

RETURNING HOME¹

February 16, 1979

My dear brother priests and faithful:

When one loves one's homeland then the most beautiful aspect of a long trip outside the country is the return. I feel proud and satisfied and tremendously happy to be with you. This is my return home. I thank Father Cortés for his sincere words that have faithfully interpreted your generous and spontaneous applause.

My dear sisters and brothers, as I return from Puebla there are many ideas racing through my mind. I have lived a very intense moment and in the intense and emotional meeting with you, it is impossible to tell you about all that has happened. Nevertheless, allow me to focus my poor words around these ideas: First, in Puebla I felt like the representative of a Diocese at prayer; Second, in Puebla I had no need to speak many words because the testimony of the priests and the religious and the base communities of faith, the parishes and the faithful preceded me and in Puebla this testimony gave a sacred meaning to my presence; Third, as I return from Puebla, my heart and my thoughts are enriched as a result of my contact with so many pastors and with the Pastor of Pastors, the Pope. These persons shared with me their experiences, their solidarity, and their greetings and now I place all of this before the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

1. In Puebla I felt like the representative of a Diocese at prayer

In the first place I want to profoundly thank all of you. Like never before I experienced the power of prayer. The Church is built on prayer because the Church is the Kingdom of God in the midst of women and men and above all else, is able to rely on the good will of the Lord. I experienced this prayer as an impulse and an inspiration and a reality. This prayer was not only a prayer of supplication expressed in words such as the *Our Father*, but also a prayer that expressed in many different ways the feelings of the people, feelings like the Israelites in Egypt (1) who cried out in anguish and pain to the Lord. As you cried out you hoped that the Pastors of the Latin American Continent would provide God's response, a word of orientation, a word of strength and hope for all people.

I felt that God responded to this supplication and inspired those gathered together in Puebla to compose a document that little by little we will come to know. This document is a pastoral treasure. In spite of everything else that might be said it is clear that the Holy Spirit has triumphed. The Holy Spirit responded to the prayers of the people for it was not only the people of El Salvador who were praying but the people of the entire continent. In the eyes of God this reality has great power, for as Saint Augustine said: *prayer is God's weakness and the power of women and men*. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I ask that you intensify this spirit of prayer throughout the Diocese and change

the situation of our Archdiocese into a prayer. Let us respond to all of these realities which we must live by lifting up our hearts to God in the same way as the Israelites in Egypt cried out to God and God listened to the cries of the people. Let us continue to be a Diocese at prayer.

In Puebla I did not have to speak many words because the testimony of the Archdiocese spoke most clearly

My sisters and brothers, secondly I want to speak about your testimony. Saint Paul profoundly thanked the Thessalonians when he wrote to them and said: *I do not have to preach to you because you yourselves have learned how to respond to the Lord's gospel* (2). How beautiful to proclaim such words! I want to use these same words to thank you, my beloved priests, men and women religious, and all the faithful because our Diocese is giving a testimony to the Latin American continent and to the world. I remember that one morning a bishop from France gave me a package that contained five folders and he told me: *In fifteen days we collected twenty two thousand signatures from the people of France in support of the people of the diocese of San Salvador. I give these to you.* These are the signatures of bishops and members of the Christian communities in France who admire the Christian faith of the people of our communities.

The day before yesterday, when I was still in Puebla, I was invited to participate in a Congress of the Base Communities of Faith. Christians from many different parts of Mexico had come together and asked me to share with them the experience of the Church in San Salvador. I can tell you that I left greatly satisfied because the theatre of El Colegio México was filled with over a thousand people who were attentive to my words and then asked me questions concerning the reality of the Church in the Archdiocese of San Salvador. I bring back with me some letters that were spontaneously written during the Congress and I also share with you the embraces and handshakes of the communities in Mexico who are in full communion with this Archdiocese, the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

People know much about our situation and for this reason, my sisters and brothers, we must act with great responsibility. Therefore I extend to all of you this evening the following invitation: let us be worthy of the good name that the Archdiocese has received in so many parts of the world. I remember one of the first nights when I was in Puebla I met Bishop Helder Cámara and Bishop Proaño and Cardinal Arns from Brazil. When they realized that I was the Archbishop of San Salvador they told me: *You have much to say to us and we are aware of the fact that your people are admirable and continue to be faithful to the gospel.*

I recounted for them some of our painful experiences. I spoke about the last photographs that we saw of our brother priest, Octavio Ortiz, whose face had been crushed. I also spoke about the other persons who were assassinated with him and the distortion of the news in the media. As they looked at these photographs they experienced our pain as their own. They experienced this pain on such a deep level that they offered prayers for the communities of the Archdiocese. They prayed that the

people of San Salvador might continue to be faithful, especially in light of the trials that the Lord has placed in their path. Above all they prayed that the whole Diocese might continue to follow the paths that the Gospel presents to them.

