short while and then traveling on, a sign of pilgrimage, of searching, of something undefined (Num 9:15-18). We are a pilgrim church that has no fixed abode on earth and identifies with no earthly ideology. The church will always be that column of light in the desert, leading humankind toward the ultimate happiness that does not exist in this world.

The present situation requires some analysis. Why have they occupied the cathedral and the churches of El Rosario, Cojutepeque, Apopa, Suchitoto, Mejicanos—and last night, those of Aguilares, San Francisco in San Miguel, and who knows how many more? It is easy to blame the hierarchy. It is easy to put blame on others. But I want to invite you to reflect this morning on the word of God that we have heard just now, so that we will realize that in a certain sense we all share the blame.

The people's political organizations are to blame. What are their leaders thinking? What respect do they have in their hearts for the life and the mission of the church? How much solidarity do they feel with the people, who are the main beneficiaries of the public celebration of worship? They trample on all these values solely to make their own strategy prevail. Perhaps they're occupying the churches to proclaim and promote their just demands, but they are still to blame. I would like to remind them—and all those who fight for just goals—that the end does not justify the means. You cannot do harmful things to achieve good ends. You stand to lose much credibility by using means like this that offend against the sentiments of the people, even though you say that you're fighting for the interests of the same people. What you need to do is to examine how you can wage your struggle rightly without offending the people's religious sentiments. That way you will be able to rely on the support of the people in pursuing justice because it will also be for the good of the people.

Likewise, the authorities of the nation are to blame. The organizations have to seek escape valves for the people's cries of anguish, and not finding normal channels, they seek out abnormal ones. It's like when a tumor has no escape, it explodes wherever it can. It's like a

boiler, which will explode if it doesn't have sufficient valves. The government has the responsibility to provide adequate channels so that the voices of workers, *campesinos*, and all needy persons can be heard. When the people appeal to the Assembly, no one wants to listen to them. When they go to the ministries, they are treated like second-class citizens. When they go to all the agencies that should be serving the people, they are pushed aside without being heard. I believe that if normal channels existed, there would be no need to occupy the churches. The main reason for the occupations is the government; the government is mainly to blame. (Applause)

At the same time, let there be no hypocritical rending of garments because the government also is occupying churches. (Applause) They occupied our church in Aguilares without formal permission, and they did so for purposes of bloodshed. Such occupations have now become customary, and we've gotten used to them. Are the municipalities not occupying the patronal feasts when, out of disrespect for the church, they set up stands that sell merchandise and interfere with the people's homage to their patron? Occupation of the churches is also a form of pillage. It is the history of our peoples. In Mexico, Guatemala, and parts of El Salvador people give testimony of how the governments have robbed the church. That also should cause scandal and give rise to justice.

There is much blame also with the mass media, which allow no space for the people's demands to be publicized. Where has any notice been published of the assaults being suffered by the *campesinos* there in Arcatao and Aguilares? Also, the news is presented in a distorted way. In order to make the atrocities known, the protesters have to come and cry out to the people, and they do so from a church. The church must understand—thought she doesn't justify it—that this is happening because the protesters have no access to press, radio, or television since all the major media are controlled by the opposition and their lies. (Applause) For the people there is no space, often not even for paid advertisements. The church has also experienced this marginalization, along with the people. There are so many things we have wanted to publish, but there is no space, they say, since it offends the forces of oppression and repression. Many media have made themselves servants of these forces when they should be serving truth and freedom. (Applause)

So let's not think that it's an easy matter to say who is to blame for the occupation of the churches. Let's not be simplistic. I don't agree with the occupation, but I try to understand all these other reasons. Let us hope that the organizations also analyze them and have more respect for the people. This anomalous situation, in which we all have a hand, means disruption of our worship. I invite you this morning, therefore, to consider these matters sincerely in the light of the divine word. Let us analyze not only the phenomenon of the occupation of the churches but also all the hypocrisies that exist among us under the cover of religion. Christ spoke about «hypocrites» (Mark 7:6); let us hope that this harsh word, which is almost a curse on the lips of the Lord, is not one that applies to us all this morning.

There are so many opinions among Catholics. Let me tell you, dear sisters and brothers, that I understand people's confusion and the diversity of views about what is happening. It is important for us to analyze the situation more seriously, and we're going to do that with all our priests. Meanwhile, let me say two things while respecting the diversity of opinions.

We need to distinguish between normal times and times of emergency. In normal times no one would occupy a church. In normal times there would be normal channels of expression, and the churches would be there for the expression of religious sentiment and nothing more. But our time is not normal; it is a time of emergency. It's like when a terrible earthquake shakes our land—the churches are opened to receive all the people who are injured and left homeless. No one would claim that that was a profanation. Likewise, we are now in a time of emergency, and we must understand that in times of emergency it is not easy to condemn acts which in normal times might well be condemned.

