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God Calls Us to Construct Our History Together with Him

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

10 February 1980

Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Dear sisters and brothers, at no moment did I ever feel far away from you. This journey I just made, I made with you and for you¹. I made it with you in our communion as church. I always followed closely the vicissitudes of this country and this church, and I have taken it all to prayer. Even when far away, I shared with you all the tribulations of this beautiful people, and at every moment I made an effort to be present with you. The reason for my physical absence was to bring this local church communion to the universal church communion and to join in communion with the pope and other pastors of our church.

When meeting with the pope, I did not really feel that I was meeting him personally, but I was bringing with me all the work and the collaboration of our priests, religious, and faithful. The pope's encouraging words also signified for me his encouragement for the whole archdiocese, and I'd like to communicate his encouragement to you. I want to tell you also that the Holy Father knows all about our work here and totally agrees with our attempts to defend social justice and with our preferential love for the poor. (Applause) The tendentious reports that are sometimes heard about our relations with the Holy Father are inspired only by a malicious desire to discredit a pastoral ministry with which the pope is far more familiar than are the local mass media that attempt to distort the reality. (Applause)

One report had me saying that the pope was not well informed. That is false. I never said that anywhere. What I did say is that all the agencies that report news about Latin America have a responsibility to be very objective. They should try to give the most accurate account of events possible and not distort matters. (Applause) Even Cardinal Martin, the archbishop of Paris, told me, «That problem does not affect only you or only Latin America; it affects the whole church». (Applause) At the present time in the church there are elements that want to put a brake on the impulses of the Holy Spirit that have their origins in the Second Vatican Council; they are trying to manipulate the pope himself. It is important for all of us to know that the pope is the person doing the most to impel the advances of the Second Vatican Council. Let us try to defend these advances of our church, which is every day more committed to serving the world; let us defend them against all those who, from within the church herself, want to stop progress.

¹ Archbishop Romero left for Rome on 28 January 1980 and was received by Pope John Paul II on January 30. A day later he continued his journey to Belgium where on February 2 he received a doctorate *honoris causa* from the University of Louvain. He returned to El Salvador on February 6. *Monseñor Oscar A. Romero, Su Diario*, Archbishop's Office of San Salvador, 1989, 404-419.

I therefore felt that you were all close to me as I experienced the joy of sharing with some of the Christian communities there, as I did especially when meeting with the base communities of the diocese of Bruges. Also very happy was Bishop De Smedt, the bishop who has sent us priests and sisters for our work; I thanked him for his generosity toward El Salvador. While celebrating with the ecclesial base communities there, I felt as if I were right here in El Salvador: it is the same faith and the same joy, for we are sharing the same style of church, one that is ever more genuine, ever more welcoming. Great was the joy I felt in the name of all the community here. I told them there in Bruges that I felt like Saint Paul conveying the greetings of the Christians of El Salvador—of the «holy ones», as Saint Paul called them (Eph 1:1)—to the holy ones of those communities that have so devotedly followed the history of our people.

I spoke also with the families of the priests and the sisters who have come here to work. I shared with them the gratitude of all our people and told them how much we appreciate the sacrifice they make in separating themselves from their loved ones so that they can come here to work among us.

I also conveyed your affection to all the Salvadorans and Latin Americans who met there with me. Some of them are victims of exile, others are studying, and all have a great love for our church, to which I tried to respond by giving them the same words of hope that I give also to you.

I told them that our church communion remains alive because the pastoral work here is well staffed. So I want to thank publicly the tireless labor of our priests, especially the vicars and the vicar generals. I thank Father Fabián, who did a fine job explaining the word of God last Sunday. (Applause) I thank the sisters, the catechists, and the other pastoral agents. They have all made me think more deeply about how our archdiocese is moving toward perfect communion. It's not just one person or two; it is the spirit of the whole diocese, and I give thanks to God for it. May we grow every day stronger in our communion as church. (Applause)

As I said, this journey was mainly for your sake. Personally I would have preferred to stay here because I was feeling anxious about the many difficult situations. But I was convinced that we also had to let people there know about the cause we are supporting and defending. I felt that the award was a homage not to me personally but to everything that contributes to the service of this whole community. It was in the name of all of you that I presented myself there to receive the degree of doctor *honoris causa*.

In developing the theme the University of Louvain had given me, «The Political Dimension of Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor», I told them, «I am not going to speak to you as an expert in politics or even in theology. I am not going to explain to you the theoretical connection between faith and politics. Instead, I am going to speak to you simply, as a pastor who, along with his people, has slowly been learning the difficult and painful truth that Christian faith does not separate us from the world». (Applause) I told them about the adventure that all of us are living in this archdiocese, about how we are running the same risks and sharing the same fate as the poor, and about how we are suffering calumny and persecution precisely for defending the poor. But I also told them that, in return for the eager service our faith is rendering to the politics of our country, especially among the poor, the church is receiving generous compensation since there is great growth in people's faith and their love for Jesus, who is precisely the one who becomes incarnate among the poor. I told

them that our faith, because of its political dimension, draws us closer to the mysteries of our religion so that we are learning to be more truly church. I remember well the attention paid to this concept by the academic staff and the students. The whole auditorium was filled with young people, and they all expressed their agreement with a Christian faith that truly confronts the risks of the world without betraying fidelity to the Lord. (Applause)

I also want to tell you that this adventure of faith that you and I are living—a faith ever more committed in the midst of the world and at the service of the world—found much sympathy in the mass media there. I brought back a very thick folder of clippings and stories about how this message was received there. In contrast, I felt sad to see the two short stories in our own newspapers; instead of reporting the facts, they malign and distort them and engage in a conspiracy of silence². How niggardly we appear!

