

THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST IN HISTORY

*Second Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Romero
Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1977*

To my beloved brothers and sisters, the auxiliary bishop, the priests, religious, and laity of the Archdiocese of San Salvador; to you and to all Salvadorans of good will: the joy and hope of our divine Savior.

IN THE SPLENDOR OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

I wrote you my first pastoral letter for Easter, on April 10. That was four months ago. It was my *letter of introduction* and my *first greeting*. The Lord wished to place my inception as pastor of this beloved archdiocese within the providential context of Lent, Passiontide, and Easter. That context inspired the theme of my first letter, and so I gave it the title *The Easter Church*.

Today the world's divine Savior, who is the patron of our local Church, illuminates, with the splendor of his transfiguration --- as at a Salvadoran Easter --- the path through history of our Church and our nation. I believe it opportune to write again to you who, together with me, make up this portion of the people of God who *like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God (Lumen Gentium, #8)*.

Because of what has happened in El Salvador both before and after that memorable Easter, and because of the intense life of the Church at the time of those events in our Archdiocese, an explanation of my actions is demanded. And no time seems more fitting to give it, none better to compare the road we have marched together as the people of God with the divine plans for our salvation, than now, in this new luminous and liturgical presence of the divine Savior.

Different Reactions

In good conscience, I believed my position to be that of the gospel. It has aroused a variety of reactions. Now it is necessary to give an explanation of the Church's stance as a basis for understanding, in the light of our faith, the different reactions aroused.

Some have been delighted. They feel that the Church is drawing closer to their problems and anxieties, that she gives them hope, and shares their joys. Others have been disgusted or saddened. They feel that the Church's new attitude makes a clear demand upon them, too, to change and be converted. Conversion is difficult and painful because the changes required are not only in ways of thinking but also in ways of living.

Many Catholics of good will have been disconcerted, even to the point of hesitating to follow the Church in the latest steps she has been taking. Instead they have preferred to seek refuge in the security of a tradition that spurns growth.

Others again, inspired more by selfish interests than by the Church's purity and fidelity, have, pharisaically, been scandalized. They have even gone so far as to attack her in what is closest and most sensitive to the heart of the Church of Christ: they are saying that she has been unfaithful to the gospel.

Thanks be to God, the faithful sons and daughters of the Church are beyond number. Priests, religious, and laity, sincerely committed to the demands of the kingdom as proclaimed by Christ, have been bolstered in their faith, hope, and Christian commitment. With the Church, they repeat with the apostle, *Let us go too, and die with him* (John 11:16).

A Word of Faith and of Hope

I have therefore come to regard it as a duty of my episcopal office to address myself to all the beloved sons and daughters of the Church, as also to all other Christian brothers and sisters, and to all Salvadorans who look and hope for a temperate word that, from the standpoint of the faith and of our Christian hopes, would throw light on what is taking place.

Yes, it is a word of faith. I am not trying to replace the efforts of human reason necessary in the search for real, viable solutions to our grave problems. But with the light of faith I am secure in offering the contribution that is proper to the Church, purifying and strengthening the power of reason, so as to free it from impure motives and to guarantee that it will have God's approval.

It is also a word of hope. The word of the Church can be nothing else, because it is the word of the good news, of the gospel, of the liberation that Jesus goes on proclaiming to humankind by means of the Church. But it is not an ingenuous hope that the Church proclaims. It is accompanied by the blood of priests and *campesinos*: blood and grief that denounce the obstacles and the evil intentions that stand in the way of the fulfillment of that hope. Their blood is also an expression of a readiness for martyrdom. It is therefore the best argument for, and a testimony to, the utterly certain hope that the Church offers, as from Christ, to the world.

In the light, then, of our faith and hope in Christ, I am going to dwell on three major themes in this pastoral letter. (1) What are the changes in the present-day mission of the Church? (2) These changes come about because the Church is the Body of Christ in history, and because the Church has to communicate the Lord's message and continue his eternal mission in keeping with the many changes that occur in history. (3) This is the ecclesiology that has come alive in our Archdiocese. It comes alive in an archdiocese that, out of fidelity to the gospel, rejects as a calumny the charge that she is subversive, a fomentor of violence and hatred, Marxist, and political. It comes alive in an Archdiocese that, out of the persecution it is undergoing, offers itself to God and to the people as a united Church, one ready for sincere dialogue and cooperation, a bearer of the message of hope and of love.

THE CHURCH'S MISSION TODAY

What I am going to say here is nothing new. I think, however, that it is opportune to repeat it. It is something that has not been sufficiently assimilated. And there are a great number of

Salvadoran speakers and writers who are telling others what the Church is, and they are distorting her true nature and mission.

Church and World

Many things in the Church have changed in recent years. One might instance changes in the liturgy, in the role of the laity, in religious life, in the training given in seminaries, and so on. But the fundamental change, the change that explains all the others, is the new relationship between the Church and the world. The Church looks upon the world with new eyes. It will raise questions about what is sinful in the world, and it will also allow itself to be questioned by the world as to what is sinful in the Church.

