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Baptism, the Epiphany of Messianic Riches

The Baptism of the Lord

13 January 1980

Isaiah 2:1-4, 6-7

Acts 10:34-48

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Dear sisters and brothers, the participation that was announced will be held after the homily. It's an invitation that has to do with the week of ecumenism. Also, within the homily we'll have the participation of a religious sister, who will give her testimony.

This is the feast of the Lord's baptism. When I speak of baptism, dear sisters and brothers, I feel the serenity and joy of someone who returns home and remembers his family, his childhood, his origin, even his cradle. We have so much need these days of that domestic tranquility since there is tremendous upheaval all around us. It is when we are besieged by the storm of persecution that we feel the greatest need to be united with our family. I invite you, then, on this day when we celebrate the baptism of the Lord, to experience Christ's baptism as the cradle of this whole great family of God. It was there that we were born as the people of God, as the family of God. When we come to Mass on Sunday, it should be like spending the weekend at home with our Father God and our Brother Jesus Christ, all of us sisters and brothers. We have a tremendous need to breathe in that homey atmosphere of love, serenity, and joy!

Besides that, baptism makes the citizens of a country on earth into citizens of the kingdom of God. Our birth certificates are in the town halls because we are citizens of nations here below, but we also have baptismal certificates in the parishes, and we have baptismal fonts that are like the cradles where we were born in our parishes. This doesn't mean we're setting up an opposition between Christianity and civil society. To the contrary, it's a matter of complementarity, as I've been trying to clarify in all my talk about «the people». As Christians we must distinguish between the natural people and the people of God, but not so as to separate or alienate ourselves from the civic, political, social, and economic problems that we must deal with as citizens of this earth. As Salvadorans we cannot separate ourselves from these realities. But besides our reality as Salvadorans with birth certificates, living in this country of ours, we belong to another kingdom, one that does not alienate us from our homeland but empowers us, gives us special lights, and endows us with new and original criteria so that, working together with all our fellow citizens of earth, we can be the leaven of God's kingdom in our society and among the Salvadoran people.

Our meditation today on the baptism of Christ and on our own baptism should point to our identity as persons who were born in baptism for the kingdom of God. We must not betray our citizenship in God's kingdom in order to work in the kingdom of this world. Those who see a contradiction between being a Christian and being a good citizen have not understood well

the nature of these things; they don't know what it means to be a Christian. This day when we celebrate baptism is very important for helping all those who are baptized, even if they have political commitments, to know how to honor their Christian commitment and the indelible baptismal character that is imprinted on their imperishable spirit.

With this Sunday we bring to an end the Christmas season, which culminated last Sunday with the Epiphany. The child who was born on Christmas is now fully revealed because he has come not to remain hidden away but to make himself known so that all people can know him and follow him. For «there is no other name by which people can be saved» except the name of that child who was born in Bethlehem (Acts 4:12). That is why he was displayed openly and shown to the public. Our mission now is to carry him to all parts of the world and to be his epiphany and his revelation. Today's feast, the baptism of Christ, fits within the liturgical setting of the Epiphany. The baptism of Christ is a new epiphany. In his baptism Jesus manifests himself in a new way, as we'll see today. And so in my homily this morning I want to apply today's word of God to our concrete life and reality here in El Salvador. I'm going to give it the title, «Baptism, the Epiphany of Messianic Riches». The first point will be the baptism of John as preparation for the birth of the messianic people; the second reflection will be the baptism of Jesus as the epiphany of his messianic mission; and the third will be our own Christian baptism as our vital participation in the riches of the Messiah Jesus. So on this day of Christ's baptism we'll touch on three concepts concerning baptism that are often confused. The homily will serve as the kind of pre-sacramental talk or catechesis that is so necessary today. In no parish should any child be baptized until the child's parents and godparents have been instructed regarding the great commitment that comes with the dignity of baptism.

The baptism of John as preparation for the birth of the messianic people

Let us first examine the baptism of John because today's readings tell us how Jesus came to be baptized while John was baptizing the people. And here we have the first common misunderstanding: «I don't baptize my infant child because Christ got baptized when he was grown up». What confusion! The baptism of your child is not the baptism that Jesus received, nor is John's baptism the sacrament we administer today in the Catholic Church.

To understand the baptism of John, let us place ourselves in that psychological framework described by today's readings, especially the gospel: «The people were in expectation, and all were wondering where the Messiah could be. John spoke to them and said, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"» (Luke 3:15-16). John the Baptist had stirred up a spiritual movement in the nation so that people of every category would be drawn to the Jordan River to be baptized.

The psychological state of those gathered around John at that time is expressed with the words: «The people were in expectation, and all were wondering». It was a people's movement that was seeking something, that was seeking an answer. People were expecting the one who was to come, the one announced by the prophets. Could it be this man of great humility and austerity? Could it be John, the marvelous preacher with a tremendous following? But John told the people, «I am not the Messiah. The Messiah has already come. My job is to prepare the people for him, as it was prophesied. This is my mission: preparing the people for the Messiah and making them the beginning of the messianic people. The one who is coming to establish a messianic people is already among you. He is the one who is coming to fulfill the promises of so

many prophets, but I am not he. I am only the precursor preparing the way for him. My mission is to convert people. My baptism is not the baptism that gives eternal life. My baptism is an external rite, a washing in the waters of the Jordan that expresses heartfelt repentance. More than anything, my baptism requires an internal act of those who want to be baptized, for no one can be baptized here unless they first make an act of conversion from their sins».

