

**163**

## **JESUS IS THE TRUE MESSIAH**

**Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**16 September 1979**

Isaiah 50:5-10

James 2:14-18

Mark 8:27-35

I am grateful for your presence, dear sisters and brothers, which is doubly meritorious because of the lack of public transportation and this awful weather. Despite the heavy rain I am pleasantly surprised to find this large congregation before me, because now I can share with you a reason for great joy. I want to tell you that we as the people of El Salvador should feel confident that we are in the pope's heart; this week His Holiness offered a prayer for our country, El Salvador. He prayed for the «countless victims of the incessant struggle and the internal tensions» and he asked that we Salvadorans might receive «the gift of peace without which true civic and human progress is impossible»<sup>1</sup>.

Besides this joy of a national and religious nature I also have another more intimate type of joy because a very influential person in the church has visited our countries of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras<sup>2</sup>. When he returned to Rome and spoke personally with the pope, the pope showed special interest in the archbishop of San Salvador. (Applause) This sign of communion you give me with your applause makes me feel even more satisfied about this news. This man of the church, who is impartial and profoundly spiritual, was able to tell the Holy Father what he had seen, which is what you are seeing and experiencing. He could also clarify various aspects that have been distorted in badly reported press notices. As a result, the Holy Father understood that our archdiocese and our humble ministry were giving him a testimony of communion and that we felt only joy at being followers of his teaching. I don't need to go on longer, but I want to tell you that I am flooded with a vast joy. I feel affirmed knowing that the Holy Father is aware of my work and feels that he is in close communion with this archbishop. (Applause)

I see this Sunday event as a providential gift of the Lord because it gathers together all of us who sincerely want to know the thinking of the church, and I try to take advantage of this moment to impart true catechesis. If there's any title that I'm proud of, it is that of catechist. That's what I want to be: the catechist of my diocese. With catechetical simplicity I want to try to give instruction that makes us aware that we are the church of Christ and that, as the church of Christ affirmed and consolidated in faith, we must shed light on the world that surrounds us, for otherwise we would not be the true church that serves the world.

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<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, «Sunday Allocution», 9 September 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (16 September 1979).

<sup>2</sup> The references are to Father Pedro Arrupe, superior general of the Society of Jesus. See ROMERO O. A., *Su diario*, Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador 2000, 257.

The church we want is faithful to God's word, and she is a faithful reflection of the will of Christ, so that by our very nature as church, which we all are, we can bathe reality in evangelical light.

And so we have today's readings, which always provide the basis for our catechesis. The readings always treat of the mystery of Christ, and the gospel chosen for this year is that of Saint Mark, which is a direct record of the teachings of Peter in Rome. One of the commentators on Saint Peter's homilies claimed that the gospel «does not explain the Divine Master's teaching and life in an ordered way but presented them as circumstances required»<sup>3</sup>. According to that commentator, Saint Mark wrote his gospel in a way that was not well-ordered but still corresponded to the teaching of Christ as applied to the realities that Peter encountered when he was preaching the Gospel in Rome. However, modern commentators, who have studied the Gospel of Saint Mark quite thoroughly, have found that it possesses a marvelous order, especially of a theological nature. In fact, the passage we read today is something of a key to the whole gospel.

The first part of the gospel, the first eight chapters or so, presents the mystery of the Messiah. In the second part, from chapter eight on, Saint Mark tries to clarify the mystery of the Son of man. These are two titles to which Christ himself laid claim, and today we find that claim being given explicit expression in the great confession of Peter, which is the climax of the first part of the gospel: «You are the Messiah» (Mark 8:29). The second part begins when Christ starts to explain what kind of Messiah he is; he must teach Peter and the apostles what his messianic calling means, for he is to be a suffering Messiah (Mark 8:31).

So we find ourselves today at this high point of the Gospel of Saint Mark. Since we come every Sunday to learn something about the mystery of Christ, we should be anxious today to leave our Mass with the same conviction that Peter had: «You are the Messiah». At the same time, we need perhaps to correct the false conceptions we have, for our Lord Jesus Christ asks each one of us, «What kind of Messiah am I?» Accordingly, today I want to title my homily «Jesus is the True Messiah». The three complementary thoughts will be these: first, the true Messiah; second, false types of messianism; and third, the followers of the true Messiah. The schema is straightforward and simply requires us to review the readings we have just heard.

## **The true Messiah**

The true Messiah. This gospel episode is picturesque. We find ourselves in Caesarea Philippi, a very ancient city. It was formerly called Paneas, but when the tetrarch Philip rebuilt it in honor of Caesar, he gave it the name Caesarea. In order to distinguish it from the other Caesarea, which was on the sea, this one was called Caesarea Philippi. It was about forty kilometers northeast of Lake Gennesaret.

It was there, in the scenic landscape surrounding the city rebuilt by Philip, that Christ asked a probing question, «Who do people say that I am?» (Mark 8:27). The term «people» in Saint Mark can refer to three different groups. First, there was the intimate circle of Christ's apostles, his followers, his disciples. Beyond that there was a wider circle of indifferent folk who didn't have any special interest in Christ. You always have such indifferent persons around any religion. These were the ones the Lord seemed to be referring, as if to ask, «What are the people who have not joined with us saying?» Even further beyond these people Christ

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<sup>3</sup> EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 39, 15.

found a third circle, his enemies. When he told Peter, «You are thinking not as God thinks but as people do», he was referring to his enemies (Mark 8:31,33). They are mentioned here too, the ones who were going to torture him and kill him.

So the second circle included the immense group of indifferent people who neither loved nor hated Christ but still had some interest in him. Jesus Christ had become well known in his time, and even the most indifferent folk were talking about him. And it was their opinions the disciples were reflecting in the answers they gave Jesus: «Some say that you are John the Baptist who has risen from the dead» (Mark 8:28a). Herod himself was frightened when they told him that Christ was preaching, so that he exclaimed, «It must be John who has risen!» (Mark 6:16). «Other people say that you are Elijah» (Mark 8:28b). The disciples said that because that was the ancient tradition (Mark 9:11). Elijah had been taken up in the clouds and was supposed to return to prepare for the coming of the Messiah (2 Kgs 2:11). «Still others say that you are one of the prophets» (Mark 8:28c). When Christ performed miracles, the people declared, «This is the great prophet who was to come» (Luke 7:16), because Moses had said that God would send another prophet like himself (Deut 18:18). So these were the different opinions of the people.