Today I can add a new dimension to our analysis of the national reality, drawing on the perspective from abroad, from Europe. Many people already know about us, and there are many who are interested in learning more. The news reaches them without any context, and often it's not understood. It was therefore important for me to provide them not just short news items but the historical context of our country so that they could understand what is happening. Since my main job there was one of clarification, I came to understand that many people follow our situation quite closely; they feel great sympathy and solidarity with our struggle and with the liberation of our people. (Applause) They are amazed that there still exists here an oligarchy that is so selfish and cliquish and so insensitive to the suffering of the masses. The papers here have never said anything about this. I tried to explain to them that that was the principal cause of our ills.

Given the sympathy and admiration of the people there, I tried to speak the truth about our situation. I made an effort to speak objectively and in a Christian spirit not only with the Holy Father and his collaborators in Rome but with the public in general. I made declarations that I felt were true revelations for many people. And that's why, I repeat, I am amazed that here, where we actually experience these things, they are distorted and the truth of our reality is deformed. I want to thank the archdiocesan office of social communication, as well as our communications media, for having truly reflected the truth of my message in those countries.

Now that I have told you about this exchange with Europe and have shown you that the message we're reflecting on here is well received in other human hearts, I want to tell you how immensely satisfied I am that the readings of today completely confirm this teaching. They explain the ultimate reason why our faith and our church must be fearlessly committed to the concrete political and historical situations of our time, while always remaining the same church and proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Applause) Our faith in God commits us to history. Today's readings offer us norms for being serenely and effectively what all Salvadorans should be: architects of our country's destiny, but always in the light of faith. (Applause)

I want to be a messenger of hope and joy, especially during these times of collective confusion, psychosis, and anxiety. And the reason for my message is the revelatory word of God, which gives us a clear horizon for not feeling afflicted. The word presents a horizon in the

² Headlines in the newspapers of El Salvador concerning Archbishop Romero's honorary doctorate were as follows: «Archbishop Supports Violence and Says He Doesn't Believe in the Junta» and «The Church Cannot Oppose Violence: Archbishop Romero». *La Prensa Gráfica*, and *El Diario de Hoy* (4 February 1980).

Salvadoran heavens that is pointing the way to a luminous outcome for the present situation. Let us hope that all of us this morning will understand, in light of the Lord's words, how much each one of us can do, even the littlest among us, to respond hopefully and joyfully to the afflictions of this present time. In the midst of tragedies, bloodshed, and violence, there is a word of faith and hope that tells us: There is a solution! There is hope! We can rebuild our country! We Christians wield a force that is unique. Let us make use of it! Therefore, the words I choose as the title of my homily today are these: «God Calls Us to Construct Our History Together with Him». God calls us to construct our history together with him! (Applause) And really, this is not a pious consideration or a fantasy for evading or escaping from reality. To the contrary, its aim is to submerge us even more deeply into our reality. I will sum up the contents of today's reading in three reflections: first, the encounter of humanity with God; second, the project of authentic liberation that God offers humanity; and third, the Christian commitment to construct history according to the project God has offered humanity.

The encounter of humanity with God

It's wonderful to know that each one of us has an appointment with God. The fishing episode is fascinating. The men had spent the whole night fishing, but they had caught nothing and were exhausted. When morning came, Christ told them, «Put out further, and cast the net». Peter complained, «We've been working all night and haven't caught anything. Still, in your name and by your word I will cast the net again» (Luke 5:4-5). So great was the catch that Saint Peter felt that God was present, that God was drawing close to him. Then he fell on his knees and said, «Lord! *Kyrie!* Sovereign! Transcendent! Almighty! I am only a sinner. Depart from me!» (Luke 5:8). This was the moment when humanity encountered God.

The first reading tells us about the amazing theophany which was like a prologue to Isaiah's great mission. Isaiah describes God's majesty as incomparable, nothing like the fragility of kings, who are mortal. «In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were standing beside him, and they cried out to one other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The earth is filled with his glory!" At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook, and the temple was filled with smoke» (Isa 6:1-4). This was a sign of God's presence. Then follows a magnificent description of a man who realizes how small he is: «Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips! I am a sinner!» (Isa 6:5). Before the majesty of God, human beings who encounter him feel their tininess and their limitation.

We could say the same about the second reading, in which Saint Paul tells us how Christ, in the glory of his resurrection, appeared to the apostles and last of all to Paul himself, as to one aborted. He uses that expression to describe something repugnant since he in no way deserved to be loved: «I was a persecutor, and yet he appeared also to me» (1 Cor 15:5-8). Sins do not matter. What is important is to seek God sincerely. Even when Paul was persecuting the Christians, he thought he was serving the true God. But then the Lord appeared to him: «And by God's grace I am who I am. His grace to me has not been in vain» (1 Cor 15:10). Do you see what it means for someone to encounter God? If we analyze the encounters in today's readings, we discover three things.

First, the revelation of God to humanity. God appears as the Lord, as the One who is transcendent and fascinating, but at the same time terrifying and demanding. In Jesus, God's power is softened by the incarnation but always remains God's power, and it is unfurled

decisively in the infinite glory of the resurrection. This is our God. Blessed are those who encounter God, if not in a spectacular theophany like Isaiah, then in simple prayer, quiet petition, and personal reflection.