This change is of the gospel, because it has helped the Church recover its deepest Christian essence, rooted as it is in the New Testament. This new relationship with the world has deepened the Church's understanding in two directions: in the meaning of her presence in the world, and in the meaning of her service to the world.

In the World

Throughout the centuries the Church has not always given full importance to what was really going on in the world. It is different now. From his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, the present pope, Paul VI, asserted that *we ought not disregard the situation in which humanity finds itself today, in the midst of which we have to develop our mission (Ecclesiam Suam, #5)*. The Second Vatican Council felt a profound sympathy for the problems of the modern world: *Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world (Gaudium et Spes, #4)*. And for our continent more particularly, the bishops of Latin America affirmed at Medellin that the peoples of these countries are *living a decisive moment of [their] historical process (Introduction, #1)*, and that there is in them an aspiration toward integral liberation that can be expressed in biblical language as *a foreshadowing of the new age (Medellin Documents, Justice, #5)*.

The changes taking place in the world are, for the Church, a sign of the times that will help her to come to know herself better. She believes that, through these changes, God himself is speaking to her. She has to be aware of changes so as to respond to the Word of God, and be able to gauge her actions in and for the world.

The modern Church is conscious of being the *people of God in the world*, or rather, of being a body of men and women who belong to God, but who live in the world. That is why Vatican II described the Church as *the new Israel which while living in this present age goes in search of a future and abiding city (Lumen Gentium, #9)*.

What is being asserted here is of capital importance. The element of transcendence that ought to raise the Church toward God can be realized and lived out only if she is in the world of men and women, if she is on pilgrimage through the history of humankind. Therefore the council, as it opened its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, solemnly proclaimed: *The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are*

poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds (Gaudium et Spes , #1).

At the Service of the World

The Church is in the world for the benefit of humankind. This is the meaning of service. The council puts it in theological terms: the Church is a *sign*, a *sacrament*. As sacrament and sign the Church signifies and achieves something for human beings: she signifies and brings about a *very closely knit union with God and ... the unity of the whole human race (Lumen Gentium, #1).*

The Church is in the world so as to signify and bring into being the liberating love of God, manifested in Christ. She therefore understands Christ's preference for the poor, because the poor are, as Medellin explains, those who *place before the Latin American Church a challenge and a mission that she cannot sidestep and to which she must respond with a speed and boldness adequate to the urgency of the times (Medellin Documents, Poverty, #7).*

The Unity of History

So as better to grasp her relationship with the world, the Church has also deepened her understanding of another concept: the relationship between the history of humankind and the history of salvation. For a very long time we were accustomed to think that human history, with all its joys and sorrows, achievements and failures, was something provisional, something ephemeral, something that, in comparison with the ultimate fullness that awaits Christians, was of little consequence. It seemed that the history of humankind and the history of salvation ran along parallel lines. The lines met only in eternity. In short it appeared that secular history was nothing more than a period of trial, leading to final salvation or condemnation.

The Church has a different view of human history nowadays. It is not mere opportunism or a desire to adapt herself to the world that brings her to think differently. It is because she has genuinely recovered the insight, which runs throughout the pages of the Bible, into what God is doing in human history. This is why she has to take that history very seriously. Vatican II certainly recalled the traditional understanding of the Church as being on pilgrimage toward that *future and abiding city (Lumen Gentium, #9)*, but added that the Church at the same time reveals *in the world faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light (Lumen Gentium, #9).*

Medellin asserts the unity of history more clearly still: *Catechetical teaching must manifest the unity of God's plan. While avoiding confusion or simplistic identifications, it must always make clear the profound unity that exists between God's plan of salvation realized in Christ, and the aspirations of man; between the history of salvation and human history (Medellin Documents, Catechesis, #4).*

Our continent's longing for liberation, even the partial achievement of that full liberation of body and soul, is a clear sign of the presence of God in history (Medellin Documents, *Introduction*, #5).

With these affirmations Medellin put an end to the secular dualism we had subscribed to, the dichotomy between the temporal and the eternal, between the secular and the religious, between the world and God, between history and the Church. *In the search for salvation we must avoid the dualism which separates temporal tasks from the work of sanctification* (Medellin Documents, *Justice*, #5).

The Sin of the World

The relationship between the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation, and the world defines the Church's firm attitude against the world's sin and lends strength to her urgent call to conversion. By the very fact that she is in the world and for the world, by the fact that she is in solidarity with the history of the world, the Church encounters the world's dark side, the depths of its iniquity. She encounters that which brings about the moral downfall of human beings, that which degrades and dehumanizes them. The Church takes very seriously the shadowy reality that surrounds us on all sides. It is sin that prevents the history of the world from being the history of salvation. It is sin that dissolves the profound unity between the two halves of history. Sin is slavery to the world. *Their senseless minds were darkened and they served the creature rather than the Creator* (*Gaudium et Spes*, #13). That is what brings about the internal sundering of human history: the whole of human life, *whether individual or collective*, is tragically affected by sin (*Gaudium et Spes*, #13).

