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GOD'S PLAN FOR SAVING THE PEOPLE

Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

28 October 1979

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Hebrews 5:1-6

Mark 10:46-52

Dear sisters and brothers, the situation of the nation might distract our attention as we reflect today, so I earnestly ask you not to forget that this is an ecclesial gathering. We come together to be nourished by the word of God and to grow in faith. In the midst of the nation's crisis I wrote my fourth pastoral letter, and I believe that its contents have much to say at this time to true Catholics. The principal service that the church renders at this moment to Salvadorans is affirming her own identity as church¹. Her task is not to try to help the situation by becoming a political force herself or by pronouncing on political matters. If she were to do so, her proper perspective would be distorted and her words rendered false. She must simply be herself, after the manner of sincere persons who present themselves in any situation, agreeable or disagreeable, without dissembling. One of the beautiful things about the church is her evangelical sincerity. She remains true to herself both in good times and in times of persecutions, ambiguities, and adversities.

My principal aim as pastor is to help reinforce the church as the kingdom of God, so that she remains true to herself without combating anyone and without flattering anyone. Those who join her in struggling to build God's kingdom on earth will get along with her, while those who oppose God's kingdom on earth will clash with her. By remaining true to herself, therefore, the church undertakes her most important task, evangelization². She has no other task but that of evangelizing the whole world according to Christ's command: «Go and proclaim the Gospel» (Mark 16:15). It is true that in the course of time the word «evangelization» has taken on ever wider and more ample meanings, and in my pastoral letter I explain some aspects that are necessary and advantageous for today³. These include giving doctrinal orientation, denouncing error and sin to bring about conversion, exposing the idolatries of the people and the society, promoting integral liberation of the people, and calling for profound change to root out the causes of all our violence and distress. With total sincerity the church must accompany all the people, both the poor folk and the leaders, and she must explain to them her function as part of the people and as God's instrument for implanting his kingdom on earth.

I welcomed the news that Pope John Paul II has fulfilled a promise he made some time ago to take up again a document that Paul VI left to us unfinished. The document was part of the consultation carried out with the bishops for the synod of 1977, whose theme was

¹ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 31.

² *Ibid.*, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

catechesis. Paul VI had already begun to elaborate the document, but John Paul II has taken the results of the consultation and given it his own style. In presenting the document he states the following, «A firm faith is the most valuable gift that the church is able to offer to the confused and restless world of our era»⁴. This is what the church desires to offer, nothing more and nothing less: that most valuable gift of faith. How I wish, sisters and brothers, that the hearts of all of us making this reflection were touched by the prayer we just offered to the Lord: «Increase our faith, hope, and love!» If there are some people who have come to church with other intentions—out of political curiosity or out of eagerness to hear news or raise some kind of alarm—then they are wasting their time. I have no desire to give anything more than this precious gift of faith, and what I ask of you is the attention of faith—not human attention or misguided curiosity, but simply the attention of faith. Thus, the word that Christ speaks to the blind man in today's gospel could be spoken to each one of us: «Your faith has healed you» (Mark 10:52).

Let us apply this medicine to the root of our problems, beginning with our own profound personal faith and the faith of our families. There is no greater gift that can be offered to our confused and restless world of today than the serene faith of men and women who know the origin of this gift, who know the meaning of their lives, who know where they are going. Such persons of serene faith rise above the vicissitudes of history and collaborate in the critical situations that are so rapidly multiplying at the present time. Let us not live by impressions, by happenstance, by emotions, by psychoses. Let us live by faith. This is my first appeal, for that is the way we build the church.

I received a wonderful letter today which said, «Try always to keep your preaching at the service of the Gospel. Don't worry so much about your image». Our lives don't depend on taking care of our image. Our lives depend on the sincerity of our Gospel message, and this can often take on a frightful form, such as when they left Jesus Christ abandoned. As I have repeated a thousand times, the church is not striving to present an agreeable image to everybody. She wants to tell the truth even if it means standing all alone. (Applause) It's the figure of that Bedouin that I mentioned at the funeral of Father Navarro. Some travelers were lost in the desert and asked the Bedouin to guide them. Dying of thirst, they saw a mirage that looked like water; fooled by the mirage, they headed toward it. The Bedouin told them, «No, it's a mirage». They kept walking and saw another mirage, but the Bedouin said, «That's not water. Keeping going this way». The travelers were so vexed with the poor Bedouin that they took out a gun and killed him. Even lying dead, the desert guide had his hand extended, still showing them, «Go this way». This is the hand of Christ that many people will not tolerate. It is the hand of the church that guides us as we walk in confusion through the desert. Let us make her our guide! The word of God in today's readings is ideal for illustrating the thoughts that I'm going to bring together in this central theme for my homily: «God's Plan for Saving the People». What is God's plan? I'm going to break it down into three parts: first, the people of God who are liberated in Christ to be liberators of all people; second, the people as political community; and third, the relation between the people of God and the political community.

The people of God who are liberated in Christ to be liberators of all people

As we reflect on this theme today, we can distinguish two terms that are often confused: the almost sacred term used by many today, «the people», and the term «the people of God», used

⁴ *La Prensa Gráfica*, (26 October 1979).

by the church. We cannot speak about these two realities without keeping in mind the plan of God. For on the one hand God created the masses of human beings and peoples and political communities, and on the other, in the midst of these masses of people, he created *his* people, the people of God.