But my reflection seeks to go even deeper. I was telling you that the image I like to contemplate here in the basilica is that of the pilgrim church. When Christ wanted to persuade the Jews to stop thinking about the material temple and to think rather of true worship of God, he told them, «Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up» (John 2:19). They thought he was speaking about the material temple, but that was not his intention, as the gospel explains (John 2:21-22). He was transferring all the spirit of the temple to himself. It was he who would be raised up on the third day. He is the true temple of Christians, and through him we offer God our gratitude and our adoration. Without Christ all the churches are useless, no matter how beautiful they may be. «There will be no adoration», Christ told the Samaritan woman, «in Jerusalem or Samaria or any material temple. The time is coming when God will seek those who worship him in spirit and in truth» (John 4:21-24).

When singing about the death of Father Rafael Palacios, one of our popular songwriters<sup>1</sup> utters these precious words: «God is not in the temple but in the community». *You are the temple!* What is the use of having beautiful churches if what is said of them is what Christ today tells the Pharisees, «Your worship is worthless!» (Mark 7:7). And that's the way it is with so many lavish celebrations that are performed with abundance of flowers, guests, and all the rest. But where is the worship «in spirit and in truth»? I think this is teaching us a lesson, dear sisters and brothers, and I will be the first to accept it and try to interpret it. It could be that I have not been very good at fulfilling the duty I have as a priest to worship God. Perhaps my fellow priests and I have made worship consist merely of arranging the altar nicely and asking for more money to pretty things up. We have materialized and commercialized our worship! That's why God, as he enters Jerusalem with a whip in his hand, is telling us, «You have made my house of prayer into a den of thieves». All of us need to reflect. All of us are to blame. And today's divine word offers us a basis for saying that.

We return to the gospel for this year: Saint Mark, who presents Christ as the personified redemption of God. Today we also encounter Moses calling on the people to respect the law of God because he feared that true worship of the Lord would be vitiated by the false idols they would encounter in the Promised Land. Saint James also speaks to us today—not the «Great» but the one called «Saint James the Less»; he was a practical man not deceived by appearance. He tells us, «Faith without works is false» (James 2:17). And finally there is the Teacher of apostles and disciples, Christ our Lord. Since he is the first and foremost Teacher, I want to title my homily today: «Jesus, Teacher of True Religion». I rejoice that you and I are studying true religion this morning because we perhaps need to purify many of our concepts based on false religiosity and hypocritical interpretations. We need to stop blaming others and look within ourselves. I'm going to develop this theme, «Jesus, Teacher of True Religion», using the words of Scripture that were read today. My first reflection will be on empty worship. My

---

<sup>1</sup> Guillermo Cuéllar, author of a song dedicated to Father Rafael Palacios.

second will be on the phrase of James, «religion that is pleasing to God». And the third reflection will be based on the first reading: the honor of God's people obeying the law of the Lord.

### Empty worship

First, empty worship. In today's gospel Saint Mark is adapting the eastern setting of the episode to the western setting of Rome, which was where he wrote this gospel based on the preaching of Peter. Saint Mark was like the secretary of Peter; he wrote down what Peter preached, including the explanations he gave to the Romans about Jewish customs they couldn't understand. One of the Jewish customs was the frequent washing of hands and plates and cups because they felt these were unclean. Their idea of impurity was not like what we understand today; it was something material. They had so many laws about things that were unclean! Touching a corpse made one unclean. You may recall the supreme hypocrisy of that time when they didn't want to enter Pilate's house because Pilate was a Gentile (John 18:28). What an awful thing it would be for a Jew to mingle with a Gentile! At the same time they felt no remorse at asking this Gentile to condemn the innocent Jesus to death! It was in such ways that those hypocritical laws based on appearances and legalities were turned into betrayals of the true law of the Lord.

After commenting on hand-washing, Christ criticized another of their customs. It seems that a man who had made an offering to the temple could then tell his father or his mother, «I can't help you because I already offered it to the temple». «You hypocrites», Christ told them, «in this way you nullify the fourth commandment: honor your father and your mother. God did not command you to make an offering to the temple but to honor your mother and your father. By what right do you replace the duty of children toward their parents with a false religious sense?» (Mark 7:9-13). And so, if we study this situation, we see that Christ was right to become angry and to criticize as hypocritical this religion that was riddled with legal purities and hypocritical impurities.

Our Lord declared that it was false religion: «This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me» (Mark 7:6). This was empty worship; empty *first* of interiority, empty *second* of revelation and truth about God, and empty *third* of works. These are the three types of emptiness that are condemned today in any false religion. Let us be careful lest we also be found wanting and guilty of giving the Lord an empty heart!

First there is interior emptiness. «Nothing that enters from outside can defile the heart if the heart refuses to receive it. It is what comes forth from the corrupted heart that defiles people and the world» (Mark 7:15). If you have a clean heart, then even if you're standing deep in mud, the mud does nothing to you because it does not enter into you. You are free to accept or not accept corruption into yourself. When people hear a malicious conversation or witness a bad example or see something that seduces others to sin, then those who don't want to sin will not sin. Only those who accept corruption into their hearts will sin. Timid consciences often believe that they are offending God when they hear bad words or witness bad things. Not so, dear sisters and brothers. What enters you from outside does not defile you if your heart refuses to accept it. If you keep your hearts free of hatred and full of love during these times of criminal violence and senseless vendettas, then nothing in this whole environment can harm you, but it can do damage to those who succumb to hatred and allow it to poison their hearts. People have true interiority when God does not have to