The Church's present thinking is as strict as ever with regard to the seriousness of individual sin. Sin is, above all, the act of one who, in the depths of his or her will, denies and offends God. But the Church today, more than before, stresses the seriousness of sin in its social consequences. The evil of interior sin crystalizes in the evil of exterior, historical situations.

Medellin has underlined this tragic reality of sin, linking together its two dimensions: *the lack of solidarity which, on the individual and social levels, leads to the committing of serious sins, [is] evident in the unjust structures which characterize the Latin American situation* (Medellin Documents, *Justice*, #2). And when Medellin attempts to sum up, in one phrase, what for our continent is the fundamental sin of the age, it has no hesitation in asserting that it is *that misery, [which] as a collective fact, expresses itself as injustice which cries to the heavens* (Medellin Documents, *Justice*, #1).

It is, perhaps, in this understanding of sin that one finds one of the greatest changes, and the source of the greatest conflict, in the relationship between Church and world. Throughout the centuries the Church has, quite rightly, denounced sin. Certainly she has denounced personal sins, and she has also denounced the sin that perverts relationships between persons, especially at the family level. But she has begun to recall now something that, at the Church's beginning, was fundamental: social sin --- the crystalization, in other words, of individuals' sins into permanent structures that keep sin in being, and make its force to be felt by the majority of the people.

The Need for Conversion

In this new epoch of the Church's history, what has always been true has become still more evident: there is need for conversion. As Medellin puts it, *for our authentic liberation, all of us need a profound conversion* (Medellin Documents, *Justice*, #3). It is important to stress, however, that this sense of the need for conversion has been reinforced as the Church looks upon the world. As all of us bishops of El Salvador said in our Message from the Episcopal Conference on March 5: *Christians are aware of the radical no that God pronounces over our sins of omission.*

The Church is here speaking not only of the conversion that others ought to bring about in their lives, but is speaking in the first instance of her own conversion. This awareness of her own need for conversion is, historically, something very new, though it was said of the Church in the past that she always had to be reformed (*semper reformanda*). The pressure for this conversion came not only when the Church looked inward, at herself, with her defects and her sins, but also when she looked outward, at the sins of the world. The Church has regained the basic attitude for conversion, which is to turn toward *those who are especially lowly, poor, and weak. Like Christ, we should have pity on the multitudes weighed down with hunger, misery, and ignorance. We want to fix a steady gaze on those who still lack the help they need to achieve a way of life worthy of human beings* (Vatican II, *Message to the World*, October 21, 1962, #9).

It is in this encounter with the world of the poor that one finds the most pressing need for conversion. It is the love of Christ that urges us on (cf., 2 Corinthians 5:14), that makes a clear demand upon us when we are faced with a brother or sister in need (cf., 1 John 3:17).

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Why are there changes in the Church?

Clearly, then, the Church has changed. It is obvious that the Church, in recent years, has a new vision of the world and her relationship to it. Anyone who fails to understand, or to accept, this new perspective is incapable of understanding the Church. To remain anchored in a non-evolving traditionalism, whether out of ignorance or selfishness, is to close one's eyes to what is meant by authentic Christian tradition. For the tradition that Christ entrusted to his Church is not a museum of souvenirs to be protected. It is true that tradition comes out of the past, and that it ought to be loved and faithfully preserved. But it has always a view to the future. It is a tradition that makes the Church new, up to date, effective in every historical epoch. It is a tradition that nourishes the Church's hope and faith so that she may go on preaching, so that she may invite all men and women to the *new heaven and new earth* that God has promised (Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17).

What is it that bestows this energy, this perennial modernity, on the eternal tradition of the Church? What is the reason for the current changes in the Church as she confronts the world and the history of humankind? It is not opportunism, nor is it disloyalty to the gospel --- two charges that have often been leveled at her in the recent past. The answer has to be sought in the very depths of our faith. Seen in the light of faith in the mystery of the Church, the changes taking place are far from ruining her, or making her unfaithful to tradition. On the contrary, they make the Church even more faithful and better identify her with Jesus Christ.

This is the theme of my letter: the Church is the Body of Christ in history. By this expression we understand that Christ has wished to be himself the life of the Church through the ages. The Church's foundation is not to be thought of in a legal or juridical sense, as if Christ gathered some persons together, entrusted them with a teaching, gave them a kind of constitution, but then himself remained apart from them. It is not like that. The Church's origin is something much more profound. Christ founded the Church so that he himself could go on being present in the history of humanity precisely through the group of Christians who make up his Church. The Church is the flesh in which Christ makes present down the ages his own life and his personal mission.