As I have already told you, I believe the document of Puebla contains some very rich elements and there are no surprises for the Archdiocese. The document reflects that which we are already doing. Yes, the document places the gospel demands before the Diocesan communities of Latin American so that they might know how to respond to the needs and the anxieties of people who are so often treated unjustly. The Church must know how to accompany these people, but as Pope Paul VI has said, the Church must accompany them without violence or hatred or resentment. The power of our communities resides in love. Let us continue to give this testimony.

My sisters and brothers, I was greatly pleased to see that the message of the Archbishop was understood. This humble seed has touched the good hearts of the people of our communities and is bearing fruit and flourishing and becoming a true epiphany of the Lord. Our diocese deserves to be loved and so I ask that each one of us continue to give this Christian example so that each day this love might grow. We do not act out of vanity nor do we seek the praises of the world. When people asked me how I felt to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize I said: *I do not work to obtain some prize; I work for the gospel!* My dear sisters and brothers, the greatest Nobel prize for me is the reality that I see before me in this Cathedral, you --- you are my greatest reward, you are my joy!

As Father Cortés has said, while I was in Puebla I was deeply concerned about the events that were occurring here in the Archdiocese. Now that I am speaking to you about the impressions that others have of our Diocese, I can tell you that I was very proud when I received news about the organized march of the priests and religious² and the impact that this had on the people who were called to a deeper reflection.

I was filled with joy by this expression of solidarity of the clergy with their bishop. I was able to work calmly in Puebla because I knew that here the authority of the bishop was well represented and loyally expressed by the Vicar General, by all the vicariates of the Diocese and by all the pastors. They moved our diocese forward because all were inspired by the gospel and there were no rivalries or opposition because all were focused on the person of the Good Shepherd. From the Archbishop on down to the pastors and continuing to all the pastoral ministers, we, all of us, repeat the words of John the Baptist: *We want nothing more than to see Christ increase and ourselves decrease so that the Good Shepherd might be praised* (3).

I speak these words to thank you for your good example and dispositions that include even martyrdom. I thank you for your spirit of solidarity and love which ought to join us together every more closely. I also want to share with you my own expression of gratitude and appreciation and solidarity --- a solidarity with all the priests. I have defended you when the small storms began to grow and I told people: *it is not true that my priests sow violence*. We know that the Jesuits and all those who minister here in the Archdiocese are inspired by the gospel. We recognize our deficiencies and our human

defects but no one can ever fault us for being agents of hatred and violence. We are messengers of the gospel.

I come from Puebla enriched in my heart and thought

Excuse me, my sisters and brothers, for speaking here at length but you know that a family conversation that takes place after one has returned from a long journey could last the whole night, but I am not going to abuse your time. I want to develop this third idea. I have simply been like a large serving bowl that I carried to Puebla and that contained so many gifts: the gift of prayer, testimony, and example --- the life of the Archdiocese. I felt that this Archdiocese enriched the reflections that took place in Puebla. Without having to talk I knew that my presence represented all of you, the priests and the communities. If there was a necessity to speak, these words were supported by the realities that you live and thus a testimony of silence was sufficient because you became a reflection of my presence in Puebla.

But yes, I bring with me gifts from Puebla. When the Pope arrived at the meeting in Puebla, we first gathered together with him around the altar in El Seminario Palafoxiano. Since the Pope is truly the bond who unites all the bishops, we felt that by the contributions of the different bishops each diocese was in turn enriched by these different experiences.