complain of them, «Their hearts are far from me» (Mark 7:6). Let your hearts be close to him! The Lord is anxious to have his children close by him. Even those who are sinners can repent and return. That is why our condemnation of all the crimes and other things that must be denounced these days is not motivated by a craving for fame and applause. I have no interest in that; what interests me is the conversion of the sinner. I want the conversion of those who have committed kidnappings and other injustices, of those who have killed and tortured, because «God desires not the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live» (Ezek 33:11). If I am fortunate enough to get to heaven, I would feel no repugnance at being close to those who now declare themselves my enemies because there we will no longer be enemies. I am never anybody's enemy, but if there are some who for whatever reason want to be my enemies, I ask them to be converted to love, and through love we will find ourselves rejoicing together in the bliss of God. I desire for all of you this joy of intimacy with the Lord.

So let our hearts not be devoid of interiority, because the most important thing in religion is what is within, and that is what God beholds. The Bible tells us, «We humans know one another by our faces, but God knows us by our hearts» (1 Kgs 8:39). «Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who worship the Lord with interior sincerity» (Matt 7:21). Let us hope, sisters and brothers, that we will not be condemned because of our lack of interiority. Many people are not filled with religion because they prefer to be empty of religion. So fill yourselves with interiority, and you will understand what the sinner Saint Augustine said: «I was outside myself, and I could find no peace. Foolish as I was, I did not know that the beauty I was seeking outside myself was the beauty you had given me within myself. I did not realize that you were within me, inviting me to behold the inward beauty. When I entered in, I recognized the false beauty that was making me sin and embraced the interior beauty of my life and my relationship with you. Oh Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!»<sup>2</sup>. But Augustine did come to know God and love him; he was saved and became a saint. It doesn't matter how sinful we have been in the past if we discover the interior beauty of our relationship with the Lord. Today we are called to reject all the ways in which we make religion empty by basing it on exterior things.

Another awful form of emptiness that Christ denounces today is the lack of regard for revelation and truth (Mark 7:8). This is something that may touch us directly. The people in those times were very careful to wash their hands and avoid touching the dead, but those were merely human traditions; while observing them they were disregarding the true revelation of God. Who knows, sisters and brothers—many of the criticisms regarding changes in the church could be coming from that same spirit! The critics have made religion into something that consists of human traditions, such as certain forms of worship, certain manners of dressing, certain ways of praying. Whether Mass is said with the priest facing the people or with his back to the people, and whether the prayers are in Latin or in Spanish—these are just traditions. Let seek what is most pleasing to God. Let us seek what is most fitting for a religion inserted among the people.

A survey done in France has yielded results that I find shocking. It stated that the church in France lost the workers during the last century, and that in this century it is losing women. According to the survey, women between eighteen and thirty-five years of age said the church had nothing to say to them. Only nine percent of the French women in that age group were practicing Catholics; the rest were not interested in religion. We could reach that point

---

<sup>2</sup> AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Confessions*, X, 27: PL 32, 795.

here among ourselves if our religion consists only in attachment to certain traditional things and no effort is made to renew ourselves and try to understand the longings and the concerns of the majority of the people. I'm not saying that we should identify with everything the people are demanding, but we *do* need to know how to echo their anxieties and their hopes. As the Second Vatican Council says, we need to know how to be interpreters for the people of today; we need to be a religion that expresses the longings of our people (GS 4).

I am happy that many of our communities and many of our priests follow the pastoral guidelines of the archdiocese, which seek to follow the path marked out by the Council of our century and by the great meetings of Latin America in Medellin and Puebla. These assemblies were nothing more than an effort to bring the church into the present century, and Puebla speaks about not only the present but the future. Only the church can save, but she can lose all her power to save if she is not heard by the world.

Dear sisters and brothers, we all have to make an effort to practice a religion that is not emptied of God's way of thinking because it is busy attending to human traditions. How sad it was that Christ, the very Word of God revealed, had to complain that no one paid him any heed! «He came unto his own, and his own did not receive him» (John 1:11). They preferred the traditions of washing their hands, not touching the dead, fleeing from lepers—all so much hypocrisy—instead of accepting Christ's call to spirituality and renewal.

There is still much danger. I would like to point out here how many people in El Salvador—youths, students, professionals—are following false religions. A very strong current of agnosticism exists, and then you have the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, who keep winning people over. To all of these Jesus Christ could say today, «You are following human doctrines and are forgetting the revelation of the Lord» (Mark 7:8). Let us be serious, sisters and brothers, and keep a firm hold on this faith which is a grace from God. Let us not play with it, as if trying it out on other things that are not as good as the true church. The church is making an effort to understand our people. I am really at pains to further this pastoral effort of the church to make the voice of our people's anguish heard by those who are in power. Of course, they don't want us to bother them! But the church would not be fulfilling her duty if she defended only the privileged minorities and failed to love the people and give her life for them.