That is how changes in the Church are to be understood. They are needed if the Church is to be faithful to her divine mission of being the Body of Christ in history. The Church can be Church only so long as she goes on being the Body of Christ. Her mission will be authentic only so long as it is the mission of Jesus in the new situations, the new circumstances, of history. The criterion that will guide the Church will be neither the approval of, nor the fear of, men and women, no matter how powerful or threatening they may be. It is the Church's duty in history to lend her voice to Christ so that he may speak, her feet so that he may walk today's world, her hands to build the kingdom, and to enable all its members *to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ* (Colossians 1:24).

Should the Church forget this identification with Christ, Christ would himself demand it of the Church, no matter how uncomfortable that might be, or how much loss of face it might entail.

Vatican II and Medellin represent for us Christians today the humble, honest attitude of the Church in her concern to be the Body of Christ in this fascinating period of history.

The Person, the Teaching, and the Activity of Christ

To think of ourselves as the body of the world's divine Savior, in history, here in El Salvador, ought to be for our Church, I believe, the principal message of this August feast day. For in the mystery of the Transfiguration, our titular festival, the Church contemplates, and year by year listens to, the message, the activity, and the person she has to embody on behalf of all Salvadorans of every generation.

The Person of Christ

It is the mysterious voice of the Father from out of the *bright cloud* that, on the *high mountain*, presents Jesus to us as *my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favor. Listen to him* (Matthew 17:1-9). True God and true man. He is, as eternal Son, a mystery inaccessible to human reason. He can be accepted only in faith by believers. In saying that he is true God, faith asserts that in him is the ultimate truth, the ultimate answer to the mystery of the existence and of the history of humankind. Faith also asserts that this Christ, in his humanity, was brought back to life by the Father, and that he is now seated at the Father's right hand as the only Lord of the living and the dead. But the Christian faith makes another fundamental assertion as well, one that is still, as it has ever been, *to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness* (1 Corinthians

1:23): the Father's eternal Son became man, became our brother, became like us in all things except sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Only in the light of that Christ, of his actions and his teachings, can the Church find the meaning of, and guidance for, her service in the world. The study and contemplation of Christ, therefore, should constitute the chief preoccupation of those of us who make up his Church. I am now going to put before you a brief summary of Jesus' message. By comparing it with our Church's stance we can see if, here and now, we are still the authentic Body of Christ in history.

Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom of God Especially to the Poor

The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News (Mark 1: 15). This is the way Christ begins, and the way he sums up, his gospel message. His hearers understood what was meant: that they should live together in such a way that they feel themselves to be brothers and sisters, and hence also children of God. In the words of Jesus there were echoes of the ancient prophecies that proclaimed God's plan for the salvation of humankind. But in Jesus they come together to make a final impact: here and now upon this earth, the kingdom of God has the mission of turning all men and women into children of the Father of Jesus Christ, whereby they become brothers and sisters. Or, to put it another way, in the effort to become brothers and sisters they also become children of God. Faith in God requires a certain moral conduct in this world, and in fulfilling this ethical requirement one is also building up faith in God.

In Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, his preference for the poor is also evident. In his programmatic discourse, he reads the prophecy of Isaiah that he himself fulfills: *The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor* (Luke 4:18-19). This preference of Jesus for the poor stands out throughout the gospel. It was for them that he worked his cures and exorcisms; he lived and ate with them; he united himself with, defended, and encouraged all those who, in his day, were on the margin of society, whether for social or for religious reasons: sinners, publicans, prostitutes, Samaritans, lepers. This closeness of Jesus to those who were marginalized is the sign that he gives to confirm the content of what he preaches: that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Jesus Calls to Conversion

That message of hope is, in Jesus, linked to a call to conversion. Jesus does not want to exclude anyone from God's kingdom; he calls everyone to a sincere conversion of heart, a conversion that manifests itself in objective deeds. Without that conversion there is no chance of entering the kingdom, for the entrance gate is narrow (Matthew 7:13) and the road difficult. One has to be ready to leave everything, even home and family. One has to be ready to lose an eye, an arm, or even life itself in order to enter the kingdom. In the gospels there are many examples of conversion, of every sort of person: the rich Zacchaeus, Nicodemus the lawyer, the Roman centurion, the woman who was a sinner, Levi the collector of taxes --- sinners who became his faithful followers.

Jesus excluded no one, either from his message or from the invitation to enter the kingdom. He loved all his contemporaries. And because he loved them he sought their conversion, the change of heart that makes a person more human, and that is overshadowed by, or submerged under, riches, power, pride, security in the traditions of the law. What Jesus sought was that everyone should become a *new person*, a member of the kingdom.