But Christ then asked his intimate circle of companions, «And you who have shared with me my journeys, my nights, my days, my teachings—who do you say that I am?» (Mark 8:29). It is then that we hear the response that provides the theme for our homily. Peter declared to Christ, «You are the Messiah» (Mark 8:29). This is a simple word that says a great deal. «You are the Messiah» is like the fruit of all the teachings in the first eight chapters of Saint Mark. All the miracles, all the teachings, and everything else they had seen in Christ made the disciples suspect that this was so, that there was something great about this man. Otherwise they would not have left all things to follow him. Gradually Christ's love and affection, his tenderness and his power, were revealed to Peter's heart, and there was a special grace from God, as the Gospel of Saint Matthew puts it, «Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. No one knows the true meaning of Christ unless it is revealed by the Father» (Matt 16:17; 11:27).

«You are the Messiah» means «You are the one who is awaited». What were the Jews hoping for when they talked about the Messiah? What does «Messiah» mean? «Messiah» was a word of Aramaic origin which was translated into the Greek as «Christ» and is translated into Spanish as «the Anointed One». Christ is the Messiah, which means the same as «anointed». In the Old Testament the anointed ones were the kings, the priests, and the patriarchs—the ones chosen by God for a special mission. The king especially was the presence of God in the community, and woe to anyone who dared to touch the anointed one of God! Later the priests were also anointed. The people were expecting that the Christ would be an extraordinary man who had all the dignity of being prophet, priest, and king. The Messiah would reveal the presence of God among the people and bring them liberation. That pitiable people among whom Christ was born was a nation that had been constantly invaded by foreigners, so they felt a powerful longing for the liberation that was to come.

As you know, when Christ arrived, Palestine was a province of Rome. Pontius Pilate was the representative of the empire that had subjugated the poor people of that land. The people were therefore longing for liberation by «the one who is to come». Recall how the Samaritan woman responded to Christ with the words, «We know that he is to come» (John 4:25). This was the expectation of people: «Someone is to come who will bring us the blessings

announced by the prophets: peace, freedom, unity, joy, well-being, happiness». Any people deprived of these goods longs for a Messiah!

So when Peter declared, «You are the Messiah!» he was inspiring great hope in the people. Christ had already sensed the intensity of people's expectation, such as the time they wanted to make him king after he had multiplied the loaves: «This is the great Messiah! Let us make him our king!» So he had to hide (John 6:14-15). Another time the devil, suspecting that Christ was the Messiah, tried to subject him to tests and ply him with temptation, but Christ overcame the temptations to be a vain type of messianic figure (Luke 4:1-13). Christ always fled from the acclamations arising from people's poor conceptions of what the messianic task really was.

So Christ begins to clarify his mission at the end of the eighth chapter. He strictly forbade his disciples to reveal his identity to others since they would not understand (Mark 8:30). He told them, «Someday you will go out to the world to teach people that I am the Messiah, but now you are still learning». This is what Isaiah said in the first reading: «He opened my ears» (Isa 50:5). What Christ wanted first was true disciples. Before we can proclaim the Messiah, sisters and brothers, we must know him. That is why anyone who preaches must above all be a faithful disciple who listens, who meditates, who reflects, who prays.

Christ feels the need to be cautious in order to prevent misconceptions and allow time for a more precise understanding. «Wait a while; don't tell anybody what you just heard Peter say. From this point on I'm going to put you to the test because understanding about the true Messiah is not as easy as people think». The Messiah that God has conceived and sent into the world is the Messiah who was announced in the time of Isaiah: the Servant of Yahweh.

Our modern liturgy has a beautiful way of using Old Testament parallels to give special meaning to the Gospel message. Seven centuries before Peter made his confession, Isaiah had already pointed out the mysterious figure of the Servant of Yahweh, who possessed some characteristics that seemed inconceivable for a Messiah. It was difficult for people to understand that prophecy of a man who offered his cheek that they might pluck his beard, who offered his back to be beaten, who was crowned with thorns, buffeted, and spat upon (Isa 50:6). How was all that possible if he was supposed to be a great king and Messiah? Isaiah was describing the characteristics of a victim, and from this point on in the Gospel of Saint Mark, that was to be the work of Christ. At least three times we find the announcement that appears in today's gospel: «We are going up to Jerusalem because the Son of man is going to be handed over, humiliated, and mistreated» (Mark 8:31). In this is symbolized the destiny of evangelization.

The gospel says, «He will suffer greatly» (Mark 8:31a), but he didn't suffer only on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. Christ suffered greatly because his whole ministry was one of humility and humiliation. He was not understood. He was rejected by both the secular and the religious leaders of Israel; both the high priest and the civil rulers rejected him (Mark 8:31b). This rejection symbolizes the persecution against the church which has always existed and will always exist, but at the same time it tells us about the sad fate of those who reject God, for Saint John says, «Those who do not hear my message are already judged. When they reject me, it turns into rejection of God» (John 3:18). How sad that is! Let us hope, dear sisters and brothers, that we never belong to that third circle of people that always exists in history, the

people who reject Christ. They are the ones who misinform about the church, who persecute and disfigure and refuse to understand the church. When they reject God, not only do they do evil, but they become evil.

«He will be executed, he will be put to death and killed, but on the third day he will rise» (Mark 8:31c). This is a magnificent synthesis of what was called and is still called the *kerygma*, the announcement that Christ has saved the world by his death and resurrection. Christ sets the example for what is at the heart of his preaching, namely, helping the people to realize that the Messiah who is to save the world by the power of God must first suffer the humiliation, the cross, the murder, the torture, all the violence inflicted on him. But from that suffering he will rise up, for the plan of God is to rescue us from sin. «Without shedding of blood there is no redemption», says Saint Paul (Heb 9:22). The Messiah who saves the world must suffer, so that suffering will always be a characteristic of the church and of all true followers of Christ.