The readings today present us with the Old Testament prophecy that is fulfilled in Christ and in his church: the people of God who are liberated and liberating. As the liturgical year comes to an end, Saint Mark reveals even more about Christ. In four weeks it will be the Sunday of Christ the King, which crowns the liturgical year. At that time another gospel will begin to be read, but the gospel that has guided us this year, Saint Mark, is tremendously significant. It is not the longest gospel; in fact, it is the shortest, but its great desire is to present the person of Christ, his great mission, and his wonderful teaching. It doesn't contain many discourses, but it does identify Christ as Redeemer and Savior. This Sunday we have one of the last readings from Mark, just before the passion narrative. It tells of what happened when Christ and his apostles were traveling toward Jerusalem. Near Jericho a blind man found himself near Jesus and shouted out the great title that the Bible uses of the Messiah: «Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!» (Mark 10:47). «Son of David» had been a special title since the time when Nathan the prophet told King David that one of his offspring would establish his kingdom forever and that all people would be saved in him. The «son of David» was therefore understood to be the Messiah, and that's why Jesus was the son of David. Here, then, we find the blind man uttering this marvelous confession and providing a most appropriate setting for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. There he would present himself as Messiah and suffer on Calvary the death that would bring redemption to the world; there he would be raised up in the resurrection that offers us new life. As the heir of the messianic promises, the son of David would bring liberation from God to the people, and here he was, being announced by the eloquent cry of the blind man! The blind man represents humanity asking the son of David for redemption and for light to see. The prophetic figure who restores sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, who raises up the dead and preaches to the poor, is the same Jesus who is speaking here with the poor and the blind. He heals not only by performing miracles but by fulfilling the promise of making the great liberator present now among us.

The first reading explains to us who this son of David is and why the blind man has placed his faith in him. It is a passage from the prophet Jeremiah narrating the return of the exiled people from Babylon to Palestine. The returning people are happy but they know they are not victorious; they are simply weak people who have been saved. Among the crowds of people returning, says Jeremiah, there would be «the blind and the lame, pregnant mothers and those with child» (Jer 31:8b). The women would come in a weakened state, and the men in a situation of impotence. They would be humanity at its weakest, in need of redeeming power. But they would come in joy because God was saving his people. Indeed, he has already saved the people! But there is a mysterious phrase in today's reading: «He has saved his people. He has saved the remnant of his people» (Jer 31:7b). The «remnant of Israel» has a special significance. God's chosen people were not always faithful to him. They often betrayed God, but there was always a small group, a remnant, that was faithful. When Christ came, there was also a remnant: Mary, Joseph, the apostles. They were a small group compared to the crowds who cried out, «Crucify him! He is not the Messiah!» (Mark 15:13). They were the remnant through whom God was extending his promise of salvation in Christ.

«This people», says the prophecy of Jeremiah, «comes from the ends of the earth». This is a reference to the universality of salvation. They are returning to God, which

means conversion. The Lord is the One who saves. There is joy among those who left weeping, as slaves of the conquerors, for now they return free and forgiven. Yes, they are weak, but they have confidence in the power of God. As they walk along the road, the flowers bloom. Wherever this redeemed people of God passes, they sing with joy, proclaiming redemption and announcing the great liberation. There in the desert torrents of water flow, and the roads are made level to make their return easy. This is Jeremiah's description of the people of God (Jer 31:8-9).

The second reading from the letter to the Hebrews presents Christ to us as a priest mediating between God and humankind. This gives us a clue about the meaning of this people of God, whose founder is Jesus Christ, for he imparts to this people his own reality as Prophet, Priest, and King. This whole gathering of Catholics at Sunday Mass is nothing else but Christ incarnated in today's history, in us who are the church of today, the body of Christ in history. Today, by means of those of us here at Sunday Mass, Christ is offering to the Father his sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. As the people of God, we sing of redemption, we celebrate Christ's priestly mediation between God and humankind, and we bring about the great liberation from sin. The people of God, surrounded by sins and weaknesses but united to Christ the Priest, offers sacrifice to the Father for the sins of the world. Let us, in the sacrifice of the Mass this morning, feel ourselves responsible for all the sins of our country. Let us gather up all the blind fanaticism, all the weakness, all the evils there are in our people, so that we can say to God, «Forgive this people, Lord! Give them back their sight! Come, Lord, for we need you!» Let us lift up powerful prayer from the people to God our Father through Christ the Priest who supports our faith.

This movement freeing people from sin is not limited only to economic or political or social kinds of freedom. These great freedoms are only the midway point between the two extremes of the great liberation. The great liberation that frees us from sin also frees us from human selfishness and from all forms of repression and oppression, but it doesn't stop there. Christ does not want us only to live happily on earth. He has brought a transcendent redemption that makes us sons and daughters of God. And that is why, as the second reading says, he is the fulfillment of that prophecy, «You are my son. I will be for you a father, and you will be my firstborn» (Heb 5:5; Jer 31:9c). These magnificent phrases help us to see the ultimate goal of our Christian pilgrimage as the people of God.

The Second Vatican Council synthesizes everything I have said here in its chapter on the people of God. Let us read it together, sisters and brothers, because we need to understand this great reality: we are the people of God, called to form part of the «remnant of Israel» in the world, the minority of humanity, the favorites of God. Such a great honor should not make us arrogant for we understand the reason why God has loved us so much and has given us his Gospel message. We have been given his word not to encase it in individualistic piety or to practice a religion alienated from the world. As we will see, God has given us his light for the service of others. So let us hold fast to this idea: we are the people of God!

The Council said this: «At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men and women holy and save them merely as individuals, without bonds or links among themselves. Rather has it pleased him to bring them together as one people, a people which acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto himself. With it he set up a covenant. Step by step he taught and prepared this people, making known in

its history both himself and the decree of his will and making it holy unto himself. All these things, however, were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ» (LG 9). The whole Old Testament provides a sketch of what the church was meant to be. Israel, the people chosen from among all the nations to enter into a covenant with God, was the figure of a people consecrated to God. Even though everything would change with the coming of Christ, Israel served in the Old Testament Israel as the prophetic figure of what was to be the church formed by people from every nation. So what kind of church came with Christ?