Jesus Denounces Sin

Jesus carried out his mission, his preaching, his service to men and women, in a particular world, a particular society. That is the profound meaning of what we Christians affirm when we speak of the incarnation of the Son of God: that he took flesh in the real history of his age. Like so many other eras of human history, that era was dominated by sin. To the positive proclamation of the kingdom of God, therefore, Jesus added the denunciation of the sin of his age. The kingdom of God is what Jesus proclaims; for him, then, sin is everything that gets in the way of the coming of the kingdom, makes it impossible or even destroys it. With the courage of a free man, therefore, he denounced the distorted image of God created by the manipulation of human traditions that destroy the authentic will of God (Mark 7:8-13). He denounced the distortion of the temple: from being a house of God, it had been turned into a den of thieves (Mark 11:15-17). He denounced a religion that was devoid of works of justice --- as in the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). He also denounced all those who made of their power a means to keep the weak and powerless in a state of oppression, rather than using it to serve them. He accused the wealthy of not sharing their wealth, the priests of imposing intolerable burdens (Luke 11:46), the wise of carrying off the key of knowledge and leaving the others without learning, the rulers of looking only to their own advantage and not to the service of their people (Matthew 20:25 ff.).

From the beginning of Jesus' public life, these denunciations brought in their train frequent attacks upon him (Matthew 2:1-2). They brought personal risk and even persecution. The persecution was to go on through the whole of his life until, at the end, he was accused of blasphemy (Mark 14:64) and of being an agitator among the masses. For these reasons he was condemned and executed.

The Church Continues the Work of Jesus

This is the message and the mission of Jesus that he, after he had risen, intended to go on preaching and living in the history of the world by means of his Church. The Church is the community of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as the only Lord of history. She is a community of faith whose primary obligation, whose *raison d'être*, is to continue the life and work of Jesus. To be Church is to preserve in history, in and through the lives of men and women, the image of her Founder. The Church principally exists for the evangelization of the human race. Yes, she is an institution; she is made up of persons, and she has forms and structures. But all that is for a much more basic reality: the exercise of its task of evangelization.

The Church has always borne it in mind that in this task she has to go on proclaiming her faith in Jesus Christ and that she has to continue, in the course of history, the work that Jesus carried out. When doing this she is the Body of Christ in history.

The Sphere of Its Rights and Duties

This well-defined purpose of the Church also defines her duties and her rights --- above all, the right and duty of following and loving in freedom her only Lord, Jesus Christ, known in faith. Then comes the right and duty of proclaiming the gospel without hindrance and of cooperating, in accord with its proper autonomy, in building up the kingdom of God among men and women in the way Christ wants it to be done today. For that purpose she will use the means with which Christ himself has endowed her: preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, above all celebrating the Eucharist --- which will remind her, in an active, vital way that she continues to be the Body of Christ. And she will also use those particular means that throw light on the question of what path is to be followed if the kingdom of God is to be realized. In other words: the Church has to clarify faith in Jesus Christ and procedures for building up the kingdom of God in this world.

This is what the first Christians understood and lived out, those who *remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers ... The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed* (Acts 2:42, 44).

Throughout her history the Church has carried out, with greater or lesser fidelity, that ideal of those first Christians in her following of Jesus. There have been times when the Church has more clearly been the Body of Christ. There have been times when she was not so clear --- indeed, when she has been disfigured because she has accommodated herself to the world, seeking rather to be served by the world than herself to serve the world. But at other times her sincere wish has been to serve the world. On those occasions she has experienced rejection by the sinful world, just as her Founder did, even to the extent of persecution. That was the fate of the first Christians, of Peter and John before the courts, of Stephen the deacon, of Paul.

Like Jesus, the Church Proclaims the Kingdom of God

In Latin America, in El Salvador, the Church, like Jesus, has to go on proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand, especially for the great majority who, in worldly terms, has been estranged from her --- the poor, the low-income classes, and the marginalized. This does not mean that the Church should neglect the other classes in society. She wants to serve them also, to enlighten them. She also needs their help in building up the kingdom. But the Church should share Jesus' preference for those who have been used for others' interests and have not been in control of their own destinies.

The Church Denounces Sin and Calls to Conversion

The Church, like Jesus, has to go on denouncing sin in our own day. She has to denounce the selfishness that is hidden in everyone's heart, the sin that dehumanizes persons, destroys families, and turns money, possessions, profit, and power into the ultimate ends for which persons strive. And, like anyone who has the smallest degree of foresight, the slightest capacity for analysis, the Church has also to denounce what has rightly been called *structural sin*: those social, economic, cultural, and political structures that effectively drive the majority of our people onto the margins of

society. When the Church hears the cry of the oppressed she cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.

But also like Christ, this denunciation by the Church is not inspired by hatred or resentment. She looks to the conversion of heart of all men and women and to their salvation.

The Church Throws Light on the Kingdom of God

Jesus fulfilled his mission in a particular kind of world, in a particular sort of society. Like him, the Church does not simply proclaim the kingdom of God in the abstract. She also has to promote the solutions that seem most likely to bring the kingdom into being, those that are most just. The Church is well aware that to solve today's problems is a supremely difficult and complex task. She knows, furthermore, that in the last analysis it is not for her to put forward concrete solutions. And she knows that, in this world, it will never be possible fully to achieve the kingdom of God. But none of that exempts her from the pressing duty of publicizing and promoting the means that seem best able to help toward the partial realization of the kingdom.