And, finally, there is the emptiness of works spoken of in today's second reading from the letter of Saint James. I urge you to read the whole of this letter slowly. James was a practical man speaking to Christians and warning them especially about the cunning of the Pharisees. «Be careful», he told them. «Don't let your religion consist only of theories. If your religion is empty of works, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven». The Lord had already said as much: «It is not those who say, "Lord! Lord!"—those who pray many pretty prayers—who will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven» (Matt 7:21). In the letter we read today Saint James gives two examples: «visiting widows and orphans and keeping oneself unstained in the world» (James 1:27). This is true religion: not only preserving oneself unstained but visiting widows and orphans. This is a biblical expression that means «taking care of those in need». Puebla was simply echoing this mandate when it stated that the preferential option of the church in Latin America must be «the preferential option for the poor» (P 1134). But as Puebla explained clearly, this option is not a matter of dividing the poor and the rich. You should realize, sisters and brothers, that that is not what we're saying. Puebla explains that all of us, without social distinction, are called to

be as concerned for the poor as we are for ourselves—or even as we are for the cause of Christ, who has said, «All that you do for one of these poor folk, you do for me» (Matt 25:40)<sup>3</sup>.

Here everyone is called. We exclude no one. Let the rich especially come, and they will be saved. But they will be saved only if they come to do what Christ wants and stop living recklessly without regard for the poverty of the majority. (Applause). The poor give us the opportunity to practice a religion that is not devoid of works. Let us hope that the works God sees for our salvation are precisely these: «I was hungry and you gave me food! I was thirsty and you gave me drink! I was in prison and you came to visit me! I was ill and you came to console me!» (Matt 25:35-36). In a word, we need to attend to all human situations of poverty, suffering, and marginalization. All these things, dear sisters and brothers, are the rich mine from which we will dig out the treasure we need so as not to profess a religion that is empty of works. How close that mine is, but how despised it is by many!

However, we should not serve the poor in a paternalistic way, helping them from above. That's not what God wants; he wants us to help them as sisters and brothers. They are family, they are Christ, and we would never look down on Christ from above; rather, we would look up to him from below, to serve him. As the magnificent Chilean poetess used to say, «Forgive me, Lord, for teaching you!»<sup>4</sup>. This is the way we should approach any help or alms we give, or any mercy we show. «Forgive me, Lord, for serving you, because in this poor person it is you I see. May you be the one who receives this coin or this tortilla. This piece of clothing that I'm giving to protect someone from the cold and this extra shirt of my wardrobe—it is to you that I'm giving them!» Would that we would fill our lives with good works! From this pulpit I want to commend the many good works I see as I travel the length and breadth of the archdiocese. There are many good people out there who will present themselves to heaven with their hands overflowing with works. Surely they won't be reproached by the Lord for practicing a religion without works.

Faith is not enough. Good works are needed as evidence of faith. That's why, when Christ speaks of all these forms of emptiness, he points to something even more frightful: the corrupted heart. «It is not what enters from outside that defiles a person, but what comes out of the person's heart» (Matt 7:15). He then gives a list of things that could well be a catalogue of our sad situation in El Salvador. What is the source of this putrid atmosphere in El Salvador? You can be sure that it comes from the sources that Christ points out today: «From people's hearts come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly» (Mark 7:21-22).

### **Events of the week**

At this point I want to relate the divine words of the Lord to the censure that the church must make regarding all the corruption flowing out of so many Salvadoran hearts.

This week, for example, there have been many informative statements from government sources presented to the Assembly. Certainly there is some acknowledgement that the country has serious problems of a political, social, and economic nature. But take note: when analyzing why this situation exists in El Salvador, they say the following: «The country

---

<sup>3</sup> *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriela Mistral, *Oración de la maestra* [A Teacher's Prayer].

has limited resources, and because its economy depends on the cultivation and the exportation of coffee, cotton, and sugar, it is exposed to market fluctuations»<sup>5</sup>. The result of this, according to these sources, is that «the resources of the government and the private sector are not sufficient to provide all Salvadorans with the same level of prosperity»<sup>6</sup>. But they say nothing about the causes. What is the reason for those economic, political, and social differences? Instead of explaining this, they claim that the people denouncing those differences are «promoting violence» and «sowing hatred».<sup>7</sup> In other words, they don't want any to do anything about the existing differences: «Those who are protesting against the differences should realize that El Salvador cannot produce more. Meanwhile, leave us in peace, and don't bother us. You are violent terrorists». That is not justice.

The church also takes note of these differences, and she maintains that the main reason for our problems is social injustice. The church does not promote violence or hatred. She preaches peace, and she declares that the peace we have lost cannot return if there is no justice. You yourselves recognize that not all of us can possess equal wealth, but that doesn't justify some people having everything and leaving nothing for others. See that things are shared! (Applause) The truest expression of love is sharing. We should not claim that we are a society of mutual love as long as there is no sharing of things. Tell me whether the following statistics are not a sign of evil hearts: sixty percent of the urban population—the people living in cities—has a personal income of between forty-two and one hundred forty *colones* a month. That means that almost a million and a half people in the cities live on only 1.40 or at most 4.60 *colones* a day. Do you believe that someone can live on just 1.40 *colones* a day? This is the situation!