The Word made flesh has made a people for himself, the Council tells us, «Christ called together a people made up of Jew and Gentile, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new people of God. For those who believe in Christ are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit; they are finally established as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people”» (LG 9; 1 Pet 2:9). This is what we are, but not because we are descendants of Abraham. Our is not a perishable seed of flesh and blood but a spiritual seed born of faith. We become children of Abraham by faith, and we participate in the dignity of the people of God by baptism and faith. «The messianic people has Christ for its head»—see what magnificent qualities we have—«and now, having won a name which is above all names, Christ reigns in glory in heaven. The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in his temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him» (LG 9). This is our task: extending the kingdom of God in all our surroundings. We are the people of God, commissioned to bring the kingdom of God to the whole world.

This splendid text of the Council states the following: «This messianic people, although it does not yet include all people and at times may look like a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race» (LG 9). Let us savor this richness. It may be that we who have the good fortune of believing in Christ and who try to follow him are just a tiny part of humanity. I said before that the church is prepared to stand alone, but she will never be alone. Even if there are only one or two Christians, they will still be with Christ who is the center of history. And just those two persons who adhere sincerely to Christ, that small group of Christians, is nevertheless «a sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation». If we are truly God’s people, allowing ourselves to be filled with the life and spirit of the Lord, then we have liberation in our hands, we have the key to freedom, we have the true solution for all problems.

The Council text ends with these words: «Advancing through trials and tribulations, the church is strengthened by God’s grace, promised to her by the Lord so that she may not waver from the perfect fidelity» which she has promised to the Lord (LG 9). God has formed this body, and Christ makes use of it to carry his redemption to all peoples.

We need to understand this concept, dear sisters and brothers. Today’s readings make a distinction between the people in general and the people of God, and the latter is seen as the rescued «remnant of Israel» that returns with the blessings and the graces of forgiveness, joy, hope, and unity of all people. This is what the church seeks in her pastoral ministry: to help people understand that there is only one thing necessary: to create the people

of God. Once that people is formed as a nucleus of salvation, as a seed of unity and hope, then Christ uses that people to carry his salvation to the whole world and to every nation. This, then, is the distinction between the people of God and the people in general, which we can also call the political community or civil society. So let us not be confused about this difference or about the origin of the different communities.

Today's gospel presents us with a key feature that we should not lose from sight. The blind man belonged to the Jewish people; he had his homeland, as does everyone. But when God gave him not only sight in his eyes but also faith in his heart, «He followed Jesus», the gospel tells us (Mark 10:52). Without ceasing to be Jewish, this Jew became a Christian, a follower of Jesus. He was a member of the people of God, but he was also a member of civil society. Today's first reading also sings of the people of Israel as «the best of all peoples» (Jer 31:7a). This does not indicate a Jewish superiority complex but rather points out the great distinction the prophet wants to make. All peoples form human, political communities, but this people chosen by God stood out among nations because it was through them that God wanted to manifest his plan of salvation for all other peoples, to be realized with the coming of the universal Liberator.

When Jeremiah distinguished between the people and the remnant, he was thinking only of Israel. As a political community, all Jews were descendants of Abraham and so formed one people. But only those whose hearts truly hoped in God were members of the remnant that was the community of salvation. Not all the children of Abraham had faith, and that is why Christ said, «Do not boast of being called children of Abraham, because God is powerful enough to make children of Abraham out of stones» (Mark 3:9). The imperishable seed of Abraham and all his descendants by flesh and blood would be of no use at all without faith in the coming of Jesus Christ. It does no good to call ourselves Salvadorans and hold up as our patron the Divine Savior if in our hearts we have no faith in that Divine Savior. You may be a Salvadoran, but you are not a follower of the Divine Savior. You may be a Salvadoran, but you are not a Christian. This is the great difference. If the «remnant» consists only of those Salvadorans who live holy lives as the people of God, then they are truly a minority, but in that minority is to be found the seed of salvation for the whole people.

When in the second reading Saint Paul says, «The priest is taken from among the people to intercede for them before God» (Heb 5:1), he is speaking to us about the immense mass of humanity. There is a priestly people, which is the people of God interceding on behalf of all people. They *must* intercede for the world, for that is their priestly function. When the prophet Jeremiah says, «I will gather you from the ends of the earth» (Jer 31:8a), he is telling us that all nations on earth can contribute their faithful remnants to this great church which, thank God, extends to all continents and all peoples, even if some peoples have not yet accepted the reign of God. There is much unbelief, much atheism, much indifference. Even here among ourselves we see that few people are truly the seed of salvation, the remnant who follow the true Lord.

The people as political community

What is the political community? This is of great interest to me, sisters and brothers. Now that we've examined the people of God as remnant and the election of one political community, let us try to understand now what it means for a people to be a political entity. That will help us to understand better that adjective, «political», that is so ambiguous for many people, especially

those who don't want to speak about human rights or the common good. Instead they accuse the church of meddling in politics. That is false. As the seed of salvation, the church must safeguard the human dimension of the people's political reality. If we decide to focus on political, social, and economic issues, we do so precisely as the people of God charged with shedding light on earthly realities.

This earthly reality called the political community is described by the Council in terms of certain traits, and it would be helpful for us to keep these in mind, now more than ever. The Council states, «It is very important, especially where a pluralistic society prevails...». And what society is more pluralistic than the Salvadoran, which has Christian parties and communist parties, which has various Blocs and the FAPU—so many different ways of thinking! This is what is called pluralism. Christians should know what it means when we say that a nation is pluralistic. «It is important», the Council continues, «that there be a correct notion of the relationship between the political community and the church»—which is the people of God— «and there should be a clear distinction»—this is very important—«between the tasks which Christians undertake, individually or as a group, on their own responsibility as citizens guided by the dictates of a Christian conscience, and the activities which they carry out in the name of the church in union with their pastors» (GS 76).

Let us explain. The Council says that it is necessary to distinguish between a) Christians as sanctified members of the remnant of the people of God and b) Christians as Salvadorans who feel the need to make a commitment to work for the resolution of political problems. Christians must get to work, but they must also distinguish these two roles. As Christians and as responsible persons, individuals may hold a political office or work in a political organization, in a ministry, or in the presidency. They carry out their work as Christians and are personally responsible. But it is something else when they act as members of the people of God in union with their pastor—that is when they can say, «I do this in the name of my bishop. I do this as church».