In recent years everyone has come to know that the Church has an interest in speaking out on matters concerning the ordered, rational, living together of human beings. A great number of documents have been issued by the Church, from Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to the recent exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* by Paul VI (1976), which attempt to give guidance on what, at particular moments, have been the crucial problems facing society. The Church has done so in order that, in denouncing sin and drawing attention to the paths to solutions, she may bring to the world the kingdom of God.

On March 5 of this year we Salvadoran bishops wrote, in fulfillment of this duty incumbent on the Church: *Just as injustice takes concrete forms, so the promotion of justice must take concrete forms. It should come as a surprise to no one that the Church encourages particular methods of achieving justice. Among those particular methods there will be some that are matters of opinion, and the Church, too, will have to continue to learn which methods best bring about the ideal of the kingdom of God.* And we added in our collective message of May 17: *The Church believes that the world is called to be subject to Jesus Christ by way of a slow but sure establishment of the kingdom of God.... It believes in the kingdom of God as a progressive change from the world of sin to a world of love and justice, one that begins in this world but has its fulfillment in eternity.*

Duty arises from Loyalty to Christ

Only by fulfilling its mission in this way can the Church be faithful to its own mystery, which is to be the Body of Christ in history. Only by living out her mission in this way, with the same spirit in which Jesus would have lived it out at this time and place, can she preserve her faith and give transcendent meaning to her message so that her message is not reduced to mere ideology or be manipulated by human selfishness or false traditionalism. She will move toward that final perfection of the kingdom of God in the world to come only if she strives to achieve, in the history of human society here on earth, the kingdom of truth and peace, of justice and love.

THE ARCHDIOCESE OF THE DIVINE SAVIOR

On her titular feast this year, the Archdiocese presents to her divine patron, as her most precious offering, herself --- marked with the sad yet glorious signs of martyrdom and persecution. The marks are there precisely because she is being faithful to her vocation to be the Body of Christ in our history. In effect, the whole of the ecclesiology sketched in the doctrinal part of this letter has been lived out by our Archdiocese in the intensive work for the social apostolate carried on by my venerable predecessors, especially by Archbishop Luis Chávez y González. Our Church's actions are not the result of some sudden or imprudent change. They follow the well thought out approach urged on the whole Church by Vatican II, and on our own continent by the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference at Medellin. It was this that Archbishop Chávez y González tried to implement in our archdiocese.

There is need for a calm reflection on our Archdiocese and upon her stance, both in order to strengthen sincere Christians in their faith and to clear up the confusion that the media have recently created in public opinion. The media have been vehicles of calumny against the Church, and of attacks on her nature and her mission. Would that such reflection might also bring about a conversion deep in the hearts of those who, because of their own particular interests, go on attacking the Church, or have doubts about it. Here, then, I shall try to show that the Archdiocese has been faithful to the gospel, and for that very reason she has been persecuted. Yet out of this persecution arises a stronger unity that helps her to offer the people more effectively her message of hope and love.

Faithful to the Gospel

Precisely when the Archdiocese is making a great effort to be faithful to the gospel one hears voices raised with the accusation that causes her the greatest distress: the charge of having betrayed the gospel. They are many and varied, these accusations, but they can be reduced to three headings: (1) the Church preaches hatred and subversion; (2) the Church has become Marxist; (3) the Church has overstepped the limits of its mission and is meddling in politics.

These are serious accusations. They deserve serious treatment. But the following brief reply should be enough to convince those of sincere heart.

Neither Hatred nor Subversion

The Church has never incited to hatred or revenge, not even at those saddest of moments when priests have been murdered and faithful Christians have been killed or have disappeared. The Church has continued to preach Jesus' command *love one another* (John 15:12). This is a command that the Church cannot renounce, nor has she renounced it, not even in recent months. On the contrary, she has recalled that other command, *pray for those who persecute you* (Matthew 5:44).

The Church has also recalled that the love that she preaches has Jesus' love for her model, *love others ... as I have loved you*. There is no reducing this to a sentimental, or to an abstract, sort of love. It was a love freely given and it was an effective love, for he came to bring life even to his enemies. He sought their conversion so that he might free them from sin and bring them out of

darkness. That is why the Church, like Jesus, has no alternative but to extend her love to the rich and to the poor. She ought to sit down at table with all --- but in the spirit of Jesus. Jesus entered the house of the rich man Zacchaeus in search of the conversion of that household (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus repaid fourfold the goods he had defrauded others of, and he gave away half of his possessions to the poor. Jesus sat down at the table of the poor and of sinners to defend their rights, calling them, too, to conversion. Jesus' love was directed toward all men and women, but in different ways. To those who had become dehumanized because of their desire for profits, he clearly demonstrated, through his love, how to recover their lost human dignity; with the poor, dehumanized because pushed to the margins of society, he sat at table, also out of love, to bring hope back to them.