I have always liked the Second Vatican Council's description of human greatness: «By their interior qualities human beings tower above the whole universe. They plunge into the depths of reality whenever they enter into their own hearts, where God, who probes the hearts all, awaits them and where they discern their proper destiny before the eyes of God» (GS 14). This is an invitation to all of us, sisters and brothers. No one is excluded. We all possess this intimate sanctuary of conscience where God awaits us whenever we stoop to talk with him and to decide our own destiny in the light of his gaze. How extraordinary it is to think that at any time we want, we can have an audience with God! How wonderful it is to think that whenever I recollect myself in prayer, God is waiting for me and listening to me! This is what these readings are trying to reveal to us: that all of us have this intimate revelation of God in our hearts.

And what is revealed in God's glory is the human dimension. Blessed are those who, when they come face to face with the majesty of God, do not puff themselves up but, like Isaiah and Paul and Peter, fall on their knees and say, «Lord, I am a sinner» (Luke 5:8). It's not that God takes pleasure in our humbling ourselves because of our sins. God knows that of ourselves we cannot aspire to friendship with him, much less collaborate in his work. God therefore awakens in us this sentiment of humility so that he can issue his call: «Fear not! From now on you will be catching people» (Luke 5:10b). Or as he said to Isaiah, «Fear not! The lips you thought were unclean are now purified. All has been forgiven you» (Isa 6:7). Paul also, once he recognized himself as a sinner, was made by God a great collaborator in his work.

The second thing we discover in today's reading is that human beings discover their human dimension precisely in the glory of God. We do not know ourselves until we have encountered God. That's why we have so many pompous egoists and so many self-absorbed people worshiping false gods. They have never encountered the true God and so have never found their own true greatness. (Applause) How miserable life is when a person, instead of encountering the true God, worships instead the god money, the god power, the god pride, the god pleasure—all these are false gods. My great desire, dear sisters and brothers, is that, as the fruit of this preaching today, each of us will have a true encounter with God and will experience the joy of our majesty and our smallness!

Yes, our smallness, because our third discovery about this encounter with God is that God raises up our smallness and purifies it. Using symbolic language, the first reading tells us that a seraphim took a burning coal from the altar and touched it to the lips of Isaiah, for fire purifies. «No longer say that your lips are impure. Now you are cleansed, and you can go forth to announce my words». God asks, «Whom shall I send?», and the prophet answers, «Here I am! Send me!» (Isa 6:6-8). Now he feels raised up by God and empowered to be a collaborator of the Lord. Similarly in the second reading, Saint Paul takes delight in everything he has done, but he says, «It was by God's grace in me. I was incapable of doing this work, but God did it with me. It was not I but God with me». And Christ says to Peter, «Fear not! From now on you will be catching people!» (Luke 5:10b). This is the grand work of collaborating with the Lord, the grand mission of working among the Gentiles.

That's why I told you, sisters and brothers, that this morning we can find the best horizon for resolving our country's crisis. Each one of us, myself included, can enter deeply into prayer and say, «What do you want of me, Lord? What can I do in the present situation of our country?» And instead of merely political conjectures, we will find the project of God.

The project of authentic liberation that God offers humanity

This is my second reflection: God reveals to humankind the project of authentic liberation. In the gospels Jesus is always the revelation of God. The passage that was read to us today is fascinating; it says that Jesus taught the people while sitting in a boat (Luke 5:3). Commentators have understood this to be the church, the bark of Simon, the first pope. From this church Christ continues to teach, bringing us the revelation of the Father, telling us about God's project for all the countries of the world. Only Christ knows the profound secrets of all politics and all organizations. Only Christ knows where we can find the solutions for all our problems and all our crises. Blessed are those who draw near to Christ in their reflections and ask him, «Lord, what is your project?»

In today's second reading Saint Paul sums up for us what Christ taught while sitting in that boat and what he later told the apostles as he sent them out everywhere to teach: «I remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you stand. Through the Gospel you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain» (1 Cor 15:1-2). This is the truth that has come from God and that human beings must preserve as a sacred relic. We cannot play with the Gospel. We cannot interpret it or manipulate according to our likes and dislikes. It must be a saving Gospel, the one Christ brought us, the one the church keeps announcing to us. (Applause) It is a Gospel that often comes down hard on our own caprices, our desires for pleasure, and our selfish tendencies, but blessed are those who make the Gospel of the Lord prevail over their caprices. It is better to confess «I am a sinner» before the holiness of the Gospel than to subjugate the Gospel to our own sins.

After asking, «What is the Gospel that I proclaimed, the one that is saving you?» Paul sums up the essence of what we preachers preach everywhere: «The first thing that I passed on to you was what I had received»—for Paul himself was simply transmitting a message—«it was that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures; that he appeared to the apostles and even to me, one born out of time because I persecuted the church of God» (1 Cor 15:3-8). Christ alone is the salvation of saints and of sinners. Christ alone is the source of our hope and our security. This is our project of salvation. God does not want his church to be committed to any particular project. Today in our country there are three projects for developing the republic: the project of the right, the project of the left, and the project of the government. The church cannot espouse any of these. The church is espoused only to the mind of the Lord so as to be able to judge with true freedom the three projects here in El Salvador and all the projects of all the world's political systems. (Applause)

And so I come to an end of my reflections, which could be developed even more. What I earnestly ask of Christians is that they come to understand God's mind better and better. Try to encounter God and you will see that his project is one of integral salvation. All the political projects of earth are limited, and not one of them provides the saving dimension that God wants for the nations and for all humankind. As bold as an agrarian reform or a bank

nationalization may seem, God always goes farther, granting us the nationalization of God's children and true freedom from sin. (Applause)