We would say something similar to the Salvadoran Industrialists Association, which made a statement on the present crisis emphasizing the key role played by the business sector<sup>8</sup>. We are certainly happy that they are sensitive to the situation and are concerned about it; they are an important class in the country's economy. But they forget one thing in their statement: they are not the only important factor; they also have to take into account the perspective of workers, without whom no business could ever be an important force in this country. We cannot put capital and human labor in opposition. In the plan of God, people come first. If it's true that the business sector is unhappy, then we need to seek the causes, but we also need to seek constructive solutions. We need mutual understanding that respects the human person above all and that helps people to realize that entrepreneurs without workers can do nothing, just as workers without entrepreneurs can do nothing. People have been talking about the need for capital and labor to work together since the time of Leo XIII (RN 14). Neither one side nor the other should arrogate to itself the dominant role in the country. The two must work together, with neither side forgetting the other.

In recent days the Human Rights Commission has made some valuable statements regarding the cause of the present situation<sup>9</sup>. Some people have said that opposing the elections is subversive. I think this appraisal is unjust; we need to understand what people

---

<sup>5</sup> «Instead of Shouts and Violence, the Peaceful Path of Elections is the Only Democratic Solution», Statement of the Information Office of the President of the Republic of El Salvador in *El Diario de Hoy* (27 August 1979).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (28 August 1979).

<sup>9</sup> «The Human Rights Commission of El Salvador Addresses the Salvadoran People» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (31 August 1979).



are saying. It is not a question of rejecting the elections but of asking for an environment of trust and credibility and freedom so that people can talk openly about the elections. How can the elections succeed if all we see is brutal armed repression that makes the *campesinos* and other people tremble? Who will be free to vote in such a situation? (Applause) So it's not a question of subversion. It is a just demand being made by people who need to be given some small taste of freedom.

In another matter, the explanation the Ministry of Defense gave to the Assembly regarding the disappeared persons is offensive. The ministry claims that «their relatives tell the authorities they know nothing about them because they refuse to admit that they have left the country to receive Marxist education»<sup>10</sup>. Truly, out of the heart comes forth evil! The Ministry of Defense should remember that in the archdiocesan offices we have a list of at least 188 disappeared persons. Their relatives ask the authorities about them, not because they know nothing but precisely because they know that government agents have arrested them and they want to know where they are. (Applause)

Regarding the injustices committed against arrested persons, I am happy to report that Amnesty has presented before the UN—or is about to do so—a universal petition for international habeas corpus. What a wonderful idea! An international habeas corpus! Since the supreme tribunal of this country makes a mockery of the efforts of Salvadoran lawyers, we're going to see now whether the juridical forces of the world, by appealing to the supreme tribunal of the nations, can succeed in winning respect for petitions of habeas corpus, which in El Salvador are scorned.

«We are sick and tired of such great disorder», is what is reported in the papers today<sup>11</sup>. And certainly we all are, but if that is the claim of government officials, then we have to tell them that we are also appalled by the fact that the disorder is being caused directly by the security forces. There is tremendous injustice and repression against our people! (Applause)

Let us thank God that they have freed Don Jaime Conde, who had been kidnapped for seventeen days. But they still have not released Carlos Rafael Nieto. You no doubt saw the declaration calling for the ERP to free him since his family fulfilled the conditions imposed on them and simply cannot fulfill the new demand<sup>12</sup>. That is why we insist, sisters and brothers, that our judgment must be impartial. It is true that we judge the government's injustices harshly, but we must also judge severely the abuses committed by certain powers of the extreme left.

I want to congratulate Fe y Alegría for coming out in the defense of their teachers<sup>13</sup>.

The Union of Cooperatives of Coffee Growers has been established<sup>14</sup>. It is a good thing, and I am happy for them. Everyone has the right to organize. I would only say to the coffee growers who are now organized that they should try to understand the situation of the

---

<sup>10</sup> «Ministry of Defense Indicates Subversive Activity in the Country» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (31 August 1979).

<sup>11</sup> *El Diario de Hoy* (30 August 1979).

<sup>12</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (30 August 1979).

<sup>13</sup> «Statement of Fe y Alegría Regarding the Persecution and Murder of Teachers», 27 August 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (29 August 1979).

<sup>14</sup> *El Diario de Hoy* (19 August 1979).

coffee harvesters and the other *campesinos*, and they should support their right to organize because they also are human beings.

Some of the labor conflicts have not progressed because of the intransigence of some of the parties, but there have also been some valuable instances of negotiation that set an example. They show us that we are capable of negotiating matters reasonably<sup>15</sup>. I want to be truthful and state that in recent days I have met some employers who maintain good labor relations with their workers, even beyond what the law requires<sup>16</sup>. They are willing to help create a new and better climate in the country at every level. I say that we must not ignore these voices. Even if they are one-sided, they are still little lights of hope. We are not demagogic toward any social class. Rather, we are part of God's kingdom, trying to promote justice, love, and understanding wherever there are well-intentioned hearts. There is no need to purchase El Salvador's liberation at the cost of so much bloodshed. If we all display good will, renouncing material things and seeking divine values, we will certainly find the way forward. But of course, to do that we must be courageous enough to withdraw support from what has been an untouchable institution and the root of every form of violence: the institutionalized violence which is the great injustice of our country.