This distinction is necessary today more than ever because the name «Christian» should not be applied misleadingly to activities that are the responsibility of particular individuals or groups. The aim of my third pastoral letter⁵ was to distinguish between the Christian community, where faith and Christian virtue are cultivated, and the political community, where Christians can become involved and can contribute the seed of Christianity, as the Council says. Don't let yourselves be manipulated. Don't blindly obey all the slogans of the Bloc or the FAPU. If you're a Christian, use your Christian judgment, and know how to say no when you must say no! Don't be a sheep caught up in the crowd of those who are pursuing things not acceptable for Christians. Christians are responsible for their personal choices. To be Christian they must safeguard their faith; they must be leaven in the dough. When Christians are together in community, whether reading the Bible, receiving a sacrament like communion or confession, carrying out a catechetical mission, or celebrating the word, they are in communion with the pastor. They cannot practice their political option or use the Christian gathering to win members for their political parties. These two things must be clearly distinguished. Now more than ever, I repeat, we need to have clear ideas about the church community and the political community. Those who belong to both sectors must know the difference between what they have to do in one sector as individual citizens with Christian

⁵ *The Church and the People's Political Organizations* (6 August 1978) 77-107.

inspiration and what they have to do in that world that is their community, as persons of faith whose commitments must be fostered there.

After the Council speaks of the relation between the people and the political community, it explains the nature of the people. Pay special attention to this, sisters and brothers, because there is much loose talk these days about the «people». We need respect! Groups of people say many things, but they aren't the people. The people are much more inclusive than any political organization. A particular group may coincide in its aspirations with another group that thinks differently and even with the church, which also defends human rights, but no group can presume to represent the people as a strategic definition of its political reality.

What is a people? The Council states, «Individuals, families, and the various groups which make up the civil community are aware that they cannot achieve a truly human life by their own unaided efforts. They see the need for a wider community, within which each person makes his or her specific contribution every day toward an ever broader realization of the common good. For this purpose they set up a political community according to various forms» (GS 74). The Bible tells us how God went about organizing people into nations so that every nation had its own customs, its own language, its own political system. This variety is something God desires, just as he desires the variety of our faces and our ways of being. We are so different! «The political community exists, consequently, for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy» (GS 74).

What is the common good? This involves some concepts about which we must be very clear. «The common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life by which individuals, families, and associations may more adequately and readily attain their own perfection» (GS 74). This is the common good. It is a combination of social conditions by which Salvadoran groups and families can be supported in their efforts to be more happily and perfectly fulfilled. This is the supreme goal toward which the Lord calls all peoples! Therefore, the people is made up of the families and individuals who work together in a combination of circumstances so that everyone can enjoy a full life and every group and individual can be happier and more fully developed.

The Council then discusses something of great importance: «The people who come together in the political community are many and diverse, and they have every right to prefer divergent solutions. If the political community is not to be torn apart while everyone follows his own opinion, there must be an authority to direct the energies of all citizens toward the common good, not in a mechanical or despotic fashion, but by acting above all as a moral force which appeals to each one's freedom and sense of responsibility» (GS 74). Thus, we have a true political community when we have diversity of opinions. Let us bless God for our many parties, our many organizations, our many ways of thinking! But above all, let us respect one another. We don't need an authority that is repressive. We need one that respects diverse ways of thinking and allows them to flourish. It should respect people's freedom and encourage all of us to work together for the common good we must pursue. For when a group does not pursue the common good but instead seeks its own advantage, it is effectively breaking down instead of building up. On the other hand, when different and opposed systems generously come together and bring their own particular viewpoint to the search for the common good, the

authority can then allow all groups to be free and can encourage them to seek solutions that will result in the good and the freedom of all people.

«It is clear, therefore, that the political community and the public authority are founded on human nature and so belong to the order designed by God, even though the choice of a political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free will of citizens» (GS 74). God's desire, therefore, is at the base of our nation and every nation. God desires the nation, God also desires diversity within the nation, God desires authority in the nation, and God desires the common good as the goal of the nation.

This is the people. That is why we say, dear sisters and brothers, that we want to use today's reading to shed light on these great realities which are the community of the people of God and the political community of the people. We realize that there are many differences and that we must not confuse the church community with the political community. But we also insist that the church, from her evangelical perspective of seeking the kingdom of God, must give energy, force, and enlightenment to the authority and to the people. She must defend human rights and work for the common good. She must denounce the sins of selfishness and remove all obstacles that destroy the political community.

Relation between the people of God and the people as a political community

So my final reflection is the relation between the people of God, the church, and the people as a political community, that is, the state, civil society, the republic, however you want to call it. Unfortunately, the political community is not always organized, and today our people are living in a time of crisis. They are searching for a new form of life, one that breaks with the shameful molds we have adopted in the past, so that we can make a truly new society and a new people.

Building this new society is not the church's job. It is the job of you citizens, you who live in the world. You have to learn to think independently and judge wisely, using the truly Christian criteria you experience in the church community. You must try, sisters and brothers—professionals, politicians, farmers, laborers, political parties, political organizations—you must try to move things in the right direction of working together for the true common good, which is what the God of nations desires for every people.

The church will always be a distinct community because her goals reach far beyond any earthly common good. She seeks the common good of having all peoples united together in God at the end of history. Meanwhile, the political community remains active in every people and every nation, providing light and energy to the seed of society. We must prepare ourselves to take part in that task.

In today's gospel, when Jesus helps the blind man by giving him both faith and sight, he is telling us that both body and soul, both spiritual and social needs, are united together in the heart of God. Not only does God desire to free us from sin by dying on the cross, but he also repairs the consequences of sin, which are illness, blindness, hunger, and division. Repairing all these are part of evangelization.