### **False kinds of messianism**

Let us pass on, then, to my second thought: false kinds of messianism. Let it be clear that the true Messiah is a powerful Messiah because he is God, but as the Servant of Yahweh and the Son of man he is also a suffering and humiliated Messiah. Let us not be scandalized by this. Rather, let us try to understand it so that we don't become followers of a false messiah.

What are the characteristics of false messianism? I have found three here in today's readings: first, in the incident with Peter, we find messianism without the cross and without suffering; second, in Christ's reprimand to Peter—«You are thinking as human beings do, not as God does» (Mark 8:33)—we see political messianism based on human interests without thought of God; and third, the reading from James presents a messianism where faith is dead, spirituality is vain, and religion is without commitment. I think we will do well to meditate on the word of God and see what kind of messianism we believe in ourselves.

If this morning we can say to Christ, as Peter did, «Lord, you are the Messiah» (Mark 8:29), then let us hope the Lord will not reproach us by saying, «You still don't understand. Live as a follower of the true Messiah!» You are a false follower if you take Christ aside, as the scandalized Peter did, and rebuke him saying, «That cannot be, Lord! How can it be that you will go up and suffer all those things?» (Mark 8:32). No doubt Peter was good-willed, for he had followed Christ with great poverty and sacrifice, but he still hadn't understood Christ—even though his lips had just made the proclamation that Christ had been hoping for. What sadness Christ felt! He spoke harsh words to him: «You have not understood me. Stay away from me, Satan!» (Mark 8:33). And Christ would say the same to all those who would seek to preach him without the cross and without sacrifice.

Satan was the one who tempted Christ in the desert: «If you are the Messiah, turn these stones into bread. Then people will readily believe in you, and you won't suffer any more hunger! If you are the Messiah, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and the angels will catch you. If you want dominion over the world, bow down before me and worship me». Christ rejected these temptations of the evil one (Matt 4:1-11). All those who wish to eliminate the cross of the true Messiah are false followers; they have not understood the meaning of true messianism. They prefer a triumphal messianism which declares, «I am a Christian, but I don't want to get involved». This was the messianism of those people who

formed Christian communities or became catechists, but when they saw the time of persecution approach, they ran and hid away saying, «We'd better wait for better times!» This is the messianism of those who say, «Be prudent. Don't get so involved! Be careful!» How many people there are in our own day who are like Peter and like Satan! But thank God there are also people who are like that other disciple, who boldly declared, «Let us go with him, and if necessary, let us die with him!» (John 11:16). These are the ones who have understood that the Messiah will not end his life on a bed of roses; he must walk toward Calvary bearing his cross, crowned with thorns, exposing his back to lashes, and dying on the cross as poor, despised, unrecognized man.

Messianism without the cross is very fashionable among us. We have easy-going kinds of messianism, free of commitment. We have forms of messianism that are trying to force even the people who are working hard into retreat. Leave them alone! If you are cowards yourselves, at least let the valiant people continue on! May those who have truly understood messianism convert us who are cowardly and give us the true key that Christ gives to all his followers at the end. But let us keep our eyes always on the One who doesn't dawdle or remain in the trenches, but presses forward while calling out to us, «Follow me! Take up your cross!» (Mark 8:34).

When Christ tells Peter, «You are thinking as human beings do, not as God does» (Mark 8:33), we have an example of another form of false messianism that is very fashionable these days. Perhaps there is much good will in the people's political organizations and in the various struggles to liberate the people. There is no doubt good will among those who are concerned about social justice and who clearly perceive the many injustices being committed; perhaps they are fighting so that things won't remain that way. Nowadays nobody can help but be aware of what is happening. We all have to take action, but it shouldn't be the kind of action for which Christ criticized Peter. Peter was motivated only by human concerns without thinking of God's plans, and that is the reason for the failure of many initiatives and strategies in the politics of today. People are thinking just humanly, not transcendentally, and they aren't viewing the project of God as Christ saw it: «Yes, I am the Liberator. I am the Messiah God has sent, but above all else I seek to respect the will of my Father. Father, if it is possible, take this cup away from me, but let not my will but yours be done» (Mark 14:36). This is the true liberation that arises from the will of God and keeps its eyes fixed on God so as not to give way to a false messianism or a false liberation.

There were all kinds of political opinions during Christ's time. Remember when they wanted to make him king (John 6:15)? They had a political vision of Christ. Remember when they were going up the mountain for the ascension? His disciples were still asking him, «Is it now that you will restore power to the kingdom of Israel?» (Acts 1:6). Likewise, the mother of the two apostles, James and John, had a political vision in making that request of Jesus: «When you establish your kingdom, I ask that you seat my two sons, one at your right and the other at your left. That is, make them ministers of that kingdom» (Matt 20:20-23). Pure political visions!

Everything that makes people think of Christ as an earthly liberator is a political vision. There were many such visions in Christ's time, but how similar these times in El Salvador in 1979 are to the time of Christ! In those days there were many political currents. The people had their own political groupings, and there were also armed liberation forces, such as the Zealots. In fact, one of the apostles came from that organization to form part of

Christ's team. These times of ours are very similar. Christ's time was very politicized; the people were oppressed by the Roman empire, where there were human visions and nothing more. Christ came to preach the kingdom of God, sisters and brothers, but we should be very aware that he was accused of being political and subversive precisely because he was incarnating God's word among a politicized people. «He goes about subverting the social order from Galilee to Jerusalem» (Luke 23:5). That was certainly the accusation that caused the politicians and the king to be apprehensive. In order to get Pontius Pilate to pass sentence on him, they offered a political reason: «If you release this man, you are not a friend of Caesar, and we're going to denounce anyone who is not a friend of Caesar» (John 19:12). How terrible is political temptation! How frightful is the moment when people lose sight of God's viewpoint! Even though it meant losing popularity with the organizations that no doubt wanted to manipulate and bring him over to their side, Christ preferred to remain alone. But he was not alone for he was with God. The design of history carried him to God, and this was what mattered in the long run, not immediate political goals or immediate conquests.

Justice demands a great effort now, and as church we support that effort, as Christ supported the efforts of his people. No one can deny people the right to organize. Repression aimed at destroying organized groups is quite wrong because organization is a human right that no one can violate. The just demands that those organizations make must be heard. A demonstration that is requesting things that are just should not be repressed. Rather, the demonstrators should be heard so that the cries of a large sector of the population can be attended to for the common good. Christ also defends what is just. All the human rights that have been given by God must be defended. But Christ does not allow himself to be manipulated or coopted.