I want to unite myself also with the suffering of the families of three *campesinos*—Santana Argueta, Moisés Barillas Pleitez, and Carlos Eguizábal García—and the student Eladio Franco Valle. They were arrested early one morning and later were found dead on the coastal highway.

The body of José Osmín Abrego was also found. Who killed him? You can decide, knowing that in the petition for habeas corpus his relatives testified before the Supreme Court that he had been arrested on August 15 by a combined detachment of guards and soldiers.

It has been 105 days since the arrest of Juan Francisco Romero, a well-known catechist, and still nothing is known about him. There are others, such as Rubén Darío Portillo. You can see more details about all of them on the solidarity page of *Orientación*<sup>17</sup>.

### **Religion that is pleasing to God**

How true is that saying of Christ: «Out of the heart come evil deeds» (Mark 7:21)! In El Salvador all these things are corrupting only the hearts of those devising evil deeds. But we thank God that in El Salvador there are also good people, whose hearts are like fountains with pure water that washes away all the filth of the country. This is what I'm referring to in my second reflection when, inspired by Christ our Lord, I ask: what then is true religion? We have already described false religion. Puebla tells us, «What is most horrible about the regimes based on power and guided by the ideology of national security is that they believe that they are Christian and are defending Western Christianity» (P 547). There is no greater hypocrisy than to be massacring Christians in the very name of Christianity.

---

<sup>15</sup> «Solidarity» in *Orientación* (2 September 1979).

<sup>16</sup> In his pastoral diary Archbishop Romero notes that on Tuesday, August 28, he had a meeting with «Messrs Poma and De Sola». See Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, *Su diario*, San Salvador, 1999, 247-248.

<sup>17</sup> *Orientación* (2 and 9 September 1979).

In contrast, true religion is not empty of interiority, of revelation, or of works. In today's gospel Christ says, «Nothing that enters from outside can defile the heart if the heart refuses to accept it» (Mark 7:15). Once again, as always, he is referring to interiority. We don't know what true religion is, sisters and brothers, unless we know how to encounter God in our innermost conscience. And this is so easy! Even Alcoholics Anonymous has made that one of its rules: «growing in awareness of one's relation with God». This is what I want to tell my beloved Christians: «Let us grow daily in our awareness that we can dialogue, and that we do indeed dialogue, with our Father who is Lord and God». This kind of interiority will increase our sincerity. How can anyone deceive others—even if speaking in the Legislative Assembly—without first trying to deceive himself? But those who pray to God our Lord do not deceive themselves. That's why the saints say, «Those who pray live well, and those who do not pray live badly». If there are many people in El Salvador who live badly, then here is the cause: a lack of interiority and a lack of prayer.

Another condition of true religion is following the law of God rather than human tradition (Mark 7:8). The law of God is so beautiful, so easy, and so simple that it sums up everything. It renders redundant the many penal laws, civil codes, constitutions, and other rulings that are hardly obeyed at all. Observing the Ten Commandments of God's law would be enough to transform El Salvador. True religion, therefore, observes the law of God more than it does all the traditions and entanglements that humans create with their laws and formalities.

A third condition is found in today's second reading. Good works provide evidence of faith: visiting widows, helping orphans. Good works are to be done above all with a sense of charity and love, with a true sense of human equality. Let no one feel superior to anyone else because if you have more than you need, it is because God has given it to you, and it is by means of you that he wants to give it to others. Feel that others are your sisters and brothers!

A fourth condition includes some elements of supernatural religion that James proposes to us in today's second reading. Since I'm speaking to a Catholic audience composed of many religious and lay people committed to the church and of many communities listening on the radio, I want to tell you, dear Christian sisters and brothers, that our religion is not content with just those three things: interiority, the law of God, and good works.

We have a more divine horizon, a life of supernatural transcendence, as James tells us today: «On his own initiative the Father brought us forth for love and has made us a kind of first fruits of his creatures» (James 1:18). What this means is that those who are in God's grace are as if directly begotten by God. The life we were given by our parents is not enough. It is a natural life which since Adam has come to us devoid of God's grace, as we were saying last Sunday. The most beautiful thing about our Christian lives is that they add something like a second floor, built over the life given us by our parents. That natural life may be quite pleasant, sensible, and humanly fulfilling, but it lacks that second story. The grace that God wants to give us means forgiveness of our sins; it means becoming God's children and heirs of his glory; and when we die, it means we can possess him eternally. This, then, is the first element: living in God's grace.

And the second is the word of truth. God begot us in the word of truth. Saint James exhorts us today «to accept with meekness the word that is planted in us and capable of saving us» (James 1:21b). Only that word can save us! Believing and hoping are the grace of

Christians in our time. When many people despair and think that there's no hope for the country and that it's all over, then Christians say, «No, we have not yet begun! Even now we are expecting the divine grace which is surely already starting to build on this earth a blessed nation that will be free of all this horrendous crime. A time will come when there are no more kidnappings. We'll enjoy walking in our streets and in our fields without fear of being tortured or kidnapped. That time will come!» Let us sing our song: «Have faith that everything will change!» Things must change if we truly believe in the word that saves and place all our trust in that word.

