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The Poverty of the Beatitudes as the Force for the True Liberation of the People

**Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time
17 February 1980**

Jeremiah 17:5-8

1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20

Luke 6:17, 20-26

Dear sisters and brothers, before anything I want to congratulate you for impressing on this moment the true identity of the people of God. I'm referring to a comment made to me last Sunday by an elderly Venezuelan politician who spent some time with us and was rather curious. He thought our Masses resembled political meetings and that people were coming to them out of political curiosity. Though misrepresenting our Sunday Mass, this man, who is a great Christian besides being a politician, told me, «Still, I realized that it is a true Christian assembly because the people pray and sing. What impressed me tremendously was the great procession of people who approached the Eucharist at the moment of communion». I felt a very intense joy because I am in no way attempting to practice politics. If I shed some light on the politics of my country because the moment calls for it, I do so as a pastor, using the light of the Gospel. As church we have the obligation to illuminate the paths the country is taking and to make whatever contribution we can.

I am grateful to you, then, for giving to this gathering the identity of God's people. As God's people, you live in the midst of the «natural» people of our land, and you feel responsible for meditating on the Gospel so that each of you can go forth and, according to your circumstance, be a multiplier of the word, shining light on the paths of the nation. The circumstances always lend themselves to this. Indeed, what circumstance is not appropriate if the Gospel is the incarnation of God in all human circumstances? At this time when our country is experiencing fear, confusion, insecurity, and uncertainty, we are badly in need of a calming word whose reach is infinite: the Gospel.

This Sunday we meet up with another circumstance: we are about to begin Lent. As people of God we cannot forget our liturgical journey. Today we have reached the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time. These past six Sundays of Ordinary Time have come between the feast of the Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. At this point Ordinary Time will be interrupted because next Wednesday we'll enter into another intense season of our liturgical year, the season that includes Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. At Pentecost we will finish celebrating the fifty days of the Easter season, and we'll return to Ordinary Time with its Seventh Sunday. But I think this present moment, as we take leave of Ordinary Time and prepare for Lent, is ideal for disposing ourselves as people of God to enter with all our hearts into the great, all-embracing spiritual retreat called Lent.

Next Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we will inaugurate the season of Lent. Right here, God willing, we will inaugurate the season of Lent at seven o'clock on Wednesday. I invite all of you who can attend to be here for the impressive ceremony of the ashes, which are a sign of our mortality but also of our «supernaturality». Let us use this time for serious reflection. I don't think that there is any time more valuable for helping the country than the season of Lent, if we experience it as a great campaign of prayer and penance. We are not politicians, nor do we trust in purely human forces. We are first of all Christians, and we know that «if the Lord does not build our civilization, all those who build it labor in vain» (Ps 127:1). We know, therefore, that our power comes from prayer and from conversion to God.

So let us make good use of this time to prepare for our long pilgrimage. We begin our journey on Wednesday and continue until Easter and Pentecost, the two great goals of Lent. People do not mortify themselves out of a perverse desire to suffer. God did not make us for suffering. If we fast and do penance and pray, it is because we have a very positive goal that will be reached by overcoming ourselves. Our goal is Easter, the resurrection, but we don't just celebrate a Christ who rises and is somehow different from us. During Lent we prepare ourselves to rise with him to a new life; we prepare ourselves to be the new men and women that our country so badly needs today. Let us not just cry out for a change of structures, because new structures are useless when no new persons are available to manage and enliven those structures that the country so urgently needs (M 1,3).

After Easter we have Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Let us prepare ourselves so that our hearts will be like spotless vessels, ready for when the Spirit of God comes with all his sanctifying power to transform the face of the earth. That is what is needed in our country: much Spirit of God, much sense of resurrection, much renewal of life.

So Lent invites us to look within and to renew ourselves, and that's just what I think today's readings are: a call to interior renewal and a wonderful prologue to Lent. I think we find in the Puebla document a statement that fills us with hope if we really understand it: «In Latin America poverty is a palpable reality marking the lives of the great mass of people, but at the same time these people are open to receiving the blessings and the loving devotion of the Father and are capable of being the genuine protagonists of their own development» (P 1129). The poor are a sign in Latin America. The great majority in our countries are poor, and that is why they are able to receive these gifts from God. Because they are filled with God, they are capable of transforming their own societies. What I like about Puebla is that it also says that young people, along with the poor, are a sign. Beloved youth, you are clear signs of God's presence in Latin America, just like the poor!

«The poor and the young are the treasure and the hope of the church in Latin America, so that evangelizing them is a priority» (P 1132). That means that our church feels a special affection and a special responsibility for the poor majority and for the young. Let us be confident that the poor and the young are going to rebuild our country. Let us prepare ourselves as people who are poor and youthful, as most of our people are. The resurrection of the Lord will be revealed in those two great signs, the poor and the young, the only elements capable of rebuilding El Salvador. Let us not lose hope. If they are the hope of Latin America, then in El Salvador there is tremendous hope because there are many poor and many young people. (Applause)

Therefore, I'm going to take the title of my homily today from a text of the Medellín documents that speaks about poverty and says that poverty is a denunciation, a spirit, and a commitment (M 14,4). The general title states the theme of the homily: «The Poverty of the Beatitudes as the Force for the True Liberation of the People». (Applause) The three points for reflection are those indicated by Medellín. The Beatitudes are a force for liberation, first, because poverty is a divine denunciation; second, because poverty is a spirit; and third, because poverty is a commitment. Today, God willing, we'll have a clearer idea of what we so often repeat, namely, that the church has made a preferential option for the poor (Applause) and that she can be the true church only if she is converted and commits herself to the poor and suffering people. (Applause)

Poverty is a divine denunciation

First, there is what Medellín says about poverty as a denunciation, which I'm going to back up with today's liturgical texts. Medellín states, «Insofar as it is a lack of goods of this world, poverty is an evil». So, lacking the goods of the world is an evil. «The prophets condemn it as contrary to the will of the Lord and as generally the fruit of human injustice and sin» (M 14,4a).