The gospel tells us that «all kinds of people came to John to ask him, “What should we do?” He answered them, “Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has much to eat should share with the person who has nothing”. The tax collectors asked him, “What should we do?” He said, “Be converted, you tax collectors! Don’t be unjust. Collect no more than you are ordered to”. The soldiers also approached him»—the gospel tells us—«and John told them, “Don’t abuse the force you have. Be content with your pay. Whatever armed force might be necessary, don’t misuse it”» (Luke 3:10-14).

And so, with the integrity of a man preparing the way for God and speaking in the name of God’s law, John said what had to be said to each person, even if the person was a king. For he told King Herod, «It is not lawful for you to live with your brother’s wife. You are sinning!» (Mark 6:18). That was going to cost him his head because there is no more fearful beast than a woman wounded in her self-love. Taking advantage of the charm of her dancing daughter, the adulterous paramour of Herod asked for the head of John the Baptist. He died, but he triumphed because the truth always triumphs. (Applause) That was the baptism of John: speaking the truth, preaching against sin, calling people to repentance. A school formed around John, a community of people who were converted and who were seeking the Lord’s kingdom. This was the true baptism of John. In one biblical commentary I read this precious thought: «John led the people up to the moment of the world’s salvation, preparing them to be converted into the messianic, eschatological people of God». We could say that John prepared the raw material into which Christ would infuse, with his baptism in the Spirit, the life of God that John could not give. But he had prepared the dough; he had prepared the consciences. What an honor! We do nothing more than John in our own evangelization because preachers cannot give God’s grace; they can only open the ways toward conversion.

What an honor it is for me, dear sisters and brothers, dear radio audience, if you are listening to me not out of curiosity but in the same way that the people listened to John the Baptist! «What must we do to find the kingdom of God?», they asked. I know that many people have been converted—for which I thank the Lord—because they truly seek in the word of God what the word of God must say: no to sin and yes to virtue. I desire nothing else. If from this pulpit we must denounce abuses, assaults, sins, and injustices, it is because we want to continue to carry out the mission of John: preparing the people to receive Christ so that they form part of the messianic people.

The spirit of this messianic people was defined beautifully by the Second Vatican Council. In fact, John’s preaching is quite relevant to our present day, as can be seen in the way the Council adopted the Baptist’s teaching about preparing the people for Christ. In 1980 our people continue to be the same as the people there on the shores of the Jordan: they were seeking the Christ they needed; they were seeking the kingdom of God. They couldn’t find it in John, but John showed them where to look. «At all times», says the Council, «God saves people of good will, but his will has been not to save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased him to bring men and women together as one people, a people that acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness» (LG 9). (Applause)

When Pope Pius XI established the feast of Christ the King in 1925, he wrote a marvelous encyclical, *Quas Primas*, in which he described the kingdom of God in the same way John the Baptist described it. The pope said, «“His kingdom is not of this world, but that doesn’t mean that he has no sway over the kingdoms of this world. It means that his is a very special kingdom into which one enters by penance and baptism. His kingdom is opposed to the kingdom of Satan; it preaches justice and the other virtues, and it requires abnegation» (QP 14). Sisters and brothers, all of you know about the kingdom of God because Christ has told us Christians, «The kingdom of God is in your midst» (Luke 17:21).

Being a native-born Salvadoran is very different from being part of the people of God, a people of virtue and renunciation and holiness! We can say that in El Salvador all of us who form the people of God are Salvadorans, but the reverse is not true: not all Salvadorans are part of the people of God. Let us keep this mind because it was the same with John the Baptist and his people. He also was a citizen of Palestine, and he was preparing Palestinians to receive Christ, but not all of them were converted. When Christ came and began to preach, he found the first fruits that John had prepared, and these were the true people of God: fully Palestinian but also fully converted Christians.

What a precious scene is described to us in the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint John, verse 35! It tells us, «John the Baptist was surrounded by his followers and when Jesus passed by, John pointed to him and said, “That is the Lamb of God”. When the disciples heard this, they followed him. Jesus turned around and, seeing that they were following him, asked them, “What are you seeking?” They answered, “Teacher, where do you live?” Jesus told them, “Come and see”. They went and saw where he lived. It was about four in the afternoon, and they spent the rest of the day with him» (John 1:35-42a). Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two. Andrew went to look for his brother Simon and told him, «We have found the Messiah, the Christ», and introduced him to Jesus. I’ve read you this passage because you can see there how John, by preaching conversion, prepared the precious raw material with which Christ would begin his kingdom. Christ found those first disciples—John, Andrew, Simon—in the school of John the Baptist, and certainly those first Christian communities were composed of men and women who practiced the repentance that John was preaching. That’s why the point of my first reflection is that John the Baptist prepared the origins of the messianic people with his baptism. He did not create the people of God, but he prepared the way for Christ to begin the kingdom of God with these people who were converted.

The baptism of Jesus as the revelation of his messianic mission

My second point follows: Christ went down to the Jordan River to be baptized among the sinners. This presented a problem for the first Christian communities: explaining why Christ was baptized if he was not a sinner. If you read the gospels, you’ll see that not much stress is placed on this problem of Christ’s baptism. In today’s gospel Saint Luke recounts the baptism in passing, «While John was baptizing the people, Christ was baptized» (Luke 3:21). Luke then presents Christ at prayer, as if rushing past this problem they didn’t know how to solve. Theology, though, gives us a wonderful solution. Jesus did not need to be baptized. His baptism was not for the purpose of receiving something, as is the case with us when we are baptized. His baptism was not an expression of repentance in order to receive pardon because he didn’t need to be pardoned; he was supremely holy.