The Gospel presents to us the project of integral liberation. I want to remind you of a famous statement of the Second Vatican Council: «Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. However, to the extent that the former, that is, earthly progress, can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God» (GS 39). (Applause) The project of God is the project of God's kingdom, and while we shouldn't confuse all the world's projects of progress with the project of God's kingdom, we should definitely make them ever more faithful reflections of God's kingdom. Our country will resolve its problems to the extent that it tries to reflect here among Salvadorans, among rich and poor, the justice of God's kingdom and the love of God's kingdom. The genuine material progress of El Salvador is being stifled because we are opposing the project of God's kingdom. When a few people own everything while the great majority has nothing, we are opposing the kingdom of God! (Applause)

The Christian commitment to construct history according to the project of God

My third reflection, then, is on our Christian commitment to construct history according to the project of God. Sisters and brothers, this is a time for very serious decisions in our country; it is time for us to do some hard work in the field of human progress and politics. If we are truly Christian, we must have the project of God's kingdom deeply engraved in our hearts and our minds, in our visions and our activities. Any politicians who find themselves in the government today, if they are Christian, must be striving to have God's project reflected in the reality of the country. Let the young folk in the people's political organizations or in other groups working for political ends on earth do their work, but if they are Christians, they should not exchange the project of God's kingdom for anything else; they should try to reflect that project and so be «salt of the earth and light for the world» (Matt 5:13,14). In the midst of your organizations and your political groups, try to reflect the kingdom of God. Otherwise, don't call yourselves Christians! (Applause)

Saint Paul has told us this morning that we are to hold fast to the Gospel that he preached. Let us therefore hold fast to this Gospel in all our human activities, including politics, because if we don't, he tells us, we have «believed in vain» (1 Cor 15:2). Saint Paul could say so much more in this regard about the many people who prefer their political identity and betray their Christian identity!

We have received other instructions as well about this project of God's kingdom: «Evangelization will also always contain—as the foundation, center, and summit of its dynamism—a clear proclamation that in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men and women, as a gift of God's grace and mercy. It is not an immanent salvation, meeting material or even spiritual needs, restricted to the framework of temporal existence and completely identified with temporal desires, hopes, affairs, and struggles, but a salvation which exceeds all these limits in order to reach fulfillment in a communion with the one and only divine Absolute: a transcendent and eschatological salvation, which indeed has its beginning in this life but which is fulfilled in eternity» (EN 27). This is the project of God, which is not opposed to the projects of earth. Yes, it does oppose the sins of earthly projects, but that is why the church must preach the kingdom of God: to root out sin from all earthly projects and encourage the development of projects that are in keeping

with the kingdom of God. This is the great work of Christians in history; this is the great mission to which we are being invited by today's readings. This was the mission of Isaiah, whom God the King sent into the world with his lips purified and his eyes filled with God's glory. He was sent to remind the people that, confronted with the majesty of kings and the idolization of gold and power, they must not desert the one and only God. He alone is to be worshiped, and his power is not to be compared with any perishable power of earth.

Regarding this work of ours, dear sisters and brothers, there is another text that we should keep in mind, especially now when there are so many options in the concrete ways we should shape our Salvadoran history. The Council tells us, «Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the Gospel message». In other words, let us suppose that a political party or a political organization believes that it alone possesses the solution in accord with the Gospel; they think that they are the most Christian of all Christians, and they want to monopolize the Gospel. Regarding such a case the Council states, «It is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the church's authority as one's own. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good» (GS 43). We must always reflect the kingdom of God and its justice (Matt 6:33) so that those who labor in earthly projects will keep that illumination present and will try to build earthly society in the light of that faith. This is the great mission of Christians in the world. That's what I was referring to when I spoke about the political dimension of faith in Belgium: in order to be authentic, faith must be involved in the realities of the world, but it must always remain faith in Jesus Christ. (Applause)

Life of the church

As pastor of the church and as the Christian community we are, let us see if our work of growing in faith corresponds to the work of the three great figures that appear in today's readings: Peter on his knees before Christ, trying to learn the meaning of his liberation; Paul, learning about the Gospel and asking to be faithful to the Gospel so that he can truly help free the people; and Isaiah, who felt overwhelmed by the greatness of the mission but was intrepid when God sent him into the world with his word. Do we also want to be genuine messengers of God's kingdom? What about those of you who have a political vocation, those involved in organizations and political parties, those working in the government or in the army, or anyone who has authority in the political workings of our country? Are you truly Christians? Are you living out the logical consequences of your faith as you deal with the realities that you confront? It is precisely on this foundation of the Gospel that our church tries to build herself. I feel joy as I review our church activities this week, for we are working in our church in the same way Isaiah and Paul and Peter did. We immerse ourselves in the kingdom of God in order to work in the world with those engaged in politics.

The academic year has begun at the major seminary, and it gives us great hope. The young men are called to be like Isaiah, Peter, and Paul. During their seminary years they must immerse themselves in God's kingdom so that they can reflect it in the realities of earth. I want to thank publicly the seminarians in the major seminary for their wonderful letter. In it they send me greetings and news about the beginning of the new course, they express their

solidarity with the bishop and the work of the archdiocese, and they express their desire to be workers in this church blessed with so many marvels of the Holy Spirit.

Besides the inter-diocesan major seminary there are two minor seminaries, one in San José de la Montaña and the other in Chalatenango. There the young men obtain their high school diplomas as they reflect on their call to priesthood.

We also have an introductory year of seminary life, something new this year since God has blessed us with so many vocations of young men coming from different high schools. The purpose of this introductory year is to orient them toward understanding better the priestly vocation; it will last just one year.

Another new experiment in our diocese is the year of service as a deacon, which will interrupt the studies of the young men. Those in fourth year of theology will suspend their studies in order to have a year of pastoral experience. The following year, after they've had this practical experience in our rural areas, they will finish their studies and be ordained priests.