And when the second reading speaks about the «priest chosen from among the people», it is telling us that what is important for God is not the priest who is chosen but what he is chosen for: «to serve the people» (Heb 5:1). If the people of God is a community of

persons especially called to share in the holiness of God's kingdom, then they are not meant to enjoy it in a selfish manner. Rather, by the light of the faith and hope and love, they must be light and ferment for all the surrounding society.

Again I want to make use of the Council. Pardon me for this, but the Council is the great law that we now have at our disposal. In defining the relation between the church and the political community, the Council states clearly, «The church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other» (GS 76). This is quite clear. The church is church, and her mission arises from her own identity. The political community is also a society desired by God, and all of its members participate in it for the good of all. But they are two autonomous entities.

«Both church and political community, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same people» (GS 76). This is what we have always said. There is no conflict between the church and civil authority. What there is, is conflict between civil authority and the people. If this conflict did not exist, if authority existed to serve the people and worked for the good of people, then it would collaborate with the church, which must also work autonomously on behalf of the people. In such a case, this great principle of the Council would come true: «The more that both of them foster sounder cooperation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place, the more effectively will their service be exercised for the good of all» (GS 76). That is why we have said that the church is open to dialogue and collaboration whenever authority is also seeking to serve the people.

«The horizons of humans are not limited only to the temporal order; while living in the context of human history, they preserve intact their eternal vocation. The church, for her part, founded on the love of the Redeemer, contributes toward the reign of justice and charity within the borders of a nation and between nations. By preaching the truths of the Gospel and bringing to bear on all fields of human endeavor the light of her doctrine and the beauty of Christian witness, she respects and fosters the political freedom and responsibility of citizens» (GS 76).

When John Paul II spoke at the OAS, he stated that the common good which is the duty of every government is also the object of the church's struggle, and he offered the collaboration of the Holy See and the churches of America to achieve that end. These were the words of John Paul II at the OAS when he was demanding religious freedom for the church, a freedom that is often trampled on in Latin American countries. The pope said that the liberty he is asking for «is to serve, not to oppose, the legitimate autonomy of civil society»⁶. These are the pope's words, and we hope that he will come very soon to our country. «The sooner all citizens are able to exercise their freedoms normally in the life of the nation, the sooner will Christian communities be able to dedicate themselves to the central task of evangelization, namely, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the source of life, strength, justice, and peace»⁷.

What the pope is saying here is that, if the church's primary and almost sole role is denunciation, it is only because of the great need for that. But when the day comes that

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the Organization of American States», 6 October 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 November 1979).

⁷ Ibid.

individuals, parties, politicians, and experts speak out, then the church will have more time to dedicate to her special task, which is meditating and reflecting on the Gospel, which is the source of peace, love, and holiness. We have never stopped doing that, thank God, but having to cover this other area has prevented us from giving it our full attention. Let us hope that that area of denunciation will now be covered by those who should be covering it: the politicians, the experts, the professionals. Now is the time for El Salvador to enter into the phase of forming and building her own destiny.

Events of the week

Considering all this, dear sisters and brothers, we now have the evangelical criteria we need to examine three major problems in our present situation.

First, there is the position of the archdiocese with regard to the present moment in the country. Given the pope's statements and the whole complex of doctrine about what the church's role should be in the political community, I want to speak to you very clearly about the new historical context that our country is experiencing today. The new government is promising to guarantee freedom of organization and expression, the parties are returning to the political arena, and the activities of the people's organizations are continuing. All the promises of the new government are forcing the church to reexamine her position, and we hope that others who are affected by these new circumstances will also reexamine their views so as not to persist with the fanatical positions taken earlier. The church herself is reconsidering, and I think I can assure you that she will address the real problems directly, for that signifies no sin on the church's part.

I said in my pastoral letter that the essential mission of the church is evangelization and that the starting point of evangelization is the very person of Christ⁸. Evangelization is the church's principal mission, and it a very complex one⁹. It cannot be reduced solely to certain elements but must open up visions of hope for our people¹⁰. In our present circumstances, evangelization is in danger of becoming distant from Salvadoran realities. That is why the church will continue to examine those realities closely, and it will do so precisely because her mission is transcendent. Transcendence doesn't mean alienation but incarnation. Human hearts are elevated to transcendence in the midst of the history of the people. Evangelization will continue to be our mission regardless of the situation of the political community¹¹.

So the church will continue to follow closely the country's real problems, but she wants the lead to be taken by the people, the government, and political professionals in their mutual commentary, dialogue, and action. In other words, it is not the church's job to be a political expert or to advise the political parties in their debates. In view of this new situation allowing liberty of expression, the church simply invites all of you to dialogue, to participate actively, to try to be good Christian critics, and to make decisions that contribute to the common good that should be sought according to your own Christian faith. The church calls all of you, as the Salvadoran nation, to build your own political community. She doesn't want the

⁸ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Country's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

kind of paternalistic attitude that waits to see what the bishop says on Sunday before making decisions. You must think and analyze as politicians, as political parties, as groups, as Christians. You must be the ones who pass judgment, either condemning or praising, but always seeking the good of yourselves, which is the nation. (Applause)

Meanwhile, the church will always develop her unique service of evangelization, which includes all the elements that I mention in my pastoral letter¹². These elements include human liberation, demand for changes in the structures that cause all kinds of misery, and the necessary denunciation of idolatry and absolutism. All these the church will continue to carry out. She will be willing to mediate when the situation requires and when the parties in conflict request her help. For example, many people have asked whether the church can mediate in the occupation of the ministries¹³. The church would do so happily if both parties were to request her mediation, because mediation means placing oneself in between two parties.

The church also promises to intervene actively if there is a failure to lay the foundations of greater justice on which peace can be built. As circumstances demand, therefore, the church will always be ready to fight for the justice that is essential. Even if others betray this cause, the church will never betray it. (Applause)

I promise, therefore, that by drawing on the light of the Gospel, the church will continue to provide guidance for the country's most serious problems. The church can never stop offering the voice of the Gospel in that open dialogue of the people as they seek their destiny.