So what was his baptism? Well, that is why we are celebrating it today, on this Second Sunday of Epiphany: more than a penitential act, his baptism was a glorious epiphany, a revelation, a manifestation. The revelation of Christ's baptism can be summed up in the words that were read today. The Gospel of Saint Luke told us, «While he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, my beloved, my delight"» (Luke 3:21b-22). This was the epiphany! Christ was baptized not to become the Son of God but to reveal himself as the Son of God. Christ was not baptized because of any need of his own but because of our need for him to reveal himself and make himself known.

That's why I called uninformed the claim of those who say, «I will let my child be baptized when he reaches the age of Christ». But your child is not the Son of God; he is a son of the flesh! He needs to become a child of God as soon as possible! In contrast, Christ was the Son of God from his conception in the womb of Mary, so he had no need of baptism. If he went down to the waters of the Jordan, it was to give expression to what he already was and to tell people about his messianic treasures: «In me is fulfilled all that was announced by the prophets». The baptism of Jesus, therefore, was a baptism of epiphany. In today's three readings we find the best commentary on that brief revelation: «You are my Son, my beloved, my delight» (Luke 3:22b).

In the same gospel we find the testimony John gave when they were confusing him with Christ. He said, «No, he is greater than I. I baptize only with water. He is the one who baptizes in the Spirit. The only one who can give God is God, and he is God. I am not worthy even to loosen the straps of his sandals. I am not worthy even to be his slave» (Luke 3:16).

Christ marks with the fire of judgment those who let themselves be baptized. He marks people with the eternity of God's judgment—that's what it means to be baptized by fire. The expression «fire» in the Bible signifies purification, for fire purifies, but it also signifies God's judgment. Fire distinguishes that which can burn from that which cannot burn so that only the latter remains. For us humans fire acts as our conscience, making us do solid things and not just the flammable, transitory things of this world. The baptism Christ gives is a baptism of fire that purifies us and gives us the consistency we need to be able to withstand the judgment of God.

And Christ baptizes in the Holy Spirit because the Spirit that anointed him, thus making him the Son of God in the womb of most holy Mary, is the same Spirit that sanctifies the child who is baptized. That same Christian child, growing up faithful to her baptism, carries within herself the breath of the Holy Spirit, the breath of truth. Christians who let themselves be carried forward by their baptism become holy, become heroes. No citizens are more valuable to a nation than those baptized citizens who are faithful to their baptism. (Applause)

These are the Salvadoran Christians we want, and that's why we preach this way. We want to shake our baptized members out of the routine that hangs over them and that practically turns them into baptized pagans who make idols out of their money and their power. What kind of baptized people are they? (Applause) Those who want to bear the mark of the Spirit and the fire with which Christ baptizes must take the risk of renouncing everything and seeking only God's kingdom and his justice. (Applause) Salvadorans who are marked by Christ's baptism, which is Spirit and fire, must be Salvadorans who have eternal hopes and are never overcome by pessimism. They must not let their eternal ideals and triumphs in the faith

be consumed in earthly political projects. The grand hope of baptized Salvadorans must float high above all the despondencies of earth's political leaders. (Applause)

Considering this hope we have and our present crisis, we want to conclude that all baptized Salvadorans who are doing political work in El Salvador today must keep in view the great breadth of God's kingdom. They shouldn't become fanatical supporters of small groups or political parties. They shouldn't get fixated on just their own organization or just their own project but should be concerned about the whole political panorama of the common good of our people. They should be citizens who, relying on the perspective of Christian hope, are able to understand other people and their different political projects so that together we can strive to have God's kingdom become incarnate and enthroned in El Salvador. (Applause)

In today's readings we also have the testimony of Peter commenting on this revelation, this epiphany of Christ's baptism. Citing the words, «You are my Son», Peter calls Christ «the Lord of all» and «the one anointed by God with the power of the Holy Spirit» (Acts 10:36). Peter says that «God was with him» (Acts 10:38), and that he was indeed God.

But above all, sisters and brothers, I want us to concentrate on the testimony of today's first reading. This precious reading from the prophet Isaiah is the best commentary on God's revelation about Christ. By the Jordan God declared, «You are my Son», and the prophet Isaiah had long before said, «You are my servant» (Isa 42:1a). Christ was the «servant of Yahweh», which means the same as «the chosen son», «the anointed one», «the one on whom I have placed my spirit». That's why these words of Isaiah are cited on this day of Christ's baptism: «I have placed my spirit on him» (Isa 42:1b). This is the anointing that makes Christ the anointed one, that is to say, the «Christ» or the «Messiah». «Messiah» is the word of Eastern origin that means the same as the Greek word «Christ» or our modern word «anointed». They're all the same: Messiah, Christ, Anointed. The Holy Spirit anoints Christ; that is, he suffuses him with divinity, he raises him up to the divine.

And that is why the first reading presents Christ to us as someone strong, so strong that he has been charged with implanting, establishing, and promoting justice throughout the earth by his laws and in this way giving hope even to the most distant nations (Isa 42:4). Do you see how consoling this is? God has deposited his power in Christ. The task of his kingdom is to implant the true law of justice and right among all peoples. Let us not despair for we can count on a servant of God so powerful that he is able to transform all societies when the people truly dedicate themselves to collaborating with him. But that collaboration has to imitate the Lord's own style.