I'm also happy to be able to offer you, as another fruit of our pastoral ministry, a group of adult vocations, about which I have spoken to you on other occasions. They are young men who thought that because of their age and their poverty they couldn't be priests, but they found that God has opened a path for them. They are very enthusiastic, and without a doubt they will be good priests.

Tomorrow being the feast of the Virgin of Lourdes, we send greetings to the diverse communities that live under her protection. Coming down from heaven, she inspires in the church a desire to understand people's concrete situations and to become immersed with motherly love in the realities and afflictions of earth. It was on 11 February 1913, the feast of the Virgin of Lourdes, when Pope Saint Pius X created our ecclesiastical province. Whereas the whole republic of El Salvador had previously been a single diocese, he created three dioceses—Santa Ana, San Miguel, and San Salvador—and he made San Salvador an archdiocese. Since then two more dioceses have been added to the province: San Vicente and Santiago de María. This feast of the Virgin of Lourdes, then, is something like the birthday of our Salvadoran ecclesiastical province.

Father Ramiro, the pastor of this church, underwent surgery in the *policlínica*, and we pray for his speedy recovery.

The pope has once again condemned the arms race. He is opposed to the installation in Europe of 572 missiles manufactured in North America. Speaking on this topic, the pope said, «The cause of peace and justice has never been achieved when it has been linked to violence and the stifling of humanity's deepest aspirations». These are words we should keep in mind in our own situation of violence.

I also want to thank Bishop Claudio Humes, of San Andrés in Brazil, who sends warm words of solidarity to the whole community of the archdiocese. He writes to express his solidarity «with the valiant struggle for social justice and for the freedom and the participation of the Salvadoran people», and he concludes, «May Jesus Christ sustain your courage, and may God bless the church and the people of El Salvador». (Applause)

So that you can see the church in all her beauty, we have besides these testimonies from abroad this one from a kind rural pastor, Father Poprawa of Las Flores, Chalatenango. His telegram reads, «Many people, even the poorest, requesting Masses for peace in the republic. Good sign. Profound religious sentiment. I rejoice. Greetings». (Applause) I make mention of Father Poprawa's admiration for the people in order to express to you my own admiration for all the prayers being offered for El Salvador, starting with those unforgettable words of John Paul II: as he embraced me in the solidarity of the universal church, he said to me, «Tell them that I pray every day for El Salvador». So we can count on the pope praying for us daily, and there are also many Christian communities there in Europe and here in the Americas and above all in our diocese that are alive with prayer. I believe that a people that prays is not lost. Let us pray earnestly that God will give us the outcome revealed to us in today's word, the one that the Lord has declared to us.

At this point I want to express our church's solidarity with the people and the churches of Guatemala. A statement of the Central American province of the Jesuit Fathers³ and the violent reaction of the right make us realize how serious the situation is there and how great the church's responsibility is in that sister country of ours. How are we going to respond to the many demonstrations of solidarity that have reached us from there? We must pray hard and stand in solidarity with the struggle of the Guatemalan people for their own liberation. (Applause)

Events of the week

Regarding the situation here this week, let us offer the perspective of the church, which cannot view the world with indifference. I want especially to make mention of the statement of the UCA⁴ and to invite you to reflect on it seriously because it seems to me to be quite valid. My own views are less informed because I am not an expert in these matters, and the church is not competent in this regard either. But from a more pastoral viewpoint, which it is my duty to provide, I am going to express my impressions about the national situation as I found it upon my return. My concern as pastor of a Christian people is to motivate all of us to coordinate the project of God with the work that is being done to construct our history. I earnestly invite you all, as people of God, to bear witness to this project of God and to collaborate with it so that this babe being born in this painful childbirth of El Salvador will truly respond to the divine project that wants us all to be happy and to live as sisters and brothers here in this land.

What I expounded in Rome and presented to the Belgian and French journalists was simply the content of my recent homilies. I explained the three projects that are contending in this tragic play of violence: the project of the government, the project of the people's organizations, and the project of the right. I reaffirmed my utter disapproval of the right's opposition to the changes the people need. (Applause) I therefore ask this question again about those who were quick to say that I was defending violence (which is a calumny): why did they not report what I said quite clearly, namely, that I was against the project of the right? That is what I would like to see come out in all the newspapers of El Salvador, because it is the voice of the church! (Applause)

³ «Before the Sorrow and the Hope of the People of Guatemala», *ECA* 375-376 (1980) 139-141.

⁴ «Statement of the Higher Council of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas on the Present Situation of the Country», 2 February 1980, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (5 February 1980).

With regard to the other two projects, I stated there in Europe that I support what is sound in both and I reject what is harmful, inhumane, and anti-Christian in both. (Applause) I explained this to the cardinal secretary of state, who of course is familiar with politics and guides the church in this regard. When I told him about the three projects—that of the right, which the church repudiates, and the other two, in which the church collaborates with what is good and condemns what is bad—the cardinal said this to me, «That is the way!» I believe this is true. The church doesn't offer expertise in political projects, but she does offer pastoral and evangelical guidance. That's the kind of guidance our church offers!

The left's effort to create unity and its openness to the democratic forces and the other honest sectors of our country point toward a solution that can help us avoid the alternative of civil war, as the UCA said in its statement⁵. Civil war must be avoided, and it will be avoided if the three existing projects make use of reason and put aside every sort of fanaticism and compulsion. I therefore come back to the same schema as a way of giving some context to this week's events.