In what the Church has done, there has never been any sign of hatred or revenge, only a remembrance of that great truth of Jesus: that love wants to make all men and women truly human. For that purpose she has to seek out the best way to restore human integrity to those who have lost it.

If one understands the words of love that the Church preaches in this way, one can also understand what is meant by accusations of *sermons of subversion* or *violence*. The Church has not called upon the people to rise up against their brothers and sisters. But she has recalled two fundamental things. The first is what Medellin has to say about *institutionalized violence*. When there really is present a situation of permanent, structured injustice, then the situation itself is violent. Secondly, the Church is aware that anything said in that situation, even something undoubtedly prompted by love, will sound violent. But the Church cannot refrain from speaking out. She can in no way reject what Jesus said: *The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm* (Matthew 11:12). For there is the violence of the struggle against one's own selfishness, against the inertia of one's own existence --- more inclined, as it is, to dominate than to serve. And there is the violence with which one denounces what is wrong in a violent situation.

Nor Marxism

Another way of accusing the Church of infidelity is to call her Marxist. Marxism is a complex phenomenon. It has to be studied from various points of view: economic, scientific, political, philosophical, and religious. One has, moreover, to study Marxism in terms of its own history. What the Church asserts, and what, in its joint message of May 1, the episcopal conference has recalled, is that insofar as Marxism is an atheistic ideology it is incompatible with the Christian faith. That conviction has never changed in the Church's history. In that sense, the Church cannot be Marxist.

The real problem, however, arises from the fact that alongside the traditional condemnation of Marxism the Church now lays down a condemnation of the capitalist system as well. It is denounced as one version of practical materialism (See Joint Message of the Episcopal Conference, May 1, 1977).

The Church is very well aware that she coexists with a variety of ideologies and social practices. She has analyzed and reflected upon what there is for good or ill, what there is of

attraction or temptation, in socialist thought and liberal ideology (*Octogesima Adveniens*, #30-37). When listening to, and rendering her judgment upon, the various ideologies she is influenced in the first place by the moral concerns proper to the faith. She is not so much moved to give technical judgments about the concrete proposals that spring from different ideologies. With regard to this moral concern, the Church's attitude has been constant from Leo XIII to Paul VI. Although there have been different ways of stating the Church's concern, it has always been to defend the rights of the individual in the use of material goods so that human beings may live with dignity. When Pius XII, for example, spoke about private property he pointed very clearly to moral problems: *We wish to refrain from approving the conduct of some of the advocates of the right to private property, because, in their way of interpreting the use of, and respect for this right, they manage only, even more successfully than their opponents, to put it in danger* (March 7, 1948).

The Church is not dedicated to any particular ideology as such. She must be prepared to speak out against turning any ideology into an absolute. As several of the Latin American hierarchies have said time and again in recent years, worldly interests try to make the Church's position seem Marxist when it is in fact insisting on fundamental human rights and when it is placing the whole weight of its institutional and prophetic authority at the service of the dispossessed and weak. As the Episcopal Conference of Chile has said, and as our own has repeated, *it is also a help to Marxism --- though indeed without wishing it --- to regard as Marxist or to suspect of Marxism every effort for human dignity, for justice, and for equality, everything that seeks participation and opposes domination.*

Nor Meddling in Politics

Lastly, the correct relationship between the Church and politics has to be recalled. It is understandable that the Church's message and her activity, because it is Christ's message and activity, should have very lively repercussions, including repercussions on matters that may be called political, in the society within which she is active. But the Church's activity does not take in -- as an appropriate method of pursuing her goals --- political parties or equivalent groups. It has to be repeated emphatically: the Church does not engage in party politics.

The correct relationship between the Church and the political community was defined by Vatican II. In the first place, both groups work for the same constituency: *both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same human beings* (*Gaudium et Spes*, #76). Therefore the Church holds out as the ideal that there should be a sincere cooperation between itself and the political community so that the people may be served more effectively --- both parties, however, safeguarding their own autonomy. But in addition to such desirable collaboration the Church has a right and an obligation to speak about the political sphere: *It is only right ... that at all times and in all places, the Church should have true freedom to preach the faith, to teach its social doctrine, to exercise its role freely among men, and also to pass moral judgment on those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it. In this, it should make use of all the means --- but only those --- which accord with the Gospel and which correspond to the general good according to the diversity of times and circumstances* (*Gaudium et Spes*, #76).

It is for those reasons that, over recent months and years, the Salvadoran Church has been speaking out. Far from betraying the gospel, she has done no more than fulfill her mission. She has spoken out about events in this country precisely because she is interested in the good of each and every individual. This has been required of her for the defense of human rights and for the salvation of souls.