Finally and especially, as we've already said, the preferential option of our church is for the poor. The church will never abandon the poor. (Applause) As in her defense of the human rights of all, the church is inspired by a force that does not depend on human whims but on God himself. Her defense of human rights will be as unshakeable as God himself. (Applause)

The second problem I want to examine today in the light of God's word is the new government's readiness for dialogue and collaboration with the church; from the start they have made that offer. That is fine, as long as the government is faithful to its promise to serve the people, something that must be proved with effective deeds. (Applause) In this regard I want to express my solidarity with the statement of Bishop Rivera, which you all saw published in the paper:

As a pastor concerned about the integral salvation of every person and of all the people, and as a man convinced that the church walks in union with humankind and in solidarity with our people's historical destiny, I view this change with hope, and I think that it should be seen that way by all people of good will. In a climate of real freedom, the church can carry out her evangelizing mandate more effectively. Since the church lives by eternal values, she cannot become wedded to any regime, but she should collaborate with those regimes that are truly concerned about the common good so that

¹² Ibid., 37.

¹³ On 24 October 1979 members of the People's Revolutionary Bloc occupied buildings of the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of the Economy to demand from the new government an increase in wages and a reduction of the prices of basic products. *La Prensa Gráfica* (25 and 26 October 1979).

the difficult objectives of justice are finally attained and true respect is given to human rights. Since this task requires the generous collaboration of all Salvadorans, it is obvious that extremists of both left and right who appeal to an exclusive messianism must reexamine their attitudes and heed the voice of reason and the imperative of the common good¹⁴.

In other words, the church supports whatever inspires justice and hope, but she is also willing to denounce what is unjust and sinful. The church is a humble arbiter, but she is backed by the almighty power of the Lord.

In judging this new situation, we should be honest. We should recognize the positive signs that there is a break with the past. The composition of the new government might be an example of that¹⁵. I welcome the honest, capable, and progressive persons who have been chosen for it. From what I know of them, I believe that if they're allowed to do their work, they will not lend themselves to improper manipulation. In all honesty we must also acknowledge a certain breath of freedom now, which is evident in the return of Mr. Duarte and Colonel Claramount¹⁶, the demonstrations to honor them, the publication of the popular platform¹⁷, and the diverse political voices being heard in the government—all these seem to me to be positive values that shouldn't be discounted. We see non-violent occupations and convocations, growing international support, and many commentaries on the part of the ordinary folk who are truly desirous of seeing signs of hope.

At the same time, sisters and brothers, we cannot deny the negative signs. For example, there has been slowness in fulfilling promises. There is still the great problem of the disappeared persons. The position of the church was made very clear last Monday at the Legal Aid Office's press conference, held in the presence of some 200 relatives of persons who have been arrested. (Later, other relatives also appeared, people who hadn't spoken out because of fear.) The church stated that she joins with the people in demanding the freedom of political prisoners and disappeared persons, a thorough investigation of their circumstances, punishment of those responsible for grave violations of human rights, and just compensation for the many children and homes that have been left orphaned. (Applause)

I have received a number of letters and visits asking for the church's intervention, and for that reason I want to be the voice of these people seeking to express their hopes and their concerns. For example, the family of Miguel Angel Terezón Ramos, invoking the decree of general amnesty for all political prisoners, has written to me, «Placing our total trust in you to obtain the freedom of our son by your valiant cooperation and intervention with

¹⁴ «Personal Reflections on the Change of Government», 18 October 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (23 October 1979) and *Orientación* (28 October 1979).

¹⁵ The cabinet of the new government, sworn in on 22 October, consisted of Rubén Ignacio Zamora Rivas, Minister of the Presidency; Miguel Antonio Dada Hirezi, Foreign Relations; Luis Nelson Segovia, Justice; Carlos Enrique Castro Garay, Interior; Ernesto Arbizú Mata, Treasury; Manuel Enrique Hinds, Economy; Salvador Samayoa, Education; Colonel José Guillermo García, Defense; Gabriel Gallegos Valdés, Labor; Raúl Valiente Argueta, Public Works; Alberto Hart Déneke, Planning; Enrique Alvarez Córdova, Agriculture and Livestock. *La Prensa Gráfica* (23 October 1979).

¹⁶ They returned to the country after several years of exile on 25 and 27 October respectively. *Diario de Hoy* (26 October 1979).

¹⁷ This is a reference to the Common Platform of the People's Forum, composed of three political parties (MNR, PDC, and UDN) and several trade union federations that staged a march on 24 October 1979. *La Prensa Gráfica* (25 October 1979).

the new government, we ask the Lord to enlighten you to help resolve so many problems», and so on. There are many other letters like this that express the people's grave concern about the fate of the disappeared. About thirty persons have brought us new cases, but I can't mention them until Legal Aid has carried out investigations. Then we'll announce their names.

Legal Aid has also managed to intervene in the settlements with PROESA and INTESA. They are delighted to communicate that the settlements were reached through dialogue and mutual understanding. How nice it would be if we could say the same about all these problems!

We are particularly concerned about two persons who disappeared quite recently: Tomás Flores, the sacristan of Soyapango, and a *campesino* named Pedro de Jesús Menjívar. I think these cases will give us a good idea of whether there has been a break with the past or not because they occurred during the time of the new government. What can be impeding the solution of this serious problem on which all the people's voices have converged? Your applause has just demonstrated this once again. Our people truly have a tremendous longing for their loved ones, even if it's only for information that allows them to go to visit their graves or to give them proper burial or to see whether there still flickers a flame of hope in lives that were lost so long ago!