As far as the government's project goes, we don't deny their noble and sincere intentions to implement some projects of structural change that will benefit the people. These include nationalization of the banks, agrarian reform, nationalization of foreign trade, and the creation of a constitutional statute which they claim will enable them to move forward with the changes announced. The government doesn't want the occupation of the Spanish embassy to be resolved in the same savage way it was in Guatemala⁶. Also laudable are the government's desire to salvage the image of the country, its efforts to resolve certain labor problems, and its seeking to guarantee that there will be no rise in the prices of articles consumed by the poor. All this is very honorable and very valuable, but weighing very heavily against the government is the weakness it has shown in putting an end to the repressive acts of the security forces. (Applause) There is no doubt that these forces are being supported by elements of the national army, contrary to what was promised on October 15. Illegal arrests are still being made, investigations are too drawn out, and a certain impotence, not to say bad will, is evident in the way the criminal actions and strategies of the extreme right are being investigated. (Applause) We have here the testimony of diplomats who have been trying to resolve the problem at the embassy; they complain about how difficult it is to obtain information and action regarding the persons who have been arrested and the ones who have been disappeared.

In this regard, Legal Aid has provided information about the events of recent days, especially about the disgraceful murder of Doctor Fernando Martín Espinoza Altamirano and the kidnapping by civilians of René Marroquín Arrazola, whose body was later found on the road to Mariona. The UGB claimed responsibility for this action⁷. This week a number of bodies were found in different places, and they still haven't been identified.

The «June 21» group of ANDES has denounced the murder of five teachers during the last week of January and also the recent arrest of the teacher Vidal Elpidio Recinos.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ixil and Quiché Indians occupied the Spanish embassy in Guatemala to denounce the repression in Quiché. Allowing no chance for dialogue, the Guatemalan police on 31 January 1980 entered the embassy, gunned down the occupiers, and burned the building. Some thirty-nine persons were killed, mostly of them Indians. «The Indigenous Peoples of Guatemala Address the World» in *Diálogo* 50 (1980) 126-131.

⁷ «Solidarity» in *Orientación* (17 February 1980).

On Tuesday, February 5, the body of the student Oscar Remberto García was found; his arrest had been denounced last Sunday by Father Fabián.

Legal Aid has also documented the illegal arrest of the worker Rigoberto Antonio Melgar Fuentes. Another very sad case is that of the family of Pablo Mendoza from San Pedro Perulapán. The family is known internationally because between '75 and '78 fourteen of its members suffered horrible repression, and some were even killed⁸. Now two daughters of the same family, Laura Isabel and Rosa Paula Mendoza, were arrested as they were leaving the village of Carmen Monte in Cojutepeque and returning to their home in San Pedro Perulapán; they are now among the disappeared.

Also, there are still no signs of Jesús Menjivar, Fidencio Mejía, and María Enma Aquino nor of the two students, Arnulfo Ventura and José Humberto Mejía, who were arrested near the United States Embassy. Still missing also are the mason Manuel Peña Marín and the workers René Gilberto Gavidia and Juan Antonio Carrillo.

During this wave of violence the house of Guillermo Galván Bonilla was also shot up, and he has received threatening telephone calls and other menacing messages. Another victim of threats has been a collaborator of ours, Roberto Cuéllar, the director of Legal Aid.

We just received news that the *campesinos* José Eduardo Vázquez, Abilio Cruz, and Rodolfo Vázquez were arrested on February 3 in Río Mineral in Santa Rosa de Lima; nothing more is known about their fate. The situation grows even worse with this report received from La Unión: last night, Saturday, the army raided the village of Conchaguita, which is where the Vázquez family lives. The oldest brother, Santos Domingo Vázquez, was killed.

I was also advised as I was entering the basilica that a contingent of soldiers and national guardsmen had invaded the village of Carmen Monte and arrested Laura Isabel, whom I just mentioned. Also, the community of Aguilares now reports twenty-nine persons killed in a number of different villages, in addition to the nine murders that were already denounced here. One of the most sorrowful cases is that of the two young Red Cross workers, Ana Coralia and María Ercilia Martínez, who helped out at the parish clinic of Aguilares⁹. With profound sadness we express our solidarity with their families, and we also deplore this crime.

We continue to receive very painful letters from families, such as this one from a family seeking news of its son, Alberto Carpio Miranda, who was arrested in the city of Aguilares. The anguished letter states, «We have done everything we could even though we are poor and suffering people. We have gone everywhere and have found no response». A similar letter asks about José María Guevara, who was working on a cane estate. The letter says that «on January 31 a large army contingent entered the farm to kill, beat, and arrest the workers. They all fled, including my son, and nothing is known of him since then. We beg you to help us because we cannot bear the painful anguish and sorrow we feel for our beloved son».

⁸ «The Archdiocesan Legal Aid Office Addresses the Salvadoran People: Persecution, Arrests, and Disappearances in the Pablo Mendoza Family (1975 to 1978)» in *El Mundo* (21 December 1979).

⁹ «Solidarity» in *Orientación* (10 February 1980) and *La Prensa Gráfica* (31 January 1980).

In view of all this we are studying the government's project, which is proposing structural changes. I want to reaffirm here an observation that was made in the UCA's statement:

The execution of profound structural reforms, especially agrarian reform, does not seem compatible with massive repression of the people's organizations. It is still possible for the present government of the Christian Democratic Party to play a transitional role, but this would not involve implementation of profound structural reforms. In the present circumstances such reforms would not be viable; if they were attempted, they might fail, and the oligarchy would be given new pretexts. Neither does the mission of the present government consist in conducting elections since conditions for them do not yet exist. In what, then, should its mission consist? It should consist above all in ending the repression and in rendering the oligarchy's paramilitary and para-police groups inoperative. It should also neutralize the group of military officers who are pushing the capitalist project, for the government's authority should extend to all such elements. In a word, the mission of the present government of the Christian Democrats should consist of indirectly promoting an ever more solid alliance of all the democratic forces with which it might collaborate in the restructuring required by a new national project»¹⁰.