What else was Jesus saying in the gospel account of the Beatitudes? How delightful it is to be reflecting today with that Jesus who «comes down» to a level place (Luke 6:17). The gospel expressions help us to get a deeper understanding of Jesus. Let us watch him coming down from the mountain to mix in on the plain with the common folk. Once down on the plain, he talks to the people, uttering the first words of this gospel: «Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours» (Luke 6:20b).

In addition to pronouncing these four Beatitudes, Jesus explains why there are poor people, why there are people who are hungry, why there are people who suffer. They are blessed since they suffer and weep and hunger, but why do they exist? Today's gospel points out bluntly the causes of these problems: «Woe to you who are rich, because you have received your consolation! Woe to you who are filled now, for you will be hungry! Woe to you who laugh now, for you will grieve and weep!» (Luke 6:24-25). The voice of Christ resounds with the message of all the Old Testament prophets. The prophets are fierce in their denunciations of «those who join house to house and land to land in order to become owners of the whole country» (Isa 5:8). (Applause)

When poverty exists as the lack of what is necessary, sisters and brothers, it is an accusation. Some people claim that the misery in our country is being caused by the church and the bishop, but they are trying to cover up the reality. (Applause) The ones who have caused great evil are those who have created the conditions that make our people suffer such horrendous social injustice. (Applause) It is therefore the poor who have marked out the true path for the church. A church that does not join with the poor and denounce with them the injustices visited upon them is not the true church of Jesus Christ. (Applause)

I want to use this opportunity to tell you that this was precisely the theme of my discourse at the University of Louvain. Since they told me that the general theme for this year's conferences at that famed university was «politics and faith», I chose to develop the theme by speaking on «the political dimension of faith from the perspective of the poor». I tried to explain to them how, for us here in El Salvador, the key for understanding Christian faith is the poor. I told them there in Louvain, «Our Salvadoran world is not an abstraction. It is not just

another case of what you in the developed countries understand by “world”. Our world is one in which the great majority of men and women are poor and oppressed. Moreover, we are saying that that world of the poor is the key for understanding Christian faith, church action, and the political dimension of that faith and that church action. The poor are the ones who tell us what the world really is and what kind of service the church should be rendering to the world. (Applause) The poor are the ones who tell us what politics is. The origin of the word “politics” is *polis*, which means “city”, and the poor tell us what the *polis* is, what the city is, and what it means for the church to live in the world, in the *polis*, in the city. Allow me», I told them, «to briefly explain from the perspective of the poor of my people, whom I seek to represent, the situation and the action of our church in the world in which we live»¹. So I began to tell them about the adventure of our church in El Salvador and about what it is we are doing.

First of all, we immerse ourselves among the poor. We want a church that truly is close to the poor people of El Salvador, and what we notice as we draw close to the poor is that we discover in them the true face of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. That is where we come to know most intimately the mystery of the Christ who takes on flesh and becomes poor for our sake.

What else does the church do here? I told them that we announce the Good News to the poor, but not demagogically so as to exclude other people. To the contrary, I told them, «The people who for ages have heard only bad news and who have experienced even worse realities are now, through the church, hearing the announcement of Jesus: “The kingdom of God is near at hand; it is yours” (Mark 1:15). “Blessed are you poor, for the kingdom of God is yours” (Luke 6:20b). And since that is true, there is also Good News for the wealthy: that they, by being converted to the poor, can share with them the treasures of God’s kingdom, which belongs to the poor»². (Applause)

Another thing about the church in El Salvador, I told them, is her commitment to defending the poor. «The poor majority of our country finds in the church the voice of the prophets of Israel. Among us there are those who “sell the just for money and the poor for a pair of sandals”, as the prophet said (Amos 8:6). (Applause) There are “those who store up violence and booty in their palaces” (Amos 3:10); there are “those who crush the poor” (Amos 8:4); there are “those who bring on a reign of violence while reclining on beds of ivory” (Amos 6:3b-4); there are “those who join house to house and field to field so as to take up all there is and remain alone in the land” (Isa 5:8). These words of the prophets are not distant voices that we read with reverence in our liturgy. They are ever-present realities whose cruelty and vehemence we experience day by day»³.

For this reason, I told them, the church suffers the fate of the poor, which is persecution. Our church is happy that the blood of her priests, her catechists, and her communities has been mingled with the blood of our massacred people and that she has always carried the mark of persecution. It is precisely because of her protests that people malign her and refuse to hear her voice calling out against injustice. This is the political dimension of faith.

¹ «The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Option for the Poor: Discourse of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero on Receiving the Doctorate *Honoris Causa* from the University of Louvain», 2 February 1980, in *Orientación* (17 and 24 February 1980).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

The second part of my discourse dealt with the ways in which the church has been enriched in her political understanding of the people and the poor, which has helped the church to gain a clearer sense of the meaning of sin. And that is precisely what we are saying here today, that poverty is a condemnation of sin. By drawing close to the poor, the church understands the true gravity of sin: «Sin is what killed the Son of God, and sin is what continues to kill God's children. We see that basic truth of the faith daily in the situation of our country. We cannot offend God without offending our brothers and sisters. Therefore it is not out of routine that we once again affirm the existence of structures of sin in our country. The structures are sinful because they produce the fruits of sin, the death of Salvadorans, whether it's a swift death or the slow death of structural oppression. That is why we have denounced the sin of injustice»⁴.

This mystery of poverty also helps us to understand better the redemption of Jesus Christ who became like us in all things in order to redeem us from our sins. The mystery of poverty also helps us to understand God better. God wants to give us life, and anyone who destroys or damages life—by mutilating, by torturing, by repressing—is revealing to us also in some way the contrasting divine image of the God of life, the God who respects human freedom.