Allow me to allude to what seems to be the root of the problem and, if it really is the key difficulty, to ask that it be resolved in favor of the people. Is there perhaps a great fear within the very institution of the armed forces? In previous homilies we have expressed our hopes that the young military officials would renew a corrupt army. We believe they have the capacity to expose this corruption if it still exists; and they must do so because genuine renewal is not possible if the foundations are rotten. (Applause) Believe me, beloved brothers in the military, I am trying to understand the seriousness of this problem. I feel that the unity that exists among you can be destroyed, perhaps out of fear of elements in the security forces. I believe we must all try to understand this situation, but I also want to say quite frankly that article 112 of the constitution gives you a basis for moving forward in the process you have valiantly begun by breaking with the previous regime. Article 112 defines the function of the armed forces as follows: «To defend the integrity of the territory and the sovereignty of the republic, to maintain public order, and to guarantee the constitutional rights». What those constitutional rights are is already well known. As regards individuals, they guarantee life and liberty; as regards society, they guarantee work, unionization, and so on. The armed forces have the sublime mission of serving the republic by helping to guarantee these constitutional rights. And what we see at this moment with regard to the problem of the disappeared is that great valor is needed to identify the persons responsible and to judge them and punish them wherever they may be found. (Applause)

I understand that many people are bitter because of the many years during which military privilege has ignored these constitutional rights of the people, but I think that if this is a true moment of renewal, then the strength of the military institution will not derive from their internal commitments but will come from their solidarity with the people, who will then see that the military is truly defending them. When the people truly experience a unity of sentiments and ideals between civilians and soldiers and when they feel sure that the armed forces no longer endanger the desires of the people but rather reinforce them, then we will have what we so long for at this new moment of our history: young military officers promoting a renewal that can lead to profound structural changes in the country. I believe that the civilian

members of government, for whom I have great admiration, will be able to make these great truths a reality so that civilians and the military together will, as promised, govern with a view to the people—and so that the people will be able to applaud them or condemn them for their actions. This is a time for sincerity, and sincerity should lead to extraordinary measures that will often override others that are more conventional.

The third aspect I wanted to expose to the light of the divine word, which today is testing us, is the problem of extremism. The problem exists with both the extreme right and the extreme left. The danger of the extreme right is ominous; they are determined not to yield anything. If the powerful refuse to yield, then any attempt at change or reform is useless. The church must continue to prepare collective awareness in this regard. The time is coming, let us hope, when measures will be taken that affect economic interests, and those who will be affected are most certainly prepared to react. I want to call upon the extreme right to respect good order and be reasonable. Try to achieve by love and justice what would be lost by violence. (Applause) I believe in the sincerity of many elements of the present government; they want the social, economic, and political transformations that the country needs. As church we advocate these changes because they are absolutely necessary, and we would sadly regret it if a conservative, reactionary sector were to respond with a counter-coup. God save us from that, for it would only bring more repression and oppression upon our people. What I would like is for those who now hold power to appreciate the seriousness of the situation and to collaborate in bringing about the changes that are needed. Let us hope that there's no repeat of anything like what we recall from our recent history: when a feeble effort at rural transformation was attempted, the powerful were able to move heaven and earth so as to prevent the poor from getting even a tiny bit of breathing space¹⁸.

I must also denounce the fanaticism found on the other side, among the people's organizations, but please don't think my criticism is totally negative. I understand their objectives and the reasons for their mistrust of the government. We have lived under repression for so long that it's hard to believe that it has ended, especially when certain elements of the security forces, as if by inertia, have shown by their rash and abusive actions that they want to perpetuate the situation of fear. I've received news from several towns and villages where the repressive elements, despite the dispositions of the new government, continue in their campaign to terrorize the people. If we wish to save the country, the security forces had better get rid of that mentality. There is good reason, then, for the fear and the incredulity among those on the left. This is the credibility gap that the new government must overcome. That is why I insist again that thorough reform of the security forces is indispensable, as are measures to demobilize that whole apparatus that is still causing fear and terror among the people. (Applause)

I also believe the people's organizations have raised the awareness of many sectors of our people. The organizations have their merits, but I also insist that they must be reasonable. Since these organizations already have great social force, they shouldn't immediately use it to destabilize the country. They should give the new rulers a chance, as we have recommended, since the government is proposing the same objectives that these groups are requesting and demanding. They should make creative use of the social force they have

¹⁸ In 1976 the president, Colonel Arturo Armando Molina, promoted a law of agrarian reform which was opposed by businessmen and landowners organized in FARO and ANEP. The opposition was so strong that the proposed law was withdrawn by the Legislative Assembly.

been able to muster, and as we said before, they should contribute to the political community as part of the country's vital forces, not just as a violent force.

Dear sisters and brothers of the people's organizations, you are running the risk of falling into the kind of absolutization that I criticize in my pastoral letter¹⁹. Your actions are determined only by what you yourselves think, not by what is of greater service to the people. I must repeat that, in times as serious as this in our history, no one group of Salvador has the key to the solution and the capacity to save the situation. Every group must collaborate with other forces and not adhere so absolutely to its own ideologies and its own strategies. Make use of your social force, but don't use military force. Also, don't use social force that will automatically unleash military actions.

I don't think anything will be achieved at this time by occupying government ministries and churches, not to speak of detaining hostages²⁰. (Applause) The families of the two hundred hostages in the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of the Economy have made me aware of the great harm you are doing them by your actions. (Applause) You who claim to be defenders of human rights, don't you see that you're trampling on the rights of two hundred women and men? (Applause) We must say the same about the outcome of the demonstration in Plaza Libertad, where the conflict between the FAPU and the Christian Democrats resulted in a bloody confrontation. The organizations complain that the church is being manipulative because she doesn't think the way they do. I could in turn claim that they are manipulating the noble sentiments of the mothers of the disappeared in pursuit of their own objectives. (Applause)

Yet I don't want my criticism to be negative because I recognize your great achievements, which the church has helped you defend, such as the right to organize and the struggle for the just demands of the people. In criticizing what is negative, I simply want to tell you that you must not lose your credibility. Don't become another repressive force. Make yourselves worthy of international admiration because right now you are losing it, according to reports in the international press. (Applause) If, despite all this and with the good will involved in all this, you wish to permit some intervention of the church's moral force, as many families of the hostages have requested, we are ready for dialogue at any time.