The Testimony of a Persecuted Church

To the calumnious accusations that the Church has been adulterating the Christian message has been added a series of events that amount to persecution of the Church. An Archdiocesan communique dated July 11th sums up the principal abuses to which the Church has been subjected: priests expelled from, or prevented from entering, the country; calumnies; threats and assassinations; entire parishes deprived of their clergy; lay ministers of the word and catechists prevented from carrying out their duties; the Blessed Sacrament profaned in Aguilares. And all are aware of the lengthy, anonymous, and calumnious campaign being waged in the press against Church-related persons and even against the Church herself and her mission have been understood ever since Medellin.

But rather than simply detail such sad memories again, it seems to me more important to engage in a Christian reflection upon all these abuses now that some persons have been denying --- despite all these outrages --- that there is any persecution. They are saying that what has happened is in fact the Church's fault, and blame her for the violent situation that exists in our country.

In the first place, no one should be surprised that the Church is being persecuted precisely when she is being faithful to her mission. The Lord foretold it: *A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too* (John 15:20). Christians have been subjected to persecution from the very beginning.

Why is the Church persecuted? As I said earlier, the Church is not an end in herself; she has a mission to pursue. Persecuting the Church, therefore, does not consist only in attacking her directly, depriving her of privileges, or ignoring her juridically. The most serious persecution of the Church is that which makes it impossible for her to carry out her mission, and which attacks those to whom her word of salvation is directed.

Even though the Church is juridically recognized in our country, in recent months her mission has been attacked, and so have her priests and catechists who were trying to proclaim, and helping to bring into being, the kingdom of God. The Salvadoran people have been subjected to attack. Its human rights have been trodden underfoot --- and protection of these rights falls under the Church's responsibility. It is the Church's belief that this persecution affects Christ himself: what touches any Christian touches Christ, because he is in personal union with all Christians --- especially in anything that involves the poorest of society. *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?* asks Christ of everyone who is persecuting his members. And at the last judgment Christ will reveal that *in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40).

It is in this profound sense that the Church can speak of persecution and can plead that this persecution cease. The Church is persecuted when she is not allowed to proclaim the kingdom of God and all it entails in terms of justice, peace, love, and truth; when she is not allowed to denounce the sin of our land that engulfs people in wretchedness; when the rights of the people of El Salvador are not respected; when the number mounts steadily of those who have disappeared, been killed, or been calumniated.

It is also important to keep in mind that the Church is persecuted because she wills to be in truth the Church of Christ. The Church is respected, praised, even granted privileges, so long as she preaches eternal salvation and does not involve herself in the real problems of our world. But if the Church is faithful to her mission of denouncing the sin that brings misery to many, and if she proclaims her hope for a more just, humane world, then she is persecuted and calumniated, she is branded as subversive and communist.

During this time of persecution the Church of the Archdiocese has never returned evil for evil, she has never called for revenge or hatred. On the contrary, she has called for the conversion of those who persecute her, and, in our country's difficult problems, she has tried always to promote justice and avert worse evils.

The Church hopes, with the help of God, to continue to witness with Christian courage in the midst of all difficulties. She knows that only by so doing will she win credibility for what she is proclaiming: that she is a Church that has taken her place alongside those who suffer. She will not be frightened by the persecution that she undergoes, because persecution is a reaction to the Church's fidelity to her divine Founder and to her solidarity with those most in need.

The Unity of the Church

Service of the gospel and the persecution of the Church have brought forth, as a precious fruit, a unity in the Archdiocese to a degree hitherto unknown. It is a great joy for me to be able to say that so many barriers have been removed. Never has there been such a degree of unity among clergy, religious, and laity. Letters of solidarity and of encouragement to go on living out this testimony have been innumerable. They have come from cardinals, bishops, episcopal conferences, from clerical, religious, and lay societies. Support has also come from many of our separated brothers and sisters, both inside and outside the country. I wish publicly to thank them for their fraternal, Christian solidarity. I also remember --- and with great happiness, because they have been expressions of unity --- the many and various liturgical gatherings, the processions, the countless meetings and private contacts with communities, and with all kinds of persons. This unity, this solidarity, is to me a clear sign that we have chosen the right course.

But, yet again, the events of recent months remind us that Christian unity comes not only from a verbal confession of the same faith, but also from putting that faith into practice. It arises out of a common effort, a shared mission. It comes from fidelity to the word and to the demands of Jesus Christ, and it is cemented in common suffering. Unity in the Church is not achieved by ignoring the reality of the world in which we live. So, even though the demonstrations of unity have been impressive, they have not been complete. Some among those who are called Christians have not contributed to the unity of the Archdiocese, either out of ignorance, or in order to defend

their own interests. Anchored in a false traditionalism, they have misunderstood the actions and the teachings of the contemporary Church. They have pretended not to hear the voice of Vatican II and of Medellin. They have been scandalized at the Church's new