This is the first reflection for today's homily, and I'm happy to have been able to express these ideas in a highly organized country like Belgium. I wanted to help them understand what is very difficult to understand in that setting: a church that does not get involved in politics but that, by drawing on the prophetic word of God, denounces injustice in the reality experienced by the poor, a reality which speaks for itself. (Applause)

Poverty is holy also because it cries out and denounces our own church. Puebla itself expresses this thought: «Commitment to the poor and oppressed and the rise of the base communities have helped the church to discover the evangelizing potential of the poor. The poor challenge the church constantly, calling her to conversion and demonstrating in their own lives, as many of them do, the evangelical values of solidarity, service, simplicity, and readiness to accept the gift of God» (P 1147). (Applause) Everyone who denounces must be ready to be denounced. If the church denounces injustice, she is also ready to hear herself accused and is obliged to seek conversion. The poor are constantly crying out, denouncing not only social injustice but also the scant generosity of our own church. (Applause)

Poverty is a spirit

So poverty is first of all a denunciation, but the second thing I want to say today is that poverty is a spirit. What Medellín says in this regard I find very interesting: «Spiritual poverty is the theme of the poor of Yahweh. Spiritual poverty is the attitude of openness to God, the ready disposition of those who hope for everything from the Lord. Although we may value the goods of this world, we remain free of them and recognize the higher values of the goods of the kingdom» (M 14, 4b).

Poverty is therefore a spirituality and an attitude that opens up a Christian's soul to God. That is why Puebla said that the poor are the hope of Latin America; it is because they are more disposed to receive God's gifts. And that is why Christ said with such emotion, «Blessed are you

⁴ Ibid.

who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours» (Luke 6:20b). You are the ones most able to understand what is not understood by those who are on their knees before false idols, placing their trust in them. You do not have those idols nor do you trust in them because you have no wealth and no power. You are completely dispossessed, but the poorer you are, the more you possess the kingdom of God as long as you truly embrace this spirituality. The poverty sanctified here by Jesus Christ is not simply material poverty, for not having anything is an evil. He is talking about poverty that is fully aware, poverty that accepts the cross and sacrifice, not out of resignation but with the knowledge that such is God's will. To the degree that we make our poverty a source of awareness, spirituality, and generous commitment to the Lord, we become holy, and holiness will make us better liberators of our people. The church is shaping these liberators of the people. To the extent that you as Christians convert your poverty into spirituality, you become liberators of our people.

Consider the moment when Christ spoke that Beatitude so that we can see its meaning. We shouldn't remove it from its context in the long history of Israel. How was Israel born? It was born from God's promise to an old man called Abraham. Both he and his wife were barren and without children, but God told him, «From your descendants I am going to make a great people» (Gen 12:2). Israel began under a sign of poverty and complete limitation: they could not have children, but God told them that he would give them a whole people as descendants. Abraham accepted God's word by faith, and that people truly became a reality. That people in turn were then promised by God, «I am going to give you a land» (Gen 12:7). Then, under the leadership of Moses, God led them to the Promised Land. In the Promised Land God offered the people his law and his covenant, but they were not faithful. Because of their infidelity the people went into exile, where they lamented the blessings that God had given them but that had been taken away because of their sin. This was still another sign of poverty. «Now you must repent», God told them. The prophets called the people to repentance, and they obtained God's pardon. Returning from Babylon, the people rejoiced to be in their own country again, but there were still many political vicissitudes. What is of interest to us now is that at one point the Roman Empire took possession of that land and dominated it by their administration and their army. They were a dominated people! It was to that people dominated by Rome that Christ came. It was to that people politically subject to the imperialism of a foreign power that Christ preached this Beatitude we heard today: «Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours» (Luke 6:20b). (Applause)

I have recalled this context to keep us from spiritualizing the Beatitudes of the Gospel, because Saint Matthew offers us a reflection that is more difficult to understand: «Blessed are the poor in spirit», he tells us (Matt 5:3). Many people have twisted this phrase so as to make it mean that everybody is poor, even those who are oppressing others. That is not true. In the context of Matthew's gospel, the «poor in spirit»—or simply the «poor», as Luke has it—are those who experience scarcity, those who are suffering oppression; they are people who need God to escape from their plight.

Jesus Christ does not arrive with weapons or revolutionary political movements, but he does teach us that all earthly revolutions can play a part in freeing us from sin and leading us to eternal life. He provides a wider horizon for those who are struggling for the liberation of the people. When Christ spoke about the «poor in spirit», he was referring to the Israelites, and he understood their love of their homeland. He was telling them, «You must be free again. You must one day shake off the yoke of those who have invaded this land, but you must adopt this spirituality of the poor in order to do so».

The Virgin Mary, the person most filled with the Spirit of Yahweh, understood this when she sang in her Magnificat about how God frees the lowly and the poor. An explicit political dimension is sounded when Mary declares that «God sent the rich away empty and filled the poor with good things» (Luke 1:53). (Applause) She even uttered words that today would be called «insurrectional»: «He dethrones rulers when they work against the peace of the people» (Luke 1:52) (Applause) This is the political dimension of our faith as experienced by Mary and by Jesus. Jesus was a true patriot in a nation that was under foreign domination, a nation that he doubtlessly wanted to see freed. Until then, though, there was a need to pay tribute to Caesar: «Grant to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but do not give to Caesar what belongs to God. Give to God what belongs to God!» (Mark 12:17). (Applause)

This is the spirituality that the first reading this Sunday has proposed quite explicitly. When Christ spoke, he no doubt was recalling the sayings of the ancient prophets, just as the church today reads an Old Testament passage together with a text of the Gospel of Christ. We also hear—along with the Beatitudes of the poor, the hungry, the suffering, the mourning—an echo of Jeremiah: «Cursed are those who trust in human beings and who seek strength in flesh while turning their hearts from the Lord. Like barren bushes in the desert, they will not prosper; they grow in a parched desert, on salty and inhospitable earth» (Jer 17:5-6). Such is the arid state of those who place their confidence in the things of earth. That is why you rich are to be pitied. Even if now you appear to be thriving trees, tomorrow you will be dry stumps in the arid desert because of your selfish ways. (Applause) The message of the prophets is a great contrast: «Blessed are those who trust in the Lord!» Doesn't this seem to you to echo Christ's words, «Blessed are the poor who trust in the Lord?» The prophet says, «Blessed are those who place their trust in the Lord, for they are like trees that are planted near water and stretch out their roots to the stream. When hot weather comes, they do not feel it; their leaves stay green. In the year of drought they show no distress but still bear fruit» (Jer 17:7-8).