Here I would like to make an appeal to all you dear Christians. You are not forbidden to organize. This is a right, and in certain times, such as now, it is also a duty. Social and political claims must be made not only by isolated individuals but by the full force of a united people who demand their just rights. It is not a sin to organize. What is sinful for Christians is losing the perspective of God. If Christians decide to organize, they should not surrender their faith in God for the sake of the political interests of some organization. Keep your faith in the Lord sound, and draw on that faith to dialogue with the organization and to shed light on its strategies so that it doesn't trample on the noble religious sentiments of the people. Learn how to be true voices of this people evangelized by Christ when you speak in the midst of your organizations. This is what we expect of those Christians who may have found their political vocation while reflecting on the word of God, which is the way I found my priestly vocation. Involvement in politics is also a vocation, and if God has given you that vocation, you must follow it because God will ask you to account for this gift he has given you. But you must follow it according to God's desires, lest Christ tell you as he told Peter, «You are a Christian, so don't think simply as humans do but as God does!» (Mark 8:33b). And here I am speaking to everyone, including those not organized.

The Council states that lay people live in the world along with other people who are not Christian, people who have neither faith nor hope. So Christians must give testimony to the faith and the hope that they bear within themselves (LG 35). Our baptism has committed us to using evangelical criteria in judging the world with its sins and injustices. Christians who take the side of the oppressors are not true Christians. Christians who defend unjust, indefensible positions only to preserve their status are no longer Christians. They seek the things of earth; they neither speak nor think of the things of God.

All this is difficult, dear sisters and brothers, but it is necessary. The Lord reprimanded Peter severely so that all the others would understand. Saint Mark, with his fine psychological sense, records a significant gesture of Christ. When Peter took Christ aside to rebuke him, Mark tells us, Christ then turned back to the apostles, thus turning his back on Peter. He addressed the apostles and the crowd and told them what he had told Peter: «You are Satan for me. You are following the values of the world. You don't want me to suffer, but my Father is sending me to drink the chalice of pain and suffering. You do not speak as God thinks but as the world thinks. Get away from me, Satan!» (Mark 8:33). And he went on to instruct the crowd about what true following of Jesus Christ must be.

The first type of false messianism, remember, is messianism without cross or sacrifice. The second is political messianism without a divine perspective. There is much suffering, and I know how much people are suffering. So many of those fighting to defend the just claims of the people are being killed at this very moment! How I wish we could say of all of them, «They died thinking the way God thinks!» I would like to place beautiful crowns on all those heroes of our times, on all those solicitous for the social and political problems of our age. Let us bless God that there are so many committed people in these days! But I want them to seek still higher concerns, just as Christ sought to encourage Peter by reprehending him severely.

Reprehending someone is not to wish the person ill. Criticism is an act of charity. It seeks simply to correct people by telling them, «Look, don't let what is good keep you from doing what is better. What you are doing is good, but if you unite it with Christ and with God, it will be better still». Please don't misunderstand me, but do realize that my poor voice is the voice of the church. It is the voice of a Christ who wants to be in solidarity with your political and social demands, but like Christ, I cannot tell you to manipulate everything for the sake of your immediate goals. Rather, I will tell you this: «Observe, be patient, and organize all your strategy, all your politics, and your whole way of proceeding toward the great political goal of Christ, toward the great reward of redemption, for that is what frees us from sin and selfishness. That is what creates new men and women for the new structures we need».

As Christ said, we should not try to mend old clothes with new patches (Mark 2:21). That's often what happens with earthly demands when we are not wholly renewed ourselves. We must be completely refashioned for the new structures to be created by new men and women; then we will have truly new clothes and new patches—or more delightful still, «new wine in new wineskins» (Mark 2:22). Let us truly remake El Salvador by changing the structures, but let us not do it by means of hatred and violence that lead us nowhere. Let us begin by trying to see what God wants of us. Let us renew ourselves interiorly so that we'll be the more fit for that holy revolution that Christ has brought about: the revolution of the beatitudes, the revolution of love, the revolution of renewal, the revolution of peace built upon true justice.

The third form of false messianism is mentioned in the second reading from Saint James. It is messianism in which faith is dead; it is messianism that only gives advice but does nothing; it is messianism without works. Puebla speaks about this, and I cite it in my pastoral letter. By the way, I want to tell you that the letter is now available, but because so much happened this past week, they couldn't give me the complete press run. In the first days



of this week, though, you'll be able to get copies of the pastoral letter, which is titled, «The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis».

In speaking of sin within our church, I am referring precisely to the lack of unity among Christians, and I find in Puebla a thought which can be like medicine for us. Puebla says that the medicine is to be found in the preferential option for the poor: «Not all of us in Latin America have committed ourselves sufficiently to the poor. We are not always concerned about them, nor do we always work in solidarity with them. Service to them truly requires constant conversion and purification of all Christians, so that they achieve an ever fuller identification with the poor Christ and with our own poor» (P 1140). But the conversion required by Puebla will not be true unless it is a «radical conversion toward justice and love that transforms structures from within and creates a pluralistic society that respects and promotes human dignity and makes it possible for all human beings to achieve their supreme vocation of communion with God and union with one another» (P 1206). In other words, Puebla is talking about what divides us—both within the church and, even more, outside the church—into those three circles that Christ has traced out for us today. Division has crept in, but it is because we have not been converted to the true ideal of Christ.