In today's readings, dear sisters and brothers, I want us to focus especially on the qualities of Christ: «He will not cry out or shout; he will not make his voice heard on the streets» (Isa 42:2). How different this is from the demagogic bluster that is heard nowadays among us! By the way, I would like to beg the political leaders who take to the microphone not to commit the same fault that I do, of shouting too loudly when we have a microphone in front of us. These inventions are useful and can keep us from wearing our throats out, but at times, when you hear someone with a microphone screaming like a demagogue, you ask, «What use is the microphone to that guy?» Would that we could speak with the same serenity with which Christ must have spoken: «He will not cry out or shout; he will not make his voice heard on the streets». There's a saying that goes, «Don't raise your voice. Reinforce your reasons!» Often we shout when we don't have good reasons. As I listen to certain speeches of a political nature

these days, I don't find any constructive ideas. You do a lot of shouting and pile many words on top of one another, but you never express what your projects are or what ideas you have for peacefully building up and improving the country. Think of how the voice of Christ must have sounded as he spoke with the serenity that Isaiah described: «He will not cry out».

Isaiah then describes the magnificent attitude of Christ: «A crushed reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not extinguish» (Isa 42:3). Impatient as we are, if we see a reed bent, we break it completely and throw it away. If our candle grows dim, we get angry and throw it away. Christ never puts out the wick. If it is still smoldering, then there is still a spark of hope; there is still something to be done. Let us refuse to say that all the doors are closed when there are still people who can reason. Let us imitate Christ, who came precisely to redeem us who were crushed reeds. What if Christ had behaved in the same impatient way that we behave with others? During all these long years Christ has had to put up with so much from us, and still we don't improve! But he keeps waiting and hoping because perhaps at long last the prodigal son will return, and the father will embrace him with the same tenderness with which he embraces the devoted son who always remained at his side (Luke 15:11-32). That is how God loves; that is how we must love. At this time when you feel like tossing in the towel, abandoning everything, and leaving the country, remember this about Christ: «A crushed reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not extinguish». Let us hold on still. Let us strengthen our solidarity.

Sisters and brothers, no heavenly paradise is going to emerge from this crisis in El Salvador. Never! What will emerge is a repair job. Indeed, everything that happens in history is but a repairing of sinful humanity! There is only one period of absolute renewal, and that is eternity. When we see «the new heavens and the new earth», that will be true transformation (2 Pet 3:13). While we are still in history, we have to do what Christ was doing: repairing the reed that was crushed and reviving a little the wick that still smoldered. Let us not try to make a paradise on earth because it is impossible.

This is how Christ presents himself in the epiphany of today. His strength is blended with tender gentleness, and he finds his confidence in God, who tells him, «I, the Lord, have called you in justice and taken you by the hand. I have given you as a promise to my people and a light to the nations» (Isa 42:6). How can joining with Christ not inspire in us confidence, since by our baptism we are intimately united with him who walks hand in hand with God! He is the leader who truly liberates! That is how today's first reading presents him: «I have formed you, and through you I have made an alliance with my people so that you can open the eyes of the blind, release the prisoners from their dungeons, and liberate those who live in darkness» (Isa 42:7). This is language we can understand for it is talking about the people who in our modern speech are called «oppressed». Christ came for the sake of the oppressed of every class. All those who strive to free the people from oppression can find no greater leader than Christ, the only true Liberator. (Applause)

Finally, Christ was baptized not because he needed it but because he wanted to endow water with all his messianic riches, the power of his cross and his resurrection. Christ was God undertaking those missions I just spelled out for you: establishing justice, bringing about deliverance, and saving the world with a redeeming tenderness. In order to do that he would have to suffer the most frightful humiliation of being condemned to die on the cross, but he would also enjoy the unprecedented glory of being raised and placed at the right hand of God.

That humiliating death and that glorious resurrection are the source of our hope as baptized Christians, for we are marked by that death and that resurrection.

The baptism of Christians as vital participation in the messianic riches

I conclude therefore with my third reflection: the baptism of Christians means their vital participation in the messianic riches. What an honor it is to think that all of you in front of me are Christ! Even you humble country folk who are perhaps reflecting there by their radios—you are Christ because your baptism identifies you with the death and the resurrection of the Lord! So you see that our baptism is not the baptism received from John by those who repented of their sins, nor is it the baptism that Christ received, because he was baptized not out of necessity but to reveal who he really was. Rather, we receive baptism as sinners, as children of sin who approach the baptismal font and there find forgiveness. Not only that, but all the riches of Christ become ours with baptism.

Today's second reading gives us a good account of the first pagan to be baptized. You know this wonderful story from the Acts of the Apostles: a pagan Roman centurion named Cornelius was praying in his own manner when God revealed to him that he should send for Peter because Peter had a message for him. Peter was fearful of going because the Jews were not supposed to associate with Gentiles. Peter was Jewish, and Cornelius was a Roman centurion, a Gentile. Nevertheless, Peter, ordered by the Spirit, entered Cornelius's house and spoke with him. In chapter ten of the book of Acts we have the whole discourse that Peter spoke to Cornelius's family; today's reading has only a part of it. Peter declared, «Now I see that God makes no division between Jews and Gentiles! Now I see that God wants to make all people recipients of his gifts». Peter then spoke to them of Christ. If you want to know how the apostles preached and to see whether our preaching today is like that of the apostles, read those speeches found in the book of Acts. There in chapter ten you find Peter's entire speech to the centurion Cornelius: what the Christian religion means, how we have to believe in Christ as the Son of God who came, who died, and who rose. He gave Cornelius a pre-baptismal talk, the whole catechism! «And when he finished», says the Sacred Scripture, «the Holy Spirit descended upon that family. Peter was amazed that the Holy Spirit came to people who were not Jewish but Gentile and said, "How can we deny baptism to these folk if the Holy Spirit has come upon them?" So he baptized them» (Act 10:44-48).