These are the people who are truly poor. The spirituality of those who are poor is centered on having great trust in the Lord. Woe descends upon the rich when they draw apart from the Lord and place their trust in the flesh, that is, in earthly values. So the prestige of the church, sisters and brothers, does not come from pleasing the powerful. The prestige of the church comes when the poor feel that the church is theirs; it comes from giving the church an earthly dimension that calls out to everyone, the rich included, to be converted and saved through the poor, for only the poor are uniquely blessed. (Applause)

Regarding this question of poverty of spirit, I want to reflect on today's second reading because it gives us a basis for our hope. It is from Paul's letter to the Christians of Corinth, where there were some erroneous ideas about the resurrection. People were saying that there was no resurrection, and they made fun of Paul when he spoke about the resurrection. So Paul tried to strengthen their faith. Remember what Paul told us last Sunday: «There are witnesses to the risen Christ, including five hundred disciples. And last of all he appeared also to me, the one who is speaking to you. I was persecuting the church and was not at all disposed to believe what they were saying about the church, but I have seen him, I was converted, and now I am preaching him» (1 Cor 15:6-9).

Saint Paul is a marvelous witness of the resurrection because, if there was ever a person who did not want to believe in Jesus or in the resurrection, it was the persecutor Saul. He thought the Christians were deceiving their fellow Jews, and that's why he persecuted them.

Even though Paul was convinced that Christ was not alive, once the living Christ appeared to him, he was ready to give his life for this great truth. He told the Corinthians with the erroneous ideas, «You are wrong. Christ has risen! (Applause) And if you say that the dead do not rise, why have I seen the risen Christ? Why does the risen Christ exist? But if Christ has risen, then there is resurrection for all. If there is resurrection, then our faith and our hope are well grounded. For if Christ had not risen, then we would be the most miserable of people, believing in a lie!» (1 Cor 15:20). But Christ has risen! Christ lives, and this is the great belief and trust, the great spirituality of the poor. This is our God, the God of the poor, as our popular hymn puts it⁵. (Applause)

Poverty is a commitment

As my final reflection for today, I want to leave you with this idea: poverty is a force for liberation because, besides being a denunciation of sin and a key element of Christian spirituality, it is also a commitment.

Fellow Christians, this truth first of all applies to me, who must give an example of being Christian, but it also applies to you, dear fellow priests, religious, and all of you who are baptized and call yourselves Christian. Here is what Medellín says: «Poverty is a commitment by which one voluntarily and lovingly takes on the condition of the needy of this world in order to bear witness to the evil which poverty represents and to declare one's spiritual freedom with regard to material goods. Such poverty follows the example of Christ who assumed all the consequences of our sinful condition and who "being rich became poor" (2 Cor 8:9) in order to redeem us» (M 14,4c). This is our commitment as Christians: following Christ in his incarnation. If Christ as the God of majesty became a lowly human and lived with the poor and suffered the death of slaves on the cross, so also should be our own Christian faith. Any Christian who does not want to make that commitment of solidarity with the poor is not worthy to be called Christian. (Applause)

This tremendous doctrine is confirmed in today's gospel, when Christ tells us not to fear persecution. Because—believe me, sisters and brothers—those who commit themselves to the poor must experience the same fate as the poor. And in El Salvador we know what the fate of the poor is: being disappeared, being tortured, being arrested, being found dead. (Applause)

If you want the privileges of this world instead of the persecutions that come with commitment to the poor, then listen to the awesome antithesis of today's gospel: «Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude and insult you and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice and leap for joy on that day because your reward will be great in heaven!» (Luke 6:22-23). (Applause) With great joy and gratitude I want to commend our priests. The more committed they are with the poor, the more maligned they are; the more committed they are with the misery of our people, the more reviled they are. I want to rejoice also with the religious women and men who are committed to this people and who suffer with them heroically. I rejoice with the Christian communities and the catechists who stay in their posts while others flee in fear. (Applause)

⁵ «*Vos sos el Dios de los pobres*» [«You are the God of the poor»], entrance hymn of the *Misa campesina nicaraguense* of Carlos Mejía Godoy, 1975.

Those who wish to flee because of persecution, calumny, and humiliation should hear what Christ declares this Sunday: «Woe to you when all speak well of you for that was how your ancestors treated the false prophets» (Luke 6:26). How sad is the adulation of the world! If Christians who are suffering slander and persecution want to be treated well, then they would do better to betray their Christian faith and live on their knees before money, for that is how the well-regarded of this world live. But woe to you! (Applause)

Today's second reading also confirms this truth about poverty as commitment. The most extreme manifestations of poverty are sin and death. No people are more miserable than those who are in sin, and no being is poorer than a corpse, but it was to these that Christ committed himself, the sinners and the dead. That is why Christ's redemption marks all forms of earthly liberation as deficient; they are not complete since they cannot free sinners from sin or the dead from death. This is what the great Liberator offers us. Blessed therefore are those who work for political liberation on earth while keeping in mind the redemption brought by Christ, who saves us from sin and from death.

Today's second reading strengthens the hearts of a people struggling to rise from the dead. Believe in the resurrection! Do not doubt that Christ has risen and that by his cross and his glory he has saved us from the sin and the death that afflict humankind. We will all die, but those who believe in Christ will not be dead forever. There in heaven we will sing of the triumph of immortality, and all the struggles for earthly liberation will seem to us like minor skirmishes. The greatest liberation is Christ's, and all those who join the freedom struggle of their people to faith in Christ will be guaranteed integral, complete, and immortal liberation. Do not be like those who draw apart from this Christian liberation and struggle only for temporal things, such as better wages, cheaper goods, different politicians, and new structures that tomorrow will be old. All those things are temporal and transitory, but when one works for them with a Christian spirit, then that stays in the soul.

So all of you who are in organized groups or political parties, don't forget this: if you are Christians, live intensely this spirituality of poverty, and live intensely this Christian commitment to the poor! There are many of you in the struggle, thank God, and many of you arose from our ecclesial communities. What is regrettable is that many have lost their faith and have failed in what is most important. But there are those of you who continue to struggle in the people's political organizations without betraying your faith. You still look to your Christian communities to nourish your struggle with faith and to test your political judgments by faith. In this you do well.