This is for me the greatest honor in the mission the Lord has given me: maintaining that hope and that faith in God's people and telling them, «People of God, be worthy of that name!» Being the people of God is not the same as being the people of El Salvador. You are the people of God, living among the people of El Salvador. You are a select group. You are what Saint James calls «the first fruits» of salvation (James 1:18). As the people of God and as baptized Christians who form community and create church, we have to do honor to our being lifted up in hope, faith, and grace to be children of God. Let us not get lost in the confusion of things below, even if they are religious, because often they are falsely religious and cause people to be confused about religion itself, as we said at the start. In the churches themselves there can be false worship of the Lord. In contrast, there can be no mistake in repenting of sin, in living in God's grace, and in putting our trust in the Lord. This is what is most truly characteristic of the people of God; it is what makes us a people of hope.

What I want is for my church, my archdiocese, my beloved communities, my priests, my sisters—what I want is for all of us to be truly an expression of this divine life, of this transcendence, of this hope that is beyond history and that will start to become reality in our history to the extent that we dare to live this transcendent existence. That is why we will never be understood by those who do not understand transcendence. When we speak about injustice here on earth and denounce it, they think we are being political. We denounce the world's injustices in the name of God's kingdom of justice and in the name of the eternal reward that we announce to those still working on earth: «Work hard, and place all your efforts and your technical, professional, and political skills at the service of the country, so that El Salvador is no longer a nation born of corrupted hearts. As children of God who are responsible for the politics of earth, let us make our politics, our professions, and our justice truly holy».

### **The honor of the people of God**

I come finally to my third reflection, on the honor of the people of God. I'm about to finish, sisters and brothers. As the Israelites were approaching the Promised Land, Moses addressed them with great eloquence: «Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the Lord is giving you. These commandments will give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the other nations, who will hear about you and your statutes and will say, "This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people". For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord is to us whenever we call upon him?» (Deut 4:1,6-7). Here we are told of the various honors given to the people that truly puts its honor in obeying the law of the Lord.

First, «you will live». This is true life! Speaking for myself, dear sisters and brothers, I wouldn't want to have the kind of life experienced by many powerful people today who don't live by the truth. They live warily, they live with an uneasy conscience, they live in

anxiety. That's not living! «If you observe the law of God, you will live» (Deut 4:1). Even if they kill me, I have no need to fear. (Applause) If we die with a tranquil conscience and with a pure heart that has produced only works of kindness, then what can death do to us? Let us thank God that we have the example of our beloved pastoral ministers who have taken on the dangers of our pastoral work, even at the risk of being killed. Whenever I celebrate the Eucharist with you, I feel them present. Every dead priest is for me a new concelebrant in the Eucharist of our archdiocese. And I know that they're still encouraging us so that we'll be able to die without fear and be conscientiously committed to this law of the Lord: the preferential option for the poor. (Applause)

«You will enter into the land the Lord has promised» (Deut 4:1). Who can live more joyfully on earth than those who carry this hope in their hearts? When good people observe God's law despite the manifold temptations of our time, they are often told, «But you're the only honest folk around. Look how everybody else takes advantage». And they respond, «We feel sorry for people who just take advantage of others. We may seem crazy in the middle of a bunch of profiteers, but even if others trample on God's law and sell their souls to the devil, we refuse to surrender our hopes for the heaven that will be given us if we observe the law of God». (Applause)

We then hear about the qualities of the people who observe God's law: wisdom, intelligence, justice (Deut 4:6). What wouldn't we give, sisters and brothers, in order for El Salvador to have those qualities? What if we were truly a wise, intelligent, and just people, and not just pretending to be so? We *can* be that way if we observe the law of the Lord.

We must above all «feel God close when we call upon him» (Deut 4:7). When we try to observe his law, we call on him, and he is there straightaway. When we have need of God, he does not abandon us. We are keenly conscious of his closeness to us, as Saint Augustine said, «He was there with me, but I did not feel him because I was living outside myself»<sup>18</sup>. But when we pray with the tranquility that comes of doing justice and obeying God, then we truly feel him close. «O Beauty ever ancient, ever new!»

We as a church of pilgrims, sisters and brothers, have come here to the basilica today seeking shelter for our Eucharist because we have no permanent home. Our home is taken away from us, today by some, tomorrow by others, but let us not be distressed. We are the people of God. Let us try to do honor to that title by obeying the Lord, and then we will see how we truly *are* salt, energy, and light for the whole of our country.

### **Life of the church**

I want to speak about this church community. Allow me a few more minutes and I'll soon finish. In referring to our archdiocesan church and, beyond that, to the pope and the universal church, I want to invite you all to feel solidarity with the church, for despite the persecution she bonds us more closely together so that we'll be truly a people honored for wisdom, intelligence, and justice—a bright light for our country.