Baptism, then, is the coming of the Holy Spirit once we have accepted in faith the redemption that is preached to us. This is the schema for the work of evangelization: once the kingdom of Christ is announced, it is accepted by those who wish to do so, and to show that they accept it they let themselves be baptized. In baptism the child receives the Holy Spirit and all the messianic riches of Christ as revealed there by the Jordan. That's why I told you that the baptismal font is like a cradle where a new person is born into the kingdom of God. The effect of baptism is described for us today by the Bible: «The Holy Spirit came upon them» (Acts 10:44). That means that the Spirit who impelled Christ to holiness and redemption and everything the prophet Isaiah told us, will do the same also with us. Sisters and brothers, we are all a baptized people, a prophetic people, a priestly people—we are Christ! Let us pay honor to this participation in Christ given us by our baptism.

As I develop this third reflection on the baptism of Christians, I want to focus on two marvelous figures in today's readings. The first is the Servant of Yahweh, a very typical figure in the prophecies of Isaiah. The Servant of Yahweh, the Servant of God, is a mysterious figure,

but the commentators tend to identify him with Christ: not Christ as an individual but Christ as a community. The Servant of Yahweh is Christ and the Christian community, the Christian people. When we understand the Servant of Yahweh in this way, it throws much light on the book of Isaiah. When the Servant of Yahweh suffers, there we have the Christians of El Salvador; there we have Christ suffering persecutions and difficulties along with his Christians. When the Servant is happy and rejoices after receiving the revelation of God's joy, and when we have the good fortune of going to heaven with Christ, then we will be, along with him, the one and only Servant of Yahweh the one and only people of redemption, with Christ as our glorious head and with all of us as members of a glorious Christ. What an honor it will be! What destiny is more sublime than that of those who are baptized and incorporated into Christ! They will not be separated from him for all eternity unless they decide to split themselves off by sin.

The other extraordinary figure in today's reading is the dove that came down and rested upon Christ. This is generally understood to be the Holy Spirit. Please don't be scandalized by what I'm going to tell you, but in no other part of the Bible is the Holy Spirit represented in the form of a dove. The biblical tradition preferred to interpret the descending dove as the community. In the writings of the first church fathers we find them analyzing certain biblical phrases that compared the people of Israel to a little turtle dove in the hands of God—the dove is the community (Ps 74:19; Hosea 11:11). Thus, at the baptism of Christ it seems that the meaning of the dove is that the whole of Christ's community is going to share in his title of «Son of God». All of us are like ornamental wrapping around the gift of Christ our Lord. We are his people. We are truly what Saint Paul calls the *pleroma*¹, the complement of Christ, those who cover and clothe Christ our Lord. Accordingly, what this interpretation tells us is that baptism incorporates us into Christ so that we become Christ's community and so that the life of Christ circulates through us. All the beautiful images of the church, such as that of the mystical body of Christ, signify that the life of Christ circulates through us. By baptism, then, we make our own the messianic riches of the Lord.

Let us therefore remember what it means when the priest, there at the baptismal font, anoints the crown of our head with holy chrism on his thumb and tells us that from that moment we are members of Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal people. We participate in Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King. And let us remember what it means when on the day of confirmation—this is why we want to make people more aware of confirmation—the young people, fully conscious of what they are going to do, present their foreheads so that the bishop can mark them with the sign of Christ and so that they can consciously become collaborators of Christ who is redeemer, Prophet, Priest, and King. That is what we are as Christians here in El Salvador and wherever else there are Christians. We are a people of God that is part of a natural people, but we experience realities and hopes unavailable to those without faith and invisible for those who are baptized but who experience their baptism as so lifeless and colorless that being baptized is no different from not being baptized—they are pagans still.

Life of the church

This is the church we want to build, dear sisters and brothers. As I now begin to tell you about the current life of our church, I beg you not to lose from sight that evangelical, theological perspective. What we are doing in our communities is precisely that: trying to become aware of how we are a community in Christ.

¹ A Greek word meaning «fullness».

In what I say this morning I want to give priority to the testimony of Sister Beatriz, who works in Arcatao. She has suffered much precisely because she is working for God's kingdom, and I want to read to you her personal witness.

Yesterday, in the zone of Arcatao, a soldier named José Elías Quintanilla² was captured. Subsequently, they captured us sisters and threatened to kill us if the soldier did not appear. Finally, things calmed down, and we were sent to the archbishop with a petition asking for the release of the soldier, José Elías Quintanilla. Since we did not have sufficient time to speak about all of this with the archbishop, we send this message now. We ask those who captured the soldier to let him go free. We trust that those who captured him, being guided by Christian principles, will reflect on their actions and accede to this petition. If, however, something irreparable has unfortunately already occurred, we ask that the members of the Guard not seek vengeance but think rather of all the suffering spread over so many places in El Salvador. Since so many *campesinos* have lost their lives, they should not act vengefully. They should not commit atrocities in that zone of Arcatao because they are just poor folk. There is no confirmation of who the persons are who captured the soldier from Arcatao; they are civilians, not members of the Guard since the Guard is asking for his release. And so we make this plea. We also want to tell the National Guard in Arcatao that we sisters do not need to be threatened with death or anything else in order to carry out our Christian mission, which includes interceding for the life of any human person. (Applause)