The UCA's thinking seems to be correct when it says that it is useless to talk about profound transformations at this present time when a wave of criminal repression is being visited on the people. What the government's project must do is take a step, even if it's just a small one, in helping the process of the people. That step should consist in what has been said already, namely, in demonstrating that there really does exist an authority that will put an immediate stop to the repression, which is now unbearable for our people. (Applause) This is same as what I was saying before, that the healthy part of the government should make health prevail; it should amputate as soon as possible the putrid part which is obstructing the process of our people. (Applause)

The other project is that of the right. As was denounced here last Sunday, the right has unleashed a powerful wave of repression that has sorely provoked the organized groups. Their cruel, crude, ruthless violence is evident in the kind of cold-blooded murders we have already mentioned. It is evident as well in the arrest of Doña Norma Guevara¹¹, a member of the UDN; it is evident in the gun attack on the church of El Rosario, where three people were killed and twenty-five wounded. All these actions have been carried out by the right, and they have enjoyed protection or at least a degree of impunity such as no common murderer would have in any country of the world. Some people even believe that a certain understanding has been reached between the security forces and these armed groups of the extreme right. (Applause) Now we are witnessing the reappearance under a different name of the dreaded organization ORDEN¹². It was abolished by decree, but now it is shamefully proposing itself as a model organization.

¹⁰ «Statement of the Supreme Council of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas on the Present Situation of the Country», 2 February 1980, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (5 February 1980).

¹¹ *La Prensa Gráfica* (7 and 8 February 1980).

¹² Now known as the Nationalist Democratic Front (FDN), a member the Broad National Front (FAN).

In this regard I want to repeat the commentary broadcast by YSAX; many of you saw what it was referring to on television. The commentary stated, «We want to point out the fallacious, false, and distorted aspects of the intervention of Mr. D'Aubuisson¹³. We hope that the Armed Forces are able to judge the dishonesty of this man who wants to turn a torturer into a national hero and who has no concern for those who have disappeared and been tortured and murdered. He confuses the words of ORDEN's statutes with their inveterate practice of threats and murders. He cites false testimonies that do not fool even the dullest person. (Applause) For example, there was the man who said he was Nicaraguan and confused the Caribbean with the Gulf of Fonseca, and another one who could hardly express himself. (Applause) Any project that needs to make use of people of that kind—you can imagine how much benefit it will bring for the people!» (Applause)

Another maneuver of the right can be seen in a letter I received accompanied by an identity card. The writer says that his problem is the following: «On January 22 and 23 the Crusade for Peace and Jobs used my name with a false identity number in a paid ad in *El Diario de Hoy*. On February 5 they put out another statement on Radio Sonora, again using my name. I want to make it clear that I am aware of the present situation, but I cannot afford to publish any clarification since my economic situation does not allow it. I have always been dedicated to caring for my children and my home and have never been connected with any political movement. I therefore ask that this situation be clarified since it could bring me harm». (Applause)

Finally, in reference to the third project of our proposed schema, that of the left, we view as positive the efforts being made to overcome personality cults and fanatical attitudes in the organizations and to seek unity. Some of the leaders have made sincere attempts to come together and to seek out reasonable solutions that will contribute to the people's project. When I first referred to those efforts, I stated that they were praiseworthy because they helped to move beyond the glorification of organizations and to develop projects for structural changes that will benefit the whole people. There is no doubt, then, that these efforts to achieve unity and openness give reason for hope. (Applause) But I also asked at that time, and today I do so more urgently, that these organizations make known to us what their political projects are. What are the proposals that will unify not just those who are organized but the whole of our people? The people will support the organizations if they pursue truly reasonable projects that are for the common good. I tell you that words alone are not enough. Deeds and intelligence and good will are also necessary. I also insisted, and I do so again, that we must above all preserve the humane, Christian, evangelical values of the people. That is extremely important.

Here I want to refer to the conversation I had with Pope John Paul II, which was not a scolding, as some people say. To the contrary, it was a discussion of criteria, just as when Paul went to Jerusalem to speak with Peter about what he was preaching; the purpose was to correct whatever was not good. We are not following our whims but are seeking the kingdom of God and the authentic service of the people. When I spoke with the pope, he told me precisely this: «Continue to defend social justice and promote love for the poor. (Applause) In defending human rights and other demands, however, care must be taken not to lose sight of Christian values. The loss of such values in the struggles for people's rights can cause as much

¹³ Starting in January 1980, Roberto D'Aubuisson, presenting himself as director of the FAN, began to make frequent public interventions. On this occasion he was on a television program that was shown on 7 February 1980. «D'Aubuisson Denounces Communist Conspiracy» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 February 1980).

harm as the dictatorships they are trying to do away with». I replied to the pope, «Holy Father, that is precisely the balance that I'm trying to achieve: supporting what is just in the people's demands but at the same time defending the Christian interests and the Christian values of my people». (Applause) And the pope understood me quite well what I then told him, «But in my country, Holy Father, it is very dangerous to speak about anti-communism because the right proclaims itself to be anti-communist, but they do so for selfish interests and not for any sentiment of Christian love». (Applause) The pope told me, with great wisdom, that he agreed with me but that the church's preaching should not be of the «anti» sort—anticommunism is not what the church is about. «Exactly, Holy Father» I told him, «and that's why I don't present it that way but positively, by praising the spiritual and Christian values of my people and by insisting that they must always be defended and preserved». Anyone can understand that I am referring to the danger of other ideologies that could rob us of those Christian sentiments. If we lose them, there is no other value that can compare with them.