That is what I wanted to say in my fourth pastoral letter when I stated that one of the most urgent needs of the pastoral ministry of the archdiocese today is the ministry of accompaniment⁶. That means helping to bring to maturity the faith of the women and men in political groups, so that they remain fully committed without betraying the faith. They should know that the faith has a political dimension, but it is still always faith in the eternal resurrection of the Lord and our being saved from sin. Let us hope that the church will not be demeaned when she draws on faith to cry out against the deficiencies, the abuses, the strategies, or the limitations of the political groups. Do not reject her. Listen to her as a mother; listen to her as a teacher of the faith if you truly want to do honor to your Christian identity. Be

⁶ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 92-94.

true to the title «Christian» because it is no use being called a Christian if you are not really Christian. (Applause)

Life of the church

Our desire is to create a church like the one Christ has described for us today, a church of the poor but not defined by social class. She is a church of the poor because she saves all who want to be saved by our embrace of the poor. Let us try to make our archdiocese this kind of church, sisters and brothers. The information I'm going to give you now is precisely for that purpose.

I already made the announcement about Lent at the start, but now I repeat my invitation for us all to come together here next Wednesday at seven in the evening to inaugurate Lent in a solemn manner. Since many people in the villages will be hearing this announcement by radio, I want to repeat for them what Father Fabián Amaya already announced on Friday, namely, that in the communities where there is no priest, someone will be authorized to go to receive the blessed ashes at the parish Mass and bring them back to the communities. Then the person in charge of the community—whether a lay man or woman or a sister—will celebrate the Ash Wednesday service, which consists mainly in an invitation to conversion. In the archdiocesan offices we'll have copies of the text of the service, and anyone who wishes can get a free copy. Everything that needs to be done is written there.

If you can't get a copy of the text, then just read some passage from the Bible and explain the meaning of Lent and the meaning of the imposition of ashes. Let us welcome this Lent humbly as we hear Christ tell us that the kingdom of God is near and we should be converted to the Gospel (Mark 1:15). But nobody should be left out. If you're unable even to join your village community, then do the ceremony in your homes. The father of the family can take a bit of ashes and celebrate the beginning of Lent with his family; he can impose the holy ashes since he is the true priest of the family. It's not a sacrament but simply a rite that reminds us: «You are dust, and unto dust you shall return». The important thing is being converted to the Lord. We want this beautiful rite to reach every home, and we sincerely ask everyone to collaborate in celebrating the start of Lent and to do so as widely as possible. Let us all truly enter into a season of conversion, prayer, fasting, and penance.

Fasting officially consists in eating one main meal a day. If you usually have your main meal at midday, then eat just a little for breakfast and a little for supper. Let your stomach suffer a bit. If your custom is to make supper your main meal, then eat little at breakfast and at lunch and eat well at supper. But there are only two days for official fasting: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. What is obligatory during Lent for those over fourteen and under sixty is abstinence, which consists in not eating meat. You may ask why it matters whether we eat meat or not. Well, in itself it doesn't matter, but what is important is will power: you are telling God that you are depriving yourself of something because of your past excesses and the times you have abused your freedom. That is the meaning of penance. But apart from these two official, legal matters, I urge you to consider Lent not as a time when we refrain from eating meat or something else but as a time for denying ourselves and sharing the little we have with those who have less. Let it be a season for love and charity and participation. Let us use our Lent especially to seek reconciliation with our enemies. Let us learn how to forgive and how to prepare ourselves to be raised up in love with Christ when Easter comes.

This coming week the document containing my appeal for Lent will be coming out in *Orientación*, but let me tell you beforehand what we are planning for Holy Saturday on April fifth and Easter Sunday on the sixth. The vigil on Saturday evening should be the most solemn event of our whole liturgical year. Prepare yourselves, especially you young people, for an Easter celebration in which the living Christ reveals himself and generates hope in the world, especially through the young. We also have in sight Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit fifty days after the resurrection. We want to celebrate it solemnly with confirmations for the whole diocese. I know there are several parishes that are already preparing groups of young people. So prepare yourselves well, dear young people, for Pentecost Sunday, when you will be made apostles by receiving the infusion of the Spirit that Christ gained for us by his death. Then you will be able to refresh this world with your holiness and your hope. Confirmation is a very valuable sacrament, especially at Pentecost, so I hope that this year we can really make our Pentecost celebration a time of genuine renewal of the face of our diocese. I earnestly ask our beloved pastors, sisters, and catechists to help us prepare the young people who have not been confirmed so that they can be signs of the presence of the Spirit of God on Pentecost, which falls on May 25.

The Daughters of Charity are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Virgin's appearance to Saint Catherine Labouré. The sisters at the Casa San Vicente in Santa Tecla are extending a special invitation for the excellent program they have planned to commemorate this event.

I celebrated the feast of the Virgin of Lourdes in the parish of Colón, which has a village bearing that sweet name of Lourdes. Characteristic of that place is the way the children give the kiss of peace: they pour onto the altar to greet the priest and wish him peace. When they came up like that, I really felt that children are little earth angels who bring us the peace that our country so needs. Something else special about the Lourdes community, for which I commend them, is Don Hilario—I forget his last name. This man who has been so active is now infirm, but from his wheelchair he always invites people to come to his house to pray the rosary.

Yesterday afternoon the image of the archangel Saint Raphael was enthroned in the village of San Rafael in Candelaria, Cuscatlán.

Yesterday also a new community of Carmelite Daughters of the Church was inaugurated in Guazapa. These are women who share deeply in the life of the people without belonging to a religious congregation. They will inspire many vocations and have in fact already attracted some young women who want to consecrate themselves to God. We hope the Holy Spirit will shed light on the path they should follow. You will find that today many young women truly want to aspire to the holiness of the evangelical counsels that we have talked about today.

The church in Guazapa is being enlarged, and I've been asked to make an appeal, which I happily do, so that the people in Guazapa and the different villages will collaborate in the efforts of the committee, which wants to make the church a worthy place for the people to come together.

This evening we will install Father Luis Recinos as the new pastor in the Colonia Santa Lucía in Ilopango. He is a young priest who has come from Nicaragua to pursue his studies, and he'll be offering us his pastoral services, for which we sincerely thank him.