I thank you, Sister Beatriz, and I hope that the tense situation created there in Arcatao around the capture of José Elías Quintanilla is resolved favorably. I ratify the petitions made by the sister, both the one addressed to those who captured the soldier that they not let a spark turn into a fire, and the one addressed to the National Guard that they not commit vengeful acts which could cause many innocent people to perish. For our part, we join with the sisters in forgiving that outbreak of anger which is what no doubt led to their being held as prisoners. I want to congratulate the sisters because now they can say that they've shared the experience of the apostles, who «rejoiced at having suffered something for the name of Jesus» (Acts 5:41). (Applause)

In the parish of Corazón de María, at midnight on Thursday, shots were fired against the façade of the church. Nothing is known about who did it or the reasons they did it. A simple explanation might be that it was the devil, who goes around attacking God's image on earth, such as his temples!

I received a very pastoral letter from Father Héctor Figueroa, the pastor of San José Ojo de Agua in that region of Chalatenango. It's very long, so I'm not going to read it to you, but I want to tell him now that I thank him for his work. I understand how he suffers as the pastor in a town that has grown cold and become divided because of all the hatred and dissension that have been sown. May the Lord have compassion on our people, and may we collaborate with him in sowing love instead of divisiveness and vengeance.

In the community of Santiago Aculhuaca we celebrated a very fine confirmation ceremony with the young people, and we had a good meeting with the pastoral agents. In the

² His name was actually José Elías *Torres* Quintanilla.

community of Rosario de Mora, the Oblate Sisters of Divine Love prepared a lovely first communion service with a very meaningful liturgy. Today in San Pedro Perulapán there's a gathering of pastoral agents, and I hope to be able to visit them this afternoon. In Guazapa the faithful are being asked to help finish the construction of the church and above all to help build community. I have been informed of the opening of a medical clinic in the Colonia Santa Margarita in Cuscatancingo. In the village of San José Cortez in Ciudad Delgado the catechists are asking for further assistance in getting the church opened so that they can work on building community.

The first anniversary of the death of Father Octavio Ortiz will be celebrated during these days, at seven o'clock at night in San Francisco Mejicanos. Next Sunday, January 20, we will celebrate the anniversary of the dreadful massacre at El Despertar in San Antonio Abad. We will have a Mass beside the tomb of Father Octavio in the church of San Francisco Mejicanos at eleven o'clock in the morning. I told a reporter that it was this Sunday, but I correct that error now. It's next Sunday at eleven in the morning in San Francisco Mejicanos.

In Aguilares they'll be celebrating their patronal feast of the Lord of Mercies on January 15 at nine in the morning. That same day is the feast of the famous Christ of Esquipulas, for whom we have here in our diocese two sanctuaries that draw great crowds. We hope that the people's devotion will be nourished by their visits to the Holy Christ in San Bartolomé Perulapía and in Colón.

Speaking personally, I feel very grateful for the wonderful letter sent by the vendors of Cine México and for the contribution they sent out of their meager means. They write, «Receive our greetings, and may God always enlighten you so that you stay strong in your loving dedication to this struggle for the Salvadoran people. We send you this small contribution that you can use as you see best». I thank you for your wonderful gesture. (Applause)

Orientación has been kind enough to publish last Sunday's homily in its entirety, for which I thank them³. Those who wish to analyze the homily and offer me suggestions can get a copy in this week's issue of *Orientación*.

We have a new director of our radio station YSAX, Napoleón Navarro. I thank him for his collaboration, and I have great trust that his fidelity to the church will help him keep this broadcast medium closely coordinated with the pastoral ministry of our archdiocese.

I request your prayers for David Agustín Cristales Elías, whose birthday was January 11. (I forgot to mention this last Sunday.) That date should have been his birthday, but it's not known whether he is still alive. He is one of those who was disappeared on 7 March 1977. Whether he's alive or dead, we will pray for him and for all the disappeared persons.

Events of the week

Now, sisters and brothers, since this church of ours is trying to make us into a priestly, prophetic, and royal people in virtue of our fidelity to our baptism, we must become aware of the reality in which we live our faith, so that that awareness will give us the criteria we need to view the political realities around us. As ecclesial base communities and as bishop, we have to

³ *Orientación* (13 January 1980).

live in communion with one another and shed light on our reality, for as simply an ecclesial community we are not competent to make concrete decisions.

At the present time I believe we are presented with three options: that of the government, that of the oligarchy, and that of the people's organizations. Each person is free to choose the option they want, but as church we must follow the Gospel criterion of orienting our option toward the good of the people. No option should be chosen for the sake of personal or group advantages, and certainly not for the sake of maintaining selfish privileges that are an assault on the people. Acting from this tribunal of the Christian community, we as pastors and Christian communities have the obligation not to take sides but to be a Christian conscience in the midst of our people. Our purpose is to enable this people to be a reflection of God's kingdom on earth.

With regard to the option of the government, this week the Governing Junta has been reorganized⁴, and some names have been mentioned for the next cabinet of ministers, which we expect to be named this coming week. The Christian Democrats have taken on this role after the Armed Forces publicly stated their commitment to bringing about changes and promoting democracy. The message of the Armed Forces states that they are developing a «project that is pro-people and anti-oligarchy», and it further declares, «The Armed Forces consider this to be the historical alternative of El Salvador and have decided to make it a reality by undertaking the task with enthusiasm and making whatever sacrifices may be necessary»⁵. The message concretely outlines the existing conditions and describes the policies they will follow in the social, political, economic, and military spheres. I'm not going to take time to read it because you already know the general outline of the government project that was agreed upon by the Christian Democratic Party and the Armed Forces.