The true ideal is precisely the option that is presented in today's second reading, namely, choosing the interests of the poor as a part of my own life; it means being as concerned for their interests as I am for my own. This is what Saint James calls «the works that prove our faith» (James 2:18). Don't say you have faith if you're not concerned about sincere conversion to the Gospel. Don't say that you have Christian faith if you don't sacrifice your lifestyle a little in order to contribute to the cause of truly remaking this country. It's not enough just to criticize, as James's comparison shows: «You see a poor, hungry person enter, and you tell him, "Keep warm, for you're cold. Eat well, for you're hungry. Put some clothes on, for you're naked". But you provide no clothing, no heat, no food» (James 2:15-17). You give good advice, but your faith is dead. We have no need of more advice. What we need are people who give substance to their advice and make it reality. As Christ said, «If you have two shirts, give one to somebody who has none» (Luke 3:11). If a poor person comes to your door, do not treat him with contempt, but see what you can do to help her. A challenge from God himself is arriving at your door. «Do not despise anyone because whatever you do for that person you do for me» (Matt 25:40)

This kind of messianism is very pernicious. It is so pernicious that it often disparages the church in order to justify itself: «Now they've become communists!» Whenever we touch on justice, we are classified as communists, but social justice is precisely what James is asking for in his letter. This is a letter that would be well worth reading aloud without commentary. Read it, and you'll see that James makes much stronger statements than the ones usually heard in the pulpits of our churches.

With regard to these false types of messianism, I want to respond to a question I was asked a while ago. Someone asked me to explain in a homily about the anti-Christ. Well, you have the answer there: the anti-Christ is just what we've been saying; it is false messianism; it is false Christianity. That word «anti-Christ» appears in one of the letters of Saint John (1 John 2:18,22). It represents some person or some ideology that at the end of time will wage a struggle against Christ and try to snatch away all his followers—and woe to those who allow themselves to be deceived! But we don't have to wait until the end of the world. There are many opinions among those who comment on that term, «anti-Christ». Some say that

Saint Paul mentions the presence of an anti-Christ, possibly referring to the Romans who were persecuting the Christian communities (2 Thes 2:3-12). There is also mention of the forces of evil in the Apocalypse (Rev 13:4-18). So the term means an incarnation or personification of those forces of evil, and that is why Christ told Peter, «You do not think as God does; you think as human beings do» (Mark 8:33). That worldly thinking that turns its back on God is what we would call the anti-Christ.

The anti-Christ finds embodiment in persons and organizations, and in our country the anti-Christ is very well known. The anti-Christ includes those who censure the pastoral work of our church. The anti-Christ includes those who denounce their fellow *campesinos* in order to gain favor with those above. The anti-Christ includes all those who spy on our meetings in order to misinform about them. (Applause) So we shouldn't expect it to be some mythological personage. Luther and some of our more distraught separated brethren call the pope and the Catholic hierarchy anti-Christ. As you can see, the term «anti-Christ» is one that lends itself to many interpretations, but I believe the correct one is the one offered by the great Bible commentators, which is the same as the one I just expressed: the anti-Christ is everything that is opposed to the true God, everything that is opposed to the true Messiah. Don't forget that what is most important for me this morning is to give a clear idea of the true Messiah. He is God who comes to save us—and to save us by suffering.

### **Followers of the true Messiah**

So on to my third point: the followers of the true Messiah. This means all of you, dear sisters and brothers! Christ called the people together and began to instruct them about what it means to follow him faithfully. He told them, «If you wish to come after me, you must deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me» (Mark 8:34).

These are three truly difficult tasks, like climbing a mountain. «Denying yourself» means not seeking our own pleasure or following our own whims; it means saying «no» to ourselves. «Take up your cross»—I read a wonderful commentary about this saying. Christ wasn't referring to the cross on which he died, as our Christian reflection would lead us to believe. Even before Christ, the Jews used to mark their foreheads with a *tau*, or a T, using a branding iron that burned the skin. It was a cross with religious meaning, indicating repentance from sin or consecration of oneself to a person like a king or another leader. So when Christ said, «Take up your cross», it seems he wasn't referring simply to carrying an actual material cross or to doing our duty by sacrificing ourselves. He also meant that we should allow ourselves to be marked by his Christian ideology. Just as slaves are branded so that they are easily recognizable, so also we are to be marked on our foreheads with a cross that cannot be removed. This is a sign of repentance and conversion to God; it shows that we belong to God and do not want to be separated from him. That is taking up the cross.

The third command is «Follow me». How wonderful it is to realize that whenever we make a sacrifice, Christ goes before us! I read a short history in a catechetical lesson that touched me deeply. They say that a French king who was very holy and devout asked a young page to go with him in the winter nights to visit different churches, but the page's feet got very cold on those winter nights. The king told him, «Look, try to place your feet where I place mine», and the servant felt a pleasant warmth when he did so. When following in the king's footsteps, the page felt no cold; instead he felt the warmth of someone who was working a miracle. Was this a miracle? Or is it a legend? In any case, with Christ it is pure truth. We see

him and we follow him; we walk after him and follow in his footsteps. Wherever we place our feet, we know that Christ already has placed his there, leaving the great warmth of love. Even if we see there traces of blood, thorns, spittle, dust, and pain, we know that they are steps of love that the Lord is taking and that all who follow him are not following a tyrant but are following the Savior, the true Messiah. So this is what Christ tells his Christians: «Deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me» (Mark 8:34).

As if responding to Peter, Christ tells them, «Those who wish to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for me and for the Gospel will save them» (Mark 8:35). This profound saying of Christ shows us how he recognizes an eschatological horizon in our human existence. Your life does not end with death. Your life is not confined solely to history. The most important thing is beyond history. Those who perceive that eschatological horizon know that it is worthwhile even to risk their lives because they will not lose them. In contrast, those who will lose their lives are those who try to save their lives instead of risking them; they are those who want to be wealthy and live in comfort; they are those who don't want to get involved in conflicts or problems. If this is a true saying of Christ, sisters and brothers, then I believe it is well worth the trouble to belong to our church.

I want to conclude my homiletic reflection with a statement that has always touched me deeply. It is what the Second Vatican Council said about the church as the people of God: «Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the church is called to follow the same route so that she might communicate the fruits of salvation to humankind. Christ Jesus, “though he was by nature God, emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave” (Phil 2:6-7) and “being rich, became poor” (2 Cor 8:9) for our sake. Thus, the church, although she needs human resources to carry out her mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by her own example, humility and self-sacrifice». And further on the document says, «The church, like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes. By the power of the risen Lord she is given strength that she might, in patience and in love, overcome her sorrows and her challenges, both within herself and from without, and that she might reveal to the world, faithfully though darkly, the mystery of her Lord until, in the end, she will be manifested in full light» (LG 8).