Let us be this church, for this is the church that was maligned this week. You've read about how our beloved sisters working in Arcatao have been blamed for the disorder

---

<sup>18</sup> AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Confessions*, X, 27: PL 32, 795.

there; they were said to be promoting subversion in that town<sup>19</sup>. I can testify to how angry the soldiers were when I arrived and saw the courageous sisters waiting for me despite the prohibition of the military. I congratulate the sisters, and I want to tell them that, just as it's true that I told them to come, so also I support them in all their apostolic work because I know that what has been said about them is completely false. (Applause)

I want to count on you as a church community—we are church!—to endorse this letter I am sending to the president of the republic and the minister of defense. It states:

For several weeks I have been pointing out in my Sunday homilies the systematic harassment that the security forces are carrying out against the pastoral labors of the church and the tranquility of the people in the area of Chalatenango. Not only do I have reliable information about this harassment, but I have witnessed it personally, and on various occasions I have been a victim of it.

Since there has so far been no change in this hostile attitude, which instead tends to get worse, I am addressing this letter directly to you, asking you to order those responsible to immediately stop impeding church activities and unjustly repressing the rural population.

The harassment by the security forces consists in the following: a) unjustifiably stepping up the accusations, the raids, and the slanders against the catechists, the religious, the priests, and the episcopal vicar who exercises his pastoral ministry on my behalf in the area of Chalatenango; b) preventing Christians from attending Masses that I have celebrated in that area, as well as from celebrating their patronal feast freely and peacefully and meeting regularly to reflect on the word of God; c) carrying out numerous illegal arrests, disappearances, etc. The security forces have gone to the extreme of killing arrested persons with impunity, one case being that of Francisco Fuentes Landaverde, whose body appeared last Friday, August 24, along with the corpses of six other persons.

This harassment recently became obvious with the publication of a statement in which two sisters of Arcatao were accused of instigating vandalism and provoking the authorities. We have clear evidence that this is not the truth.

I believe that this public calumny is taking place within a context of systematic persecution of the church and repression of the people; it is an attempt to discredit the work of these sisters who were once expelled from the country for a time. According to public statements, their expulsion was just a «mistake». My greatest fear is that an effort is being made to distort the facts in order to justify to public opinion some future repressive action against the sisters and other pastoral agents in that zone.

To prevent you from having to lament a new and irreparable mistake on the part of your subordinates, I have asked the sisters in Arcatao to leave that place for a prudent period so as to allow you time to give further consideration to this matter and to issue orders to the authorities in the zone to respect the sisters and stop harassing them. In due course, the sisters will return again to Arcatao with my full support, for I have received no evidence against them that demonstrates to me that they are instigating acts of vandalism. Instead, I have received many testimonies regarding the excellent church work they are performing in the area, and I have been able to confirm the fruit of that work personally.

---

<sup>19</sup> «Wave of Banditry in Northern Region of the Country» in *El Diario de Hoy* (29 August 1979) and *La Prensa Gráfica* (29 August 1979).

I hope that you, as president and as minister, will act to guarantee that not only the sisters but all the pastoral agents approved by the archdiocese will be free to carry out their pastoral work. I hope that you will take measures to end the harassment and the repression against the church and the people in Chalatenango and throughout the country. We wish to believe in the promises made by the president regarding the democratization of the country, but unfortunately these actions tend to contradict those promises<sup>20</sup>.

This is the letter that I am going to send. (Applause)

In order not to abuse your time any longer, I am simply going to indicate the communities where I've had some pastoral contact, so as to show you how lively true religion is in many sectors of our archdiocese. In El Salitre, Tejutla, we celebrated the second anniversary of the violent death of Felipe de Jesús. In La Palma we commemorated the second anniversary of the Semilla de Dios Cooperative. On Tuesday the twenty-eighth we were in the Christian community of Santa Tecla, sharing memories of Father Palacios. I sensed there the truth of the Gospel saying, «By their fruits you will know them» (Matt 7:16), for the fruits of a loving church were much in evidence there. On Wednesday the twenty-ninth we were in San Juan Cojutepeque for the patronal feast. On Thursday the thirtieth there was a wonderful gathering with the pastors from the vicariate of Mejicanos. Today at four o'clock there will be confirmations in Ateos.

I want to let you know that in San José de la Montaña they'll be setting up something like a vocational laboratory. It will provide psychological guidance for young people of both sexes and also for any persons who want assistance of a psychological nature. Two of our seminarians have gone to the Dominican Republic with the help of scholarships.

Next month our Legal Aid Office will be celebrating its fourth anniversary. I have at hand a report of theirs, but I'm going to allow you to read it in the next edition of *Orientación*<sup>21</sup>. Here I will simply mention the number of cases they have handled: forty-seven cases of a criminal nature, twelve civil cases, eight cases dealing with leases, two traffic cases, twenty-three individual labor cases, seven collective labor cases, ninety-four petitions of habeas corpus—often for detainees about whom nothing is known—and nineteen cases dealing with public order. These are the cases from January to June.

This is the community in which we live and to which I commend all our reflections of today. How I wish that all of us, beginning with myself, were members of the church that Jesus Christ has described for us today, a church that is not empty of interiority, good works, or God's revelation but rather is filled to overflowing with that interiority and those good works. Let us live the truth of divine revelation and not just follow human doctrines, so that we are honored as a people that observes the law of God! Dear fellow Christians, may we all pay honor to that admirable title of «people of God» that we received on the day of our baptism. Let it be so. (Applause)

---

<sup>20</sup> This letter was published in *Orientación* (9 September 1979).

<sup>21</sup> *Orientación* (9 September 1979).