Speaking practically, what I see in all this is that they have accepted what the former cabinet ministers laid down as conditions for remaining in their posts. What I find strange is that they accept the conditions *now*, with an abundance of details, whereas they failed to reach an agreement with the former ministers. Let us hope that their acceptance now of what they apparently wouldn't accept before is a reflection of their conversion and a sincere recognition of their error, for when there is humble acknowledgment of being mistaken, there is hope that true amends will be made.

My other warning and my hope is that all this will not remain only in words, because what matters are deeds, not declarations and written agreements—it's a matter of deeds! If it's true that the Armed Forces and this new junta are ready to confront the oligarchy and demand more equitable distribution of land and income, then deeds will make that clear. When deeds are lacking, so is credibility. The great task of the government is gaining credibility, and this will be gained only through deeds.

One of the quickest ways to gain this credibility is to create the political conditions that are needed to make these changes more effective right now, that is, changes in what some say were the actual causes of the previous crisis. It is therefore necessary to stop the repression, to

⁴ On January 9 the new civilian members joining the Revolutionary Governing Junta were Héctor Dada Hirezi, José Antonio Morales Erlich of the Christian Democratic Party, and José Ramón Avalos, an independent. *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 January 1980).

⁵ «Message of the Armed Forces to the Salvadoran People», 9 January 1980, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 January 1980).

clarify the situation of the political prisoners, to carry out an exhaustive investigation of the killings that have been taking place in the countryside, to punish those who are guilty of such crimes, and to compensate those who have been hurt. I am especially bewildered and pained by the present situation of the disappeared persons. The commission that was supposed to investigate that situation left off its work at the same time that the ministers resigned. Now this new agreement between the Christian Democratic Party and the Armed Forces makes no mention of the reality of the disappeared persons. The church as a defender of human rights keeps insisting: the situation regarding those who have disappeared must be explained!
(Applause)

Bloodshed continues in our rural areas. You already heard the message of the sister in Chalatenango. I would ask the government to give special attention to the department of Chalatenango. What is happening there? I've also been told that three bodies were found in Aguilares, and I received a note from Caritas which states that a man was killed in the jurisdiction of Santa Tecla, near Los Pajales or El Triunfo, apparently while he was bathing in the Chilama River. Facts like these astound us; we feel confounded by the dead bodies turning up everywhere.

I was deeply moved by the expression of pain and suffering in a letter that informed me about the little boy who was killed by a bullet there in the jurisdiction of Soyapango. While he was suffering, he said to his mother, «Let's pray that I don't die, mommy. Pray to the Saint Anthony I have in my bed». Of course no one wants to die, especially a child who is full of hope! We therefore make an appeal to see how we can forge peace among ourselves, but it must be a peace based on true justice.

I hope that those civilians who will now be working with the government will never contribute to deceiving or repressing the people. They should know that they can rely on the support of the church as long as they carry out the changes and reforms that truly benefit the *campesinos*, the workers, the marginalized, the dispossessed, and all those with whom this archdiocese feels a special solidarity.

In the editorial of our weekly newspaper, *Orientación*, we cite some reflections from the document of Puebla with the hope of encouraging the work for peace in our country, and in doing so we hope to encourage the pacific work of our nation. Puebla states the following: «We believe that our responsibility as Christians is to use every possible non-violent means to establish justice in economic and sociopolitical relations, according to the Council's teaching, which is valid for both national and international life: "We cannot fail to praise those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties too, provided that this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or of the community"» (GS 78) (P 533).

And there is the other option, the one of the political groups and political parties that have made it clear that they will not collaborate with the new government. I understand that it is one thing not to collaborate directly in public affairs, and nobody is obliged to do that. But supporting and advocating changes that are really for the benefit of the people is something very different. The common good of the people should move all of us in that direction. Whatever ideological opposition may exist, it should not obstruct a project that truly profits the people.

On the other hand, this week we saw that the first steps have been taken toward unity among the people's organizations. A national coordinating body has arisen and welcomes the participation of all the progressive forces of the country⁶. I'm delighted that finally they are trying to break with sectarian and partisan interests in order to seek a broader unity. This is something I will always insist on: don't be fanatical, because not everybody wants to organize and think the way you do! There are broader political visions than the particular political options of individuals or groups.

In this regard I want to remind you that there is no need for political actions to offend the sentiments of the people. I was greatly alarmed by a propaganda flyer that was handed out during a children's demonstration. It told the children that they were hoping in vain that the God above would send them their daily bread. I don't think that's any way to build the country. The point is not to destroy religious sentiments but to make them truly serve an active, lively people. That is the religion that we want and that we have preached on this day of the baptized. It's not a question of asking for bread and then remaining passive; we must work, but we must also pray. Without prayer there can be no redemption. I find it strange, for example, that there is such an outcry against imperialism but nothing is said about the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, which is being reported in the papers and everywhere else. Such an assault is also unjust even if those who carry it out sympathize with my ideas. If I am truly just, I must condemn injustices, even those of my friends. (Applause)

Consider the harmful effects of certain violent actions. I received information this week that some 8,200 persons have lost their jobs because their workplaces were closed down due to arson or other insane acts. If each of those workers supports an average of four or five persons, then the damage caused by those acts has left about forty thousand persons without the support they received when they had jobs. Let us take this into account so that we don't engage in violent acts that don't lead directly to the liberation of the people.