The true Messiah has still not been revealed. The Messiah we know now is revealed to us in history, and the church tries to imitate him in suffering and poverty. But the full glory of the Messiah will be seen only when God gathers in all the glorious wonders he has worked in history and throws out everything superfluous, everything that resulted from human thinking and nothing more. At that time the Messiah will become the glorious King who with his glorious church will reside in glorious happiness forever. Let us make this our hope, sisters and brothers! This is my great desire: to create a church that truly responds to the desires of Jesus Christ. When Christ saw that people wanted to proclaim him Messiah, he made it clear what true messianism meant, and he denounced the false types. Is this the way our church will be?

## **Life of the church**

Let us review our history—and excuse me for the time I've taken. Someone asked me, «Why do you preach so long? Think of the poor people who are standing». I respond, «I am also standing. I'll feel it myself when we're all tired!» Bear with me a little longer. If there are no pews, then

there is the floor and wherever else is comfortable. But I would like you to be attentive at this moment because this is the most important part of the week for me. This is the moment when the church is truly fulfilling her mission here in the archdiocese, thanks to the kindness of you people listening to me, for you and I together create this homily which brings life to our church and to our country.

I want to recall with affection and to express my faithful solidarity with the priests who have been murdered. Investigations carried out by our offices and by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS make it clear that Fathers Rutilio Grande, Alfonso Navarro, Rafael Palacios, and Alirio Napoleón Macías were not killed by leftist groups but by the UGB or by government agents in civilian clothing. As regards the two other priests, Neto Barrerra and Octavio Ortiz, it is clear that they died while detained by the security forces. (Applause)

I have in my hand a letter in which the OAS requested from our government an explanation of case 2336, which is the murder of Father Navarro. Our government sent this reply to the OAS: «In a notice surreptitiously sent to the newspapers of this country, the clandestine ultra-right organization called the White Warriors Union claimed to have committed this reprehensible act. I enclose a photocopy of the notice, which was published on 13 May 1977»<sup>4</sup>. That means that the government itself has responded to the OAS, saying that it was not leftist groups but the UGB that killed Father Alfonso Navarro. In order not to extend myself, let me just mention this case, and let me also state that other similar accounts<sup>5</sup> of the regrettable deaths of our beloved fellow priests are false and unfounded; they are helping the murderers cover up their crimes. (Applause)

On this occasion, rather than pay respects to the deceased priests, I want to express my solidarity with the priests, the religious, and the other pastoral agents whose lives are still in danger. I am in solidarity with them because I know that by their activities and their teachings they are responding to what the church is asking of us all. And this is precisely what we have been reflecting on today: being committed to the true messianism of Christ, a messianism which will carry us, along with Christ, to the frontiers of death, to Calvary itself. And I want to tell these beloved priests, religious, and faithful who are working and living in this true messianic spirit that they should not be discouraged. They should provide one another mutual support so that they can continue to give honor to Jesus Christ and be able to represent a church worthy of this moment in our country's history.

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<sup>4</sup> «Reply of the Government of El Salvador to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS». Department of Foreign Policy and International Organizations, 13 March 1978, in *Orientación* (23 September 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Archbishop Romero is referring to the homily of Bishop Pedro Arnoldo Aparicio preached on 9 September 1979 and published in *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* on 13 September 1979; Aparicio was bishop of San Vicente and president of the Bishops Conference of El Salvador. Among other things, Bishop Aparicio said, «We are all aware these days of the increase in criminality. We are informed about it by the press, the National Guard, and the Treasury Police. We have seen the crimes committed. But please know and understand that at least half of the victims were killed by the same groups, such as the FPL. They were killed because it was feared that they might retreat or they might betray the group. We can see clearly that Father Rutilio Grande was a victim of those same groups, because they were afraid that Father Grande would reveal the Jesuit companions who were plotting the rebellion of *campesinos* against the state, against the government, and against the church. Father Navarro of the Colonia Miramonte was killed by the same ones. Father Palacios was eliminated by them also. Father Macías was also victim of the same groups. It was not the government».

Another priest has received threats, but please listen to this lovely letter from his community: «Our purpose is to inform the Salvadoran people about the persecution of our church by elements identified as the UGB. On August 31 our beloved priest, Miguel Ángel Flores, was issued a death threat by persons who belong to that organization. They gave him sixty days to change his pro-guerrilla attitude and his form of preaching, and if he did not he would be executed. Accordingly, we stand in solidarity with our priest and declare that the accusations are false. We think they are the same accusations that were made against our Lord Jesus Christ when they accused him of being an agitator and of stirring up the people. But we recall that Christ himself said, "If they have done this with the green wood, what will they do with the dry?"» (Luke 23:31). This is a superb reflection from a humble base community<sup>6</sup>.

I also want to express my solidarity with the petition that the priests and the religious addressed to the Bishops Conference of El Salvador asking the bishops «to order priests and religious to abstain from using their homilies and meetings to defame other priests and their pastoral collaborators»<sup>7</sup>. (Applause) And what is more important, the petition asked the bishops «to speak directly with the persons who are the objects of complaints by civilian and military authorities so that that they can explain the nature of their apostolic work and give testimony about the truth or falsity of the accusations»<sup>8</sup>. We have always insisted on this whenever they expelled or mistreated our priests: «The priests have their hierarchy. Understand the situation first. Engage in dialogue to clarify the situation of this accused person».

I have also received a letter which is actually a response to a letter our clergy sent to the governing junta of Nicaragua and to other governments of Latin America. I believe the thinking of the government of our sister republic of Nicaragua is revealed in this response they sent to our priests: «After many years of intense struggle to establish a government of justice in our country and after many years of experiencing and witnessing such great bloodshed in our land, you can be sure that we understand the suffering and anguish of both the Salvadoran Catholic Church and the Salvadoran people in general. You are witnesses of how much it has cost us to arrive at this stage of the revolution, and now that we have achieved it, we assure you that we are willing to stand in solidarity with all just causes and to do everything we can to help all suffering peoples so that human rights are respected in every corner of the earth»<sup>9</sup>. (Applause)

I also want to denounce the psychological harassment to which the director of our radio station YSAX is being subjected. For two nights now groups have been coming and making threats. I want to remind you that the president himself has cited as a clear proof of press freedom the fact that he has respected our radio station and left it free to operate, even though (he says) it is always condemning the government. I believe his statement should be respected because our station seeks to pay honor to the right of free expression. (Applause)

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<sup>6</sup> «Letter from the Christian Community of San Pedro Masahuat», 9 September 1979. See *Manuscripts of the Schemas of the Homilies of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero*, in the Office for the Cause of the Canonization of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero, Archbishop's Office of San Salvador.