We also want to deplore the continued kidnapping, to the disgrace of the organizations, of four persons: Dennis McDonald, Mr. Buchelli, Don Jamie Batlle, and Don Luis Escalante Arce. I have been asked to make a plea on behalf of the last of these to whoever is holding him: either the church or the Red Cross is ready to provide a doctor for Mr. Escalante since his family is concerned for his health. These also are situations which violate human rights. Human freedom is sacred, and you would do well to recognize that this is not the way the country will be repaired. (Applause)

Life of the church

Finally, having examined as church the sad and tragic realities surrounding us, let us now consider the beautiful aspects of our own church and the solidity of her teaching.

¹⁹ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 49.

²⁰ On 21 October 1979 members of the BPR occupied the cathedral of San Salvador, and two days later members of the LP-28 February occupied the church of El Rosario. *El Diario de Hoy* (22 and 26 October 1979).

It is with great delight that I inform you that the bishops in Colombia have opposed the legalization of abortion. Relying on the church's traditional thinking, they were able to overcome the government's proposal, something Catholics have always been able to achieve when they act in unison.

I rejoiced with the Claretian Fathers this week as they celebrated the feast of their patron, Saint Antonio María Claret, and the anniversary of their foundation. May they always be heralds of the Heart of Mary!

Through the sacrament of confirmation we have brought the treasures of the Holy Spirit to the communities of Cangrejera and Tamanique in La Libertad, where we had the pleasure of greeting Sister Juanita who had been away for many months. We united with her suffering since she had to bury her mother and has left her father alone in a home there in the United States.

This afternoon in the parish community of Colón we will celebrate the sacraments to sanctify the men of the parish.

The seminary, the great hope of the church, is very lively, and I want all of us to reinforce it with much prayer. Both the minor and major seminaries have finished the school year. Thanks to a group of young seminarians, the youth ministry in the parish of San José de la Montaña is flourishing. Any young people who would like some orientation about pursuing their vocations or giving their young lives more meaning can find it there.

I also received a very gratifying visit this week from the World Council of Churches, and they've invited me to attend a meeting of the board of the National Council of Churches in the United States.

I want to conclude by calling everyone to join in forging our nation. We have seen today, in the light of the church's teaching, that the political community must be created among all of us. We must be active Christians steeped in the history of our people so that we know how to make our contribution where it's needed and as we think best. Let us be a people who fashion our own destiny. I call on everyone to act reasonably, especially the extremists, because crucial values are at stake: our life together as Salvadorans and even the existence of the country. Let us take advantage of this opportunity and see if this new door that has been opened up is one that we can open even wider toward a better world.

I call out to the young people, as did the Second Vatican Council. I believe that the reason why so many youths are taking up arms, raising their fists, opting for violence, or yielding to their passions is that they have not understood the beauty of their youthful years. As the Second Vatican Council was concluding, Pope Paul VI handed a young man a message for the world's youth; the message stated, «The church has confidence that you will find such strength and such joy that you will not be tempted, as were some of your elders, to yield to the seductions of egoistic or hedonistic philosophies or to those of despair and annihilation»²¹.

²¹ «Message to Young People», Second Vatican Council (8 December 1965) 4.

This is profound. There are many young people who profess a philosophy of despair and nihilism. They want to annihilate whatever exists, as though a new people will arise from nothing or from the ashes. From nothing, nothing can come. Nihilism is a frightful absurdity. Destroying for the sake of destroying is a false, horrifying philosophy. Why burn a hotel²² just because it's promoting tourism inspired by imperialism and the like? I ask you: why not wait until that same building, which is today a structure of imperialism, is converted tomorrow into perhaps a center of development? In any case, leave the building; don't destroy it, for it can be useful. Likewise with the buses and the factories. That whole nihilistic system which wants to do away with everything is a false philosophy, and both the pope and the Council warned young people away from it. «In the face of atheism, a phenomenon of lassitude and old age, you will know how to affirm your faith in life and in what gives meaning to life, that is to say, the certitude of the existence of a just and good God. Place your youthful energies at the service of your sisters and brothers. Fight against all egoism. Young people, refuse to give free course to the instincts of violence and hatred which beget wars and all their train of miseries. Be generous, pure, respectful, and sincere, and with enthusiasm build a better world than the one your elders left you»²³.

I want to conclude by reading a lovely letter that surprised me pleasantly this morning just as I was coming to the cathedral. It comes from the community of Ilopango and states, «Esteemed Brother in Christ. The community of Ilopango and their pastoral team send fraternal greetings. Archbishop, we want to tell you that we are pained that prejudiced groups with closed, predetermined political positions have wrongly understood you to be taking a political stance. The Christian community of Ilopango declares that we are in solidarity with you and that we are with you during these very difficult moments of our lives. In your third pastoral letter you counseled us that when faced with these or similar problems, we have to study, pray earnestly, and discern what we should do by the light of the Holy Spirit and in communion with our pastors. Taking now an ecclesial rather than a political position, we tell you that we are calmly studying and reflecting on the situation of the country. We pray, and we are attentive to your words. We understand better every day what it means for the church to be at the service of the people and not tied to any political organization. We feel now that the Lord is helping you, so we offer up our prayers so that he will continue to enlighten you, give you strength, and preserve you in righteousness. Onward, Archbishop!» (Applause)

Let us pass now to the Eucharist so that from the mystery of the consecrated host Christ may tell each of us individually and all of us as a people, «Your faith has healed you» (Mark 10:52). Let us hope that one day El Salvador, by recovering the faith now lost in so many quarters, will feel the consolation of the presence of the Lord. Let it be so. (Applause)

²² On 26 October members of the FARN burned the Hotel Trópico Inn in San Miguel. *La Prensa Gráfica* (27 October 1979).

²³ «Message to Young People», Second Vatican Council (8 December 1965) 4, 5.