What is the sense, for example, of the occupation of the embassy of Panama and the attack there on the freedom of the ambassador of Costa Rica, who has no role in the matter? I wanted to mediate, but my mediation was not accepted. Let us hope that others are more effective and manage to reach some agreement in this situation.

On the positive side, I think that this coordinating council of political organizations can play a very important and very positive role in our country if they keep watch on the Armed Forces and the new government and pressure them to carry through on their promises. They should not use their power to obstruct projects that benefit the people; to the contrary, they should use their force to make sure the projects are carried out for the benefit of our people.

In this regard our church, in obedience to a Gospel that demands that she preach love and peace, cannot condone violent actions while reasonable and peaceful recourse is still possible. Even though I mentioned it in my radio talk on Wednesday, here I would like to say something more about the decision of the former Minister of Education⁷ to join the clandestine guerrilla group, the FPL. Violence is a retreat from civilization; it is an expression of the

⁶ On January 11 the UDN, the BPR, the FAPU, and the LP-28 created the Coordinating Committee for the People's Unity Movement, from which emerged the Revolutionary Coordinating Council of the Masses. *La Prensa Gráfica* (12 January 1980).

⁷ Salvador Samayoa. *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 January 1980).

primitive instinct of those who are unable or unwilling to follow the paths of reasonable dialogue. But more than anything, it is a deplorable logical consequence of the very structure of sin. Considering, therefore, the case I just mentioned, I want to enunciate three positions.

First, this event has been used by the guerrilla organization to gain publicity. The FPL wants to use the case as a way to make propaganda and motivate more young people to join them. I have often said that we should be critical and not sheeplike. It is wrong to use propaganda to put pressure on other people's consciences.

A second attitude is that of the oligarchy, which controls the media and basically wants to reaffirm their own position. In this respect, I wish they were more honest in the way they manage the communications media. I wish they didn't manipulate the news by criticizing and demeaning the people who are working for social justice. They are only confusing matters. (Applause)

From a Christian point of view, I think we can say two things about this case. First, we should respect the personal decision that each person makes in good conscience. That is most important: respect for conscience. Mr. Samayoa has made his decision conscientiously. He will answer to God for what he does in conscience, and we respect that conscience. (Applause) But there is another important matter that we as Christians must consider, and that is whether we must condemn this structure of sin in which we live, this putrid system that tragically forces many people to choose such radical, violent options. The ones who are truly to blame are those who maintain these structures of social injustice that make people lose hope of ever being able to change things except by violence. (Applause) They should sit down and think: if they want to stop this exodus toward clandestine groups promoting tremendous disorder and violence, they have to begin by removing the great disorder of their own selfishness and their social injustice. (Applause)

But I also appeal to the human sentiments of these political groups. Take, for example, the case of the kidnapping of Mr. Dunn, the ex-ambassador of South Africa. I was accepted as a mediator, and I want to tell the kidnappers: communicate more quickly because a wife is dying, and a man is being deprived of his freedom. If you are truly popular forces struggling for the people's welfare, what you're doing here is crushing human dignity and worsening the pain of a wife. There is an urgent need to resolve this case and the other problems affecting the victims of violence.

Finally, the third political project is that of the oligarchs, who are trying to organize and expand their power in order to defend their interests. Once again, in the name of our people and our church, I appeal to you to listen to the voice of God and to share gladly with everyone your power and your wealth instead of provoking a civil war that will drown us all in blood. There is still time for you to take off your rings so that they aren't removed from your hands by others. (Applause)

These then are the three options, the three paths on which politicians are searching for a solution to the country's problems. The church does not identify herself with any project; that is not her competency. She must support any process that benefits the people. Therefore, what I've said on previous Sundays about «saving the process» has to do precisely with rescuing rather than betraying the noble aspirations of the people; it has to do with pushing the wagon toward a definitive solution. I don't think that the project the country needs is one imposed

with weapons. Rather, the country needs a project that objectively represents the interests of the great majority of Salvadorans and so includes more and more of them in the process.

So it is here that I again address the silent masses who are still on the sidelines. Please don't think that I'm going to beg you to join the organizations that already exist. Understand me well; that is not what I want to say. Rather, I want to tell you that we must all be protagonists of the future. We must analyze the situation objectively and not be carried away with emotion or euphoria or anxiety. We must be critical, mature, and brave in our judgment. We must reaffirm our vital dual identity: we are Christians thanks to our baptism which binds us to Christ, and we are natives of this land which binds us to the nation. We must integrate faith and politics through critical thought that helps us develop our true personality. That is what I wanted to tell you earlier when I said that baptism, which is our topic today, does not alienate us from our national reality but rather endows us with new criteria and new abilities. Let us become familiar with our religious identity, the meaning of our being baptized persons. This will enable us to tell people who we are as Christians, and if we have a political vocation, it will help us to define our political task without betraying our Christian identity. There are many people, especially young people, involved right now in the country's political work. This is a gift for which we should thank God, but we have to know how to channel that work, and we find the right channels described for us in today's liturgy. All Salvadorans should honor not only their specific political commitment but also their Christian commitment so that they truly become, by the saving power of Christ, a vital element in the salvation of their own country. Let it be so! (Applause)

Please listen for a moment to an appeal that will be made by an ecumenical group for this week⁸.

⁸ Archbishop Romero gave the microphone to a representative of the ecumenical committee that was inviting people to participate in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 18-25 January 1980.