Therefore, dear sisters and brothers, I hasten to tell you, especially those of you who belong to the people's political organizations, that the demands of the people are quite just and you must continue to defend social justice and love for the poor. (Applause) But precisely for this reason, if we truly love the people and want to defend them, we shouldn't deprive them of what is most valuable: their faith in God, their love for Jesus Christ, their Christian sentiments. (Applause)

And so, considering always the project of the left, I tell you this: above all else, avoid the thirst for vengeance and violence that leads nowhere. In this regard we also condemn the actions, whether spontaneous or planned, that have no objective but instead provoke greater repression. These include the murder of members of ORDEN and the security forces, the seizing of towns, and the forcible incitement of the people to insurrection.

Your actions are harming the people when the newspaper reports: «3500 Sacks of Rice Burned in Zacatecoluca with Losses Reaching 200,000 *Colones*»¹⁴. That corn is needed for our people. It is also painful to hear about seventeen wagons of cotton, worth one million *colones*, being burned at the cooperative on La Carrera estate¹⁵. We need that cotton and that money. We shouldn't expect that the country will be reconstructed from zero. Let us preserve what we have so that we can build on top of what is unjust—at least there will be something with which to begin.

Then there are the actions that involve occupying churches. It's now time to think differently. Those are actions that are not understood there in Europe, where they were saying to me, «How can you say that you're a friend of the poor when the poor are occupying the churches?» I had to do a lot of explaining. Those of you who are occupying the churches should understand that your actions are not well understood abroad. At this time when you are trying to unify efforts and gain international prestige, you must choose well your actions and not waste your efforts, which otherwise are very noble. To be sure, I do not agree with the occupation of churches, but neither I am going to commit the crime of dislodging you with guns. (Applause) You can be sure of that. I was told that during the occupation of the cathedral one of the lads climbed up to the cupola and fired a shot. That is a foolish provocation. If it is

¹⁴ *El Diario de Hoy* (9 February 1980).

¹⁵ *El Diario de Hoy* (8 February 1980).

true, I ask you: what is that a sign of? So avoid everything that can discredit you and cause you to lose your popular support.

I am against the occupation of buildings or embassies for whatever reason, and I am also against the holding of hostages, especially when they are members of the diplomatic corps. They are our brothers from abroad who are on a mission of friendship to our people. And even if they weren't, they are human persons and members of a political delegation. Long periods of unjust captivity are difficult situations and can cause nervous problems. I had the opportunity to visit the Spanish embassy and to express my solidarity with those people, who are clearly suffering¹⁶. Every denial of freedom is a violation of human rights.

At the same time, in view of the violent situation in our country, it is wonderful to hear about magnificent gestures like the heroic offer of some young people to become hostages in the Spanish embassy if those now being held are released¹⁷. These are young people from Argentina, Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica. It appears that they are on their way to our country from Costa Rica. (Applause)

I want the organizations that are taking these actions to hear this telegram from Amnesty International: «Urgent. By means of you Amnesty International wants to inform the Salvadoran public and all political groups that it wholly condemns the taking of hostages by threatening them with violence, including present occupation of Spanish embassy and Christian Democratic Party offices in San Salvador. We condemn all executions of kidnapped prisoners or hostages by government or other organisms of any political affiliation. We condemn threatened assassination of Archibald Gardner Dunn, José Adolfo McEntee, Jaime Hill Argüello, and others. Sincerely, General Secretariat».

We also oppose the kidnapping. I was happy when I heard the news that Jaime Batlle was freed¹⁸, but I also keep hoping that there will be effective negotiations for the freedom of Mr. Dunn, Mr. Hill, and Mr. McEntee. All these actions are slowing down the process of our people, weakening our unity, undermining confidence and good judgment, and provoking further repression. Don't forget that these acts of violence often result in pain and affliction for innocent people. We are not ignorant of the culpability of the right, which is often the source of the people's rage, as Medellín reminds us (M 2,17), but the left needs to be mature enough to reject solutions that are the products of violence and to rise above all other tendencies.

I conclude, sisters and brothers, by telling you that the church and her pastors will never identify with any particular project, but will always try to shed light and maintain hope. We are not in favor of violence. We want to make civil war unthinkable. I remind you of that document from the UCA which, after analyzing the projects, states, «We reject civil war as the only immediate alternative. It is true that, considering the number of victims, especially among the people's organizations, we could speak already of a low-key civil war. But everything would become far worse if there were an armed uprising of the people or an open and total confrontation between the Armed Forces and the armed groups of the left. Since such a

¹⁶ On 5 February 1980, the February 28 People's Leagues occupied the Spanish embassy in El Salvador. *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 February 1980).

¹⁷ *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 February 1980).

¹⁸ *El Mundo* (9 February 1980).

solution would exact a tremendous cost in the human lives and the material resources that are indispensable for the survival of the country, another kind of solution must be sought»¹⁹.

We firmly believe in peace, and therefore I will end where we began, with God calling us to construct our history together with him. And the construction God wants is not one built on blood and suffering. He wants his children to build in a way that makes good use of the qualities most characteristic of human beings: reason and freedom illuminated by goodness. I believe that, despite the general deterioration, we have in El Salvador people who are very capable of building for the future of our country a society that is shaped in history according to the project of God. Let it be so! (Applause)

¹⁹ «Statement of the Supreme Council of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas on the Present Situation of the Country», 2 February 1980, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (5 February 1980).