Out of a desire to help with the great many needs of the diocese, the Emergency Committee of the Archdiocese of San Salvador has been formed; it brings together Caritas and the Ecumenical Committee of Humanitarian Aid. As I was entering the church, I was given a letter asking me whether this emergency committee is anticipating a possible civil war. Let me tell you that we are not trying to alarm anyone. What is likely to strike us unexpectedly is not so much a civil war as an earthquake. Besides, how much worse can a civil war be than what we're already experiencing, with people being killed everywhere you look? (Applause) So don't worry about this being an alarm or about something happening; that's not why we have organized our committee. Rather, it was formed precisely because of the problems we had after the massacre of January 22, when we were hard pressed to find lodging for people in the church's facilities. The church must always be welcoming and willing to attend to people's needs. (Applause)

It's unfortunate that some people are judging the occupation of churches, such as happened in the cathedral, only from a distance. It is certainly bothersome, but when we look at it close up, we see that many people are fleeing from their villages, and they can't return because they're being pursued. If they can't take refuge in a church, then they have to flee to the mountains. So we can understand why the church always needs to be ready for an emergency.

I want to thank the many people who have congratulated me for the honor bestowed on the diocese by the University of Louvain—I'm sorry for not doing so sooner. I felt very honored to receive a telegram from a member of the governing junta, Doctor Ávalos, and I thank him cordially for his expression of solidarity. The telegram reads, «I offer you my sincere congratulations for the great honor bestowed on you by the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, and I take advantage of the occasion to reaffirm the great esteem and appreciation I have for you. Doctor José Ramón Ávalos Navarrete». (Applause)

I want especially to thank the National Human Rights Commission, the MNR party, and the Central Union of Salvadoran Workers for publicly manifesting their solidarity on this occasion. And I thank all those who have shown kindness and have prayed for me. May God reward you. (Applause)

Events of the week

Now, from the vantage point of the church, which must be light for the world, we look toward the world that surrounds us so as to illuminate it with faith. When I spoke in Louvain about the political dimension of the faith, I concluded by saying that the limits of the political dimension of faith are marked out for our church precisely by the world of the poor. In all the different political junctures, what most concerns us is the people who are poor. (Applause) I told them, «I don't want to go into all the various details of my country's politics. I prefer to explain to you the profound roots of the church's activity in the explosive sociopolitical world of El Salvador. And I want to make clear to you that the ultimate theological and historical criterion for the church's activity in this area is the world of the poor»⁷. What I told them, then, is that the

⁷ «The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Option for the Poor: Discourse of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero on Receiving the Doctorate *Honoris Causa* from the University of Louvain», 2 February 1980, in *Orientación* (17 and 24 February 1980).

church is doing just as we say in this homily: it is supporting all that benefits the poor as well as denouncing all that that is bad for the poor. (Applause)

Using this norm, we are going to judge some things that happened this week. For example, they promulgated the famous decree 114, which has aroused much discussion and polemic⁸. The church is not interested in legalities, which are often a cover for self-interest. What interests the church is whether that decree is really going to move us toward the transformations that the poor need or whether it will fail to lead in that direction. If the decree means something good for the poor, the church is in agreement. If it means nothing for the poor, then it is of no interest to the church.

Unfortunately, even though a path has been opened up, the promises still don't result in concrete deeds. In fact, what has become more evident this week is that neither the junta nor the Christian Democrats are governing the country. (Applause) They are simply allowing that impression to be given nationally and internationally. The massacre of the MERS demonstrators on February 12 and the savage eviction of the people who occupied the offices of the Christian Democrats⁹ show clearly that it is not they who are governing but rather the most repressive elements in the Armed Forces and the security forces. (Applause) Even the leaders of the Christian Democrats acknowledged that those assaults had to be considered acts of disobedience since they were contrary to the position adopted by the junta. Colonel Majano had assured us that the security forces would not intervene. The security forces were in no way concerned about the presence there of the daughter of a junta member or the wife of the Minister of Education; they cared even less about respecting the lives of the occupiers. (Applause) They brutally killed many of them. The descriptions that have been given by eyewitnesses are horrendous.

If the junta and the Christian Democrats do not want to be accomplices in this great crime and abuse of power, they must single out and punish the persons responsible. It's not enough to say that there will be investigations. The junta and the party can shorten the investigatory process by listening to the eyewitnesses, who are highly credible.

We are still waiting for compensation to be paid to the families of those killed by the security forces. Seeing that the present military authorities and the security forces, like their predecessors, continue to bloody their hands by repressing the people, now even more than before, we have ever less hope that there will be any punishment for those responsible for the repressive crimes of previous regimes. (Applause)

All this shows that the present government has no popular support and depends only on the Armed Forces and certain foreign powers. This is another serious failure on the part of the Christian Democrats: their presence in the government, along with particular political and economic interests, is inducing countries like Venezuela and the United States to support an alternative that they claim is anti-oligarchy but is in fact anti-people. (Applause) This concern

⁸ Decree 114 reformed the 1969 constitution so as to allow the Revolutionary Governing Junta to carry out the agrarian reform and to nationalize the banking system and foreign trade. *El Mundo* (11 and 12 February 1980).

⁹ The Human Rights Committee of El Salvador denounced that on February 12 seventeen people were killed during two repressive actions taken by the security forces: one against a demonstration held by students of the MERS and the other during the eviction of LP-28 militants who had occupied the offices of the PDC in San Salvador. *El Mundo* (15 February 1980).

has moved me to be bold enough to write a letter to President Carter himself, and I am going to send it him after you give me your opinion of it.

Mr. President:

In the last few days, news has appeared in the national press that worries me greatly. According to the reports, your government is studying the possibility of economic and military support and assistance to the present government junta.

Because you are a Christian and because you have shown that you want to defend human rights, I venture to set forth for you my pastoral point of view in regard to this news and to make a specific request of you.