<sup>7</sup> «Letter of the Priests and Religious of All the Dioceses of El Salvador to the Bishops Conference of El Salvador», 11 August 1979. See *Manuscripts of the Schemas of the Homilies of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero*, loc. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> «Letter of Alfonso Robelo C., Member of the Governing Junta of Nicaragua, to Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez and All the Salvadoran Clergy», 1 September 1979, in *Orientación* (23 September 1979).

Our YSAX director is not the author of the thought diffused through the radio but simply the administrator of the station.

Also, if my words are able to do so, I want to guarantee the security of the esteemed director of our Legal Aid Office, Doctor Roberto Cuéllar. They have been waging psychological warfare also against him, to the point where yesterday they spread the news that he had been gunned down, but that is false. So I would ask that respect be shown to this institution that has done so much good for the people, mediating in countless strikes and helping to resolve many difficult situations through its counsels. Our Legal Aid Office loyally serves the cause of human rights, giving voice to those who have no voice. Respect it please! (Applause)

I must also deplore this week the expulsion of another sister, Judith Chávez, who has been working in El Paraíso, Chalatenango. After she returned from a meeting of her congregation in Costa Rica, they gave her only twenty-four hours to leave for Guatemala. They took away her passport and told her that it would be returned to her at the border. I believe that I can give testimony about her work, which should give no one reason to fear but provides true Christian advancement for our people. I stated the same thing about the sisters who were working in Arcatao, even though the Ministry of Defense responded to my letter by saying, «There exists evidence that their work has not stayed within the limits of their pastoral ministry as it should have. However, this pertains to another government ministry so I prefer not to go into details».

Dear sisters and brothers, what right does a military official have to judge the proper limits of pastoral ministry? (Applause) In the letter I sent him, I said that I was guaranteeing the sisters' work there, which I had seen for myself. This response is therefore offensive; it's practically telling me that I'm lying. But I can still reaffirm that the work of the sisters is truly pastoral, and any action taken against them will be considered a new act of repression against our church. Have faith in your pastor, and have confidence in his good judgment in directing the pastoral ministry of the diocese. If such confidence is not shown, we will consider completely justifiable the finding of the OAS that there is systematic persecution of the church<sup>10</sup>.

We take the same attitude with regard to the renewed calumny against the Colegio Sagrado Corazón, which claims that the students are being given Marxist indoctrination. How ridiculous! In their math classes, they say!<sup>11</sup> We're in agreement with the investigation they are requesting, but let it be a truly intelligent and impartial investigation. What is happening is that we simply refuse to be converted to an authentic option for the poor. We refuse to understand the passage I just read to you from Puebla. All our educational institutions and pastoral works are trying to instill those evangelical criteria in the minds of their students so that we can change this sinful society; we want to transform social injustice into a more just social order. This is not sowing Marxism. It is simply sowing social justice and the Gospel message in the persons who have been entrusted to us. Finally, I would ask, «If you have no confidence in the school, then why do you keep your daughters there?»

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<sup>10</sup> On 9 March 1979 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights of the OAS passed a resolution that reads: «We insist on the need for the government to adopt the measures necessary to prevent continued persecution of members of the Catholic Church». See «Human Rights Are a Necessary Condition for Peace», *ECA* 369-370 (1979) 504.

<sup>11</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 September 1979).

Visits to the communities. Last Sunday I visited Aguilares and El Paisnal in the Araditas district to boost the spirit in those places, which is still very good, especially given the murder of the catechist, Jesús Jiménez. I also visited the grave of our beloved Father Grande.

On Monday I was with the Christian Cursillo Movement and asked for their collaboration in our urban ministry. I would like them to help me develop some plans so that we can evangelize the areas of the city more effectively.

The Carmelite Sisters of Saint Joseph are entering into an agreement with Catholic Relief Services so that they can continue their good work of human development with rural women in the Colonia Utila of Santa Tecla.

The Passionist Sisters and the Colegio Divina Providencia, which they direct, offered Mass for the eternal rest of José Mauricio Flores Aparicio, who was killed recently, as you know. I told them his death was a sign of the tragic moment our country is passing through. There we prayed at the cross of Christ which they venerate during their patronal feast. We send condolences also to his family. We send condolences as well to a great church collaborator, Elsa Herrera, for the death of her mother—and to another friend and collaborator in Santa Elena, Luisa Arévalo, on the first anniversary of the death of her father, Pedro Jesús Arévalo.

Yesterday we celebrated the national holiday in the Colonia Dolores since little notice is taken of the fact that September 15 is also the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. I asked that the prayers we offered for their patronal feast be offered for the whole country as well, and I urged them to view the figure of the Virgin at the foot of the cross as an image of our own land, where so many sorrowing mothers are weeping over the disappearance, the murder, or the death of their children.

This evening at seven o'clock the new pastor will take possession of San Francisco parish in Mejicanos. I mistakenly stated that it was to be last Sunday, but it's today at seven o'clock.

The church of El Calvario continues to be occupied. Since I try to echo the voices of the communities, I will read to you a note they sent me from the parish of El Calvario: «The associations and the faithful in general of the parish of El Calvario, San Salvador, protest strongly against the violent occupation of the church and the rectory at eight o'clock in the morning of Sunday the ninth by members of the People's Revolutionary Bloc. They deplore and repudiate the action of these elements, who demanded that the keys of the church and the rectory be surrendered, thus hindering the freedom of the priests to do their pastoral work. They demand that this group leave the church since the people are already conscious of their demands».

At the same time a group that regularly occupies churches is justifying this tactic. A newspaper published the following statement of the February 28 People's Leagues: «The savage repression of the people and the lack of freedom of expression and organization have impelled us to undertake the occupation of churches as a way to make known our protests». They state clearly that they have always respected the material goods of the churches and the religious devotion of the people.