My sisters and brothers, how wonderful were those days in Puebla because there I had an experience of Church that I have never had before. You know that not everyone was able to enter the meeting that took place in the seminary at Puebla --- there were three hundred fifty participants while outside the seminary there were theological reflection groups. I met with these groups because the bishops need the counsel of theologians and sociologists and of other people who provide us with their expertise, their experience and wisdom. I experienced an authentic Church among the bishops who had gathered inside the seminary as well as among the groups outside that gave us their guidance and expertise. Thus I was strengthened by the bishops and the by the presence of the Pope who with his marvelous discourses enabled me to see that the pastoral lines of our Archdiocese are in full harmony with the magisterium of the Church. The Pope and the bishops have left in this Pastor and your servant deep impressions that will enable me to serve you better, in as much as my poor abilities will allow me.

I have with me a letter that was written during one of the nights of reflection with the theologians – a letter that was written by a group of bishops³. It is a beautiful letter in which the bishops express their solidarity and say: *we understand that the Lord has placed on your shoulders (the bishops treated me as a brother and used the familiar form of you) a very heavy cross, a cross that includes martyrdom and misunderstanding and exile and suffering. But we want you to know that you have the support of your brothers and you can tell the priests and religious and the faithful that we are in full communion with the Archdiocese of San Salvador.* This letter was written at the same time that the bishops also wrote to the bishops of Nicaragua and expressed their understanding of the

difficult position of the bishops there as they defended their people --- thus they also expressed their solidarity with the bishops of Nicaragua.

The final document of Puebla is very dense and contains twenty-one chapters. The realities of Latin America are expressed there and those who thought that Puebla would take a step backward have been shown to be mistaken: Puebla has ratified the documents of Medellin. The realities of the Latin American nations are reflected in this document and it provides the pastors with guidance and demands that the pastors of the Church of Latin America express their solidarity with the God who frees people, the God who hears the cries and shouts of those who are suffering and cry out to the Lord (4).

My sisters and brothers, little by little we will be speaking more about all of this because the treasure of Puebla is, as Jesus said, the treasure of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God will give us the appropriate words that will allow us to respond to each situation (5). I have prayed often to the Spirit of God so that this treasure that has been given to us in Puebla and that was placed beneath the feet of the Virgin of Guadalupe during our final celebration of Eucharist --- I have prayed this treasure might be shared with all the people of Latin America. During our final celebration in Puebla we invoked the name of Mary under the many different titles that are given to her by our countries. I rejoiced when I heard Mary called the Virgin of Peace and thus I was able to place this document under her feet so that the people of El Salvador, under the protection of the Virgin, might know how to find there the response of the Holy Spirit.

I do not want to tire you any more and I thank you for having come here to the Cathedral. To those who have joined the multitudes here in the Cathedral --- such a large group of people that so many have had to remain outside --- and to you are listening to my voice on your radios, I want all of you to know that I return from Puebla with my heart filled with love for all of you. I have no resentments against anyone. Indeed, we learned in Puebla and we often spoke about the fact that the evangelization at the present time and in the future of Latin America must always be established on the solid foundation of love. Our evangelizing mission extends to everyone; no one is excluded from God's call but there is a condition: be converted! (6) Only those persons who turn away from false idols and return to God --- only those persons will receive the gifts of evangelization. Change your ways!

Finally I ask all of you to pray so that all the pastoral ministers might know how to be evangelizers who share the Lord's love and justice and peace. So be it.

¹ On Friday 16 January 1979 Mons. Romero returned from Puebla (Mexico) where he went on 22 January to take part in the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops. After being met at the airport, he went to the Cathedral of San Salvador to celebrate the Eucharist and greet the people. Before the homily Fr

Cristóbal Cortés said a few words of greeting. See *Monseñor Oscar A Romero, su diario*, San Salvador, 2000, pp. 111-112.

² On 30 January 1979 more than 500 priests, sisters and Christian communities from the Archdiocese of San Salvador and other dioceses walked in silence along the main streets of the centre of San Salvador with a banner which said: ¡Basta ya!. See *Orientación*, 4 February 1979, and *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 January 1979.

³ This letter, dated in Puebla de los Ángeles 10 February 1979, was signed by Mons Helder Cámara, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, Mons. Leónidas Proaño and twenty more bishops. See *Orientación*, 25 February 1979.

Marginal References (1) Ex 3,7; (2) 1Th 1,8; (3) Jn 3,10; (4) Ex 3,7; (5) Lk 12,12; (6) Mk 1,15.