I am very concerned by the news that the government of the United States is planning to exacerbate El Salvador's arms race by sending military equipment and advisors to «train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence»¹⁰. If this information from the papers is correct, your government's contribution, instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, will undoubtedly aggravate the injustice and the repression against the organized forces of the people who have been struggling to have their most basic human rights respected. (Applause)

The present government junta and its backers in the Armed Forces and other security forces have unfortunately not demonstrated a capacity to resolve in practice the nation's serious political and structural problems. For the most part, they have resorted to repressive violence, producing a total of deaths and injuries much greater than under the previous military regime, whose systematic violation of human rights was reported by the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights. (Applause)

The brutal form in which the security forces recently evicted and murdered the persons occupying the offices of the Christian Democratic Party, even though the operation was not authorized by the junta or the party, is an indication that the junta and the Christian Democrats do not govern the country. Rather, political power is in the hands of unscrupulous military officers who are interested only in repressing the people and favoring the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy. (Applause)

If it is true that last November a «group of six Americans was in El Salvador, providing \$200,000 in gas masks and flak jackets and teaching agents how to use them against demonstrators»¹¹, you should be informed that since that time the security forces, counting on increased personal protection and efficiency, have been even more violent in repressing the people with deadly weapons. (Applause)

For this reason, given that as a Salvadoran and as archbishop of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, I have an obligation to see that faith and justice reign in my country, I ask you, if you truly want to defend human rights:

- to forbid that military aid be given to the Salvadoran government; and
- to guarantee that your government will not intervene directly or indirectly, by means of military, economic, diplomatic, or other pressures, in determining the destiny of the Salvadoran people. (Applause)

In these moments, we are living through a grave economic and political crisis in our country, but it is certain that the people are becoming more aware and more organized and that they have begun to prepare themselves to manage and take responsibility for the future of El Salvador, for they are the only ones capable of overcoming the crisis.

¹⁰ «United States Studying Military Aid for El Salvador» in *El Diario de Hoy* (15 February 1980).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

It would be unjust and deplorable for foreign powers to intervene and frustrate the Salvadoran people, to repress them and keep them from freely deciding the economic and political course that our nation should follow.

It would constitute the violation of a right that the Latin American bishops, meeting at Puebla, recognized publicly when we spoke of «the legitimate self-determination of our peoples, by which they organize their society according to their own spirit and the course of their history and so cooperate in a new international order» (Puebla 505). (Applause)

I hope that your religious sentiments and your feelings for the defense of human rights will move you to accept my petition, thus avoiding greater bloodshed in this suffering country. (Applause)

What I ask of the Christian Democrats is not only that they analyze their doubtless very good intentions but that they also examine the real effect their presence in government is having. Their support is covering up the present government's repressive character, especially at the international level. As a political force of our people, they urgently need to consider how that force can best be used to help our poor: whether as an isolated, impotent part of a government controlled by repressive military officials, or as one more force included within a broad project of popular government that is sustained not by the present, hopelessly corrupt Armed Forces but by the majority consensus of the people. (Applause)

I am not against the institution of the Armed Forces. I continue to believe that there are honest elements who give us hope for the future. I also believe that there is a need for real security forces that provide security for our people. However, I cannot agree with the military men who, by abusing their power, bring disrepute on these essential institutions and make them into instruments of repression and injustice.

The impression is given that it is the right that is governing. (Applause) And that impression will remain as long as the government fails to identify and punish those responsible for the horrendous repression, and as long as it proves incapable of carrying out the proposed reforms that favor the poor. The problem is that the oligarchy is taking advantage of the government's political weakness to attack it, and it is using military force to prevent the government from carrying out its reforms. The people talk more and more, as they did earlier, about connivance between the security forces and the clandestine armed groups of the right. The people's suffering keeps increasing to the point that it becomes impossible even to keep track of the acts of violence being committed by the right.

I want to refer to my beloved priests as an example. Just as manure serves to fertilize the most beautiful gardens, so also the calumny of recent days has made the holiness of our apostles bloom in their various fields of ministry. We have here two wonderful letters from priests who repudiate the slander against them and hold its authors responsible for whatever consequences follow. They reaffirm their dedication to the people, for their greatest commitment is with Christ and with the people who reflect the holiness of Christ our Lord. (Applause)

There are too many letters here for me to read, and I have also been informed about the shots fired against the residence of the Jesuit fathers. At 12:45 at night on Saturday, February 16, machine-gun fire and the shots of a G-3 were heard. The marks of about one hundred bullets were found on the outer gates of the house, on the two floors inside, and on a car. After the volley of gunfire, a car was heard driving away at high speed. This is a house of the Jesuits,

who have often suffered persecution in recent years. Remember what happened in 1973, when they were accused publicly regarding the Externado San José, and remember also the murder of the Jesuit, Father Grande. These and other events show that this order of priests is hated and persecuted for what we've been talking about, namely, their commitment to the people. (Applause)

Also, fifty-two Jesuits working in Guatemala have received threats in reaction to a document issued by the Jesuits of all Central America. The document denounces the systematic abuse of power, economic injustice, the increase in indiscriminate violence, and serious violations of the human rights of the indigenous people in Guatemala¹².

Our magazine *Búsqueda*, which I highly recommend, has an article about Father Rafael Palacios, killed last year on June 20, and Father José Alirio Napoleón Macías, killed on August 4. The article brings together documents, testimonies, and other writings that show that these priests, far from being communist infiltrators, were true messengers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Applause)

I received an extremely sad letter from Juan Alcides Guardado. He writes that he was returning to his little house in the hamlet of El Picacho, which is in La Laguna de Las Vueltas, Chalatenango. While he was on his way, people told him not to go any farther because the whole place had been laid waste. He was not even able to find his own mother. He is asking me to use this medium of the radio to request that his mother let him know where she is so that he can go find her. What absurd things happen in our country! As I told you already, many of the people taking refuge in the cathedral are from that village also, and there are many others fleeing from this wave of terrorism.

A distressing letter sent by Mrs. María Ignacia Rivera of San Agustín in Usulután denounces the murder of her son, Manuel de Jesús, who leaves behind a widowed wife with six small children.

The teacher Agustín Osmín Hernández was arrested by five security agents in Aguilares on February 12 at eleven-thirty in the morning. His wife and the community of Zacamil are concerned about him. May this notice serve to speed up his release or bring him before the courts. This is only just. People have also expressed solidarity with the teacher Guillermo Galván, whose house was machine-gunned.