I want to respect both opinions, and I've already made clear my own way of thinking. I understand this situation in which channels for expression are lacking, but I also believe that the people's organizations have to consider the harm they're doing by occupying the churches. Let us hope that a dialogue that is truly open to seeking the interests of all will lead to a reasonable solution rather than to an outcome that is irrational and repressive. Both the violence of the government and the violence of those reacting against it are simply creating more bloodshed and confusion among us.

As I've mentioned, the fourth pastoral letter is being published. I also want to thank Mr. Duarte for what he said in an interview about the ministry of the archbishop's office.

Now, after viewing our own church with her usual problems, we lift our eyes to the universal church with whom we are in communion. The pope has requested prayers for the success of his trip to Ireland and the United States, and I ask that we all wish him the best<sup>12</sup>. He will pronounce a discourse in the United Nations before 152 nations. We recall with affection the very wise words Pope Paul VI addressed to the United Nations: «We consider ourselves to be the messenger who twenty centuries ago received from Christ the command: "Preach to all nations!" The day has finally come when we are preaching to all nations»<sup>13</sup>. The present pope has stated that his discourse and his visit will be a continuation of the visit of his predecessor.

In Colombia the bishops have raised their voices, and I bring this to your attention because they are in complete agreement with what we are saying here. The Bishops Conference of Colombia has acknowledged that in that country «there is a need for great sacrifices» and that «those who have more should renounce their excess profits in order to enter into a process of creating a more equitable distribution of the nation's wealth»<sup>14</sup>.

Also, in Chile there have been expressions of solidarity with the disappeared and with those who are suffering.

### **Events of the week**

In civil society we must again lament a week of tremendous violence. Twenty persons have been killed, either as fighters or as partisans of some organization. More than thirty have been wounded. Eight persons were murdered for non-political reasons, including a girl who was seven years old.

Jesús Fabián was murdered in San Martín while he and seven companions were putting up banners demanding the removal of troops from the district of Tres Ceibas. Witnesses claim that the military used excessive force and made no attempt to arrest them, with the result that a person was killed unnecessarily.

According to the newspapers, the FPL murdered two persons and exploded bombs in the municipal offices of Sacacoyo and Coatepeque<sup>15</sup>. According to other reports, the

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<sup>12</sup> JOHN PAUL II, «Homily at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes», 8 September 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (16 September 1979).

<sup>13</sup> PAUL VI, «Message for Humanity: Discourse to the General Assembly of the United Nations», 4 October 1965.

<sup>14</sup> «Catholic Church Denounces Grave Crisis in Colombia» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 September 1979).

<sup>15</sup> *El Diario de Hoy* (13 September 1979).



ERP opened fire on the military barracks in Sonsonate and on the National Guard post in Soyapango, wounding one of the guards<sup>16</sup>.

Jaime Batlle was kidnapped, but it is not known by whom<sup>17</sup>. Desecration of the national symbols have been reported, and the flag has been trampled upon. A BPR demonstration was repressed on September 14. As they were being dispersed, the BPR protesters burned buses and cars. We have seen photographs and statements portraying the aggression of the security forces, but they have been officially denied.

Various relatives of the adolescents who were massacred on the highway to El Cuco have asked the diocese to help them pursue justice for this crime. The police in San Miguel have promised an «exhaustive» investigation<sup>18</sup>, but whenever that word is used, it rings false. Let us hope, all the same, that justice is done in this matter.

With the murder of the teachers Juan Antonio Hernández and Eusebio Orlando Córdova Ulloa, the number of teachers killed this year has risen to thirty.

Hostages have been taken in the strike at Cartotecnica, and the BPR is not allowing them to be seen. Their relatives have requested the intervention of the archbishop's office. I want to tell those responsible, if these words are reaching them, that they should proceed humanely and take into account the anguish of these families.

The saddest part of all this, sisters and brothers, is that despite the growing situation of violence we see no effort being made on behalf of the structural changes that are needed. A number of cattle ranchers and growers of cane, cotton, and grain have appeared before the Assembly to state that they cannot pay the increase in the food allowance for their workers. Some coffee growers are also asking that there be no tax increase. They defend themselves by saying that there is no grave sin in dedicating themselves to these crops<sup>19</sup>. Naturally, there is a need to distinguish between the smaller and the larger farmers; those who cultivate on a larger scale will be more affected by a tax increase than the smaller producers who have less profit.

We agree that the present situation is not as profitable as other times have been, but what most concerns us is that the *campesinos* are suffering hunger and that's a matter of human dignity. The government itself acknowledges the problem of malnutrition among our people. The sinfulness is not in dedicating yourselves to one cultivation but in being unconcerned about the *campesinos*, about their rights, about their organization, about the dignity of their families, and all the rest. And to make things worse, some legislators consider the statement, «our *campesinos* eat only tortilla and beans», to be degrading; they have asked for that paragraph to be removed from the decree in order not to present a poor image<sup>20</sup>. I say that if they don't want to present a poor image, what they have to change is not the words but the reality itself.

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<sup>16</sup> *El Diario de Hoy* (15 September 1979).

<sup>17</sup> Jaime Batlle Geoffroy, a coffee grower and executive member of the Club Deportivo FAS, was kidnapped in the city of Santa Ana on 13 September 1979.

<sup>18</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (11 September 1979).

<sup>19</sup> «Declaration of the United Front of Coffee Growers» in *El Diario de Hoy* (13 September 1979).

<sup>20</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (15 September 1979).

All this indicates that we must become more aware of the need for the structural changes that our situation urgently demands. As long as we lack the courage to go to the root of these evils, they will always exist.

Let us return, then, dear sisters and brothers, to our reflection on the Gospel, and let us listen to the Messiah. For while it is true that he comes with all the power of God to save the world, it is also true that he must pass through sorrows, trials, and suffering.

Let us give our cross and our sacrifice redeeming power so that we are never moved by vengeance, violence, or hatred. Rather, as persons called by the love of Christ, who suffered all the humiliations of his true messianism out of love of us, let us be strong in responding to his invitation to follow him by carrying the cross. By following in this way the true path that God desires, we will reestablish that peace founded on justice that our people so desperately need. Let it be so.