Death threats have been made against Doctor Roberto Lara Velado. Those of us who know of his distinguished career must stand in solidarity with him and denounce these threats against such an honorable Christian man.

The most serious threat of all is that of the extreme right, which is planning a right-wing military coup. There is much talk about this, as there is about an extended general strike by private businesses. Any such action would be an unforgivable assault on our people's aspirations for justice. The ones who are sustaining the unjust order in which we live have absolutely no right to rise up in revolt. If such a scheme were to win out over the people, who are now fully conscious of what is happening, the price would be much bloodshed, and it would not succeed in drowning out the people's cry for justice. (Applause) The most logical thing for

¹² «Before the Sorrow and the Hope of the People of Guatemala», *ECA* 375-376 (1980) 139-141.

the powerful oligarchs to do is to reflect with human or, if possible, Christian serenity on Christ's summons to them in the gospel: «Woe unto you, for tomorrow you will weep!» (Luke 6:25b). To repeat the image you already know, it is better to take off your rings in advance, lest they cut off your hands! Use reason to form your human and Christian convictions. Give the people a chance to organize in a spirit of justice, and don't try to defend what is indefensible. (Applause)

Finally, I have a word for the popular organizations. Yesterday YSAX commented on them eloquently when it stated, «The Revolutionary Coordinator of the Masses, as an organization promoting popular unity, is carrying out a consolidating effort, and it is trying to enter into conversation with the democratic forces because it knows that without them their national project is not viable and that gaining power would otherwise be a very costly, if not impossible, endeavor. Nevertheless, the rational political policies of their leadership are being undermined by the irrational combative actions of their followers». So I want to tell you: we defend the right of organization, and we praise your efforts at unity and openness, but we repudiate the tactics of certain groups which are being poorly led or else are ignoring their leadership.

You cannot gain credibility among people who believe in reason and justice by resorting to actions that are irrational or needlessly violent. Agitation for agitation's sake leads nowhere. The process of unity cannot be advanced through concessions extorted by force.

I want to remind you of a principle of our Christian morality: trying to pressure others into an agreement or contract greatly diminishes its voluntary nature, so that what is achieved under pressure is not strictly obligatory or is sometimes not obligatory at all. Dialogue is therefore much more valuable. If our popular organizations are truly maturing, then they should show their maturity by not acting foolishly.

I repeat my disapproval of the strategy of occupying buildings; it causes many problems. I have witnessed the suffering of many hostages and their families, especially when the hostages are sick and need attention. But in any case, by what right are you depriving a human being of freedom? The strategy of occupation becomes especially ridiculous and dangerous when two organizations are competing for control. That was the case in the cathedral, where the FAPU wanted to displace the BPR and there was a dispute over the occupation. The FAPU went so far as to desecrate the sacred vestments; they left albs and other vestments scattered about until the new occupiers took care to clean things up, at least a little.

The unity being sought by the organizations is not being helped either by the BPR's occupation of the Salvadoran Institute of Foreign Trade, even after FENESTRAS had already reached a wage agreement for the workers of APLAR S.A. in the San Bartolo free zone¹³. They were negotiating the reopening of the factory as a Salvadoran business, and they were supposed to travel to the United States for that purpose either today or tomorrow. The journey could not be undertaken, however, because Arturo Guzmán Trigueros is among the hostages and none of the other directors can be found to dialogue about this problem. I urgently ask the BPR to reconsider this bad move. In the name of the 600 workers who may be left without jobs, I ask them to do everything possible so that FENASTRAS can move forward with the process for the good of these workers.

¹³ *El Independiente* (16 February 1980).

Similar immaturity was evident among those who occupied the UCA¹⁴. Since there was no possibility of dialoguing with any responsible person, the rector simply asked, «What more can I say if I've already been dialoguing with these people for twenty-two hours?»

Considering the religious sentiments of my people and concerned always for the good of the poor, I beg the leaders of the organizations now occupying the churches to come and dialogue with me or with those in charge of the churches. Let us see how we can open the churches so the people can worship during Lent, which is a time of prayer for our people and will soon be here. Since the Christian sentiments of the people are at least as important as the objectives of the occupations, let there be prompt negotiations about these matters and these interests. If it is asserted that the churches are providing a safe place of refuge for the people, then remember that the church has always had the mission of offering charity of all kinds, not only in the churches but in all her institutions. That is why I say that there must be dialogue. Don't believe that you're discovering something new, for the church has a long history of providing charity and hospitality in this way. (Applause)

I make an appeal also to the people's military organizations to return to the paths of decency, reason, and human dignity. I am referring to the kidnappings, the threats, and the vendettas. People cannot take justice into their own hands. Recourse must be had to the courts. I have transmitted many pleas for endangered lives to those who can do something to help. The sins and crimes of times past do not matter when human dignity is at stake. The pope has said that violence cannot be inflicted even on those judged guilty because it ends up really being vengeance.

I have been asked to intervene for Rodolfo Useda Franco of Ilobasco, who was accused of being involved in the eviction at the church in Los Desamparados. Since then he has received threatening phone calls. He denies that he took part. Also proclaiming their innocence are several residents of the village of La Loma in San Pedro Perulapán. They were denounced on the radio for committing crimes and for killing and burying people, but they say that all that is false.

Concerning the kidnapping of Mr. Dunn, someone has sent a letter from Argentina offering to take his place as a hostage. None such thing is necessary since the perpetrators of these actions also have human feelings. The struggle on behalf of the people truly ennobles all our efforts, but the struggle loses that quality when it assaults other human beings.

Let us conclude, then, as we began, by saying that there is great hope among the poor and among those who are suffering. That is why the church, in the name of Jesus Christ, wants to remove whatever may be base among our people. My earnest denunciations, please understand, have no other purpose than to say, «We want a holy people. We want a government that truly understands the poor. We want politics that truly works for the welfare of our people and our poor». When we have that, we'll be able to say with Jesus Christ, «Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven!» (Luke 6:20b). (Applause)

¹⁴ The administrative offices of the UCA were occupied by students organized in the FUR-30. *El Mundo* (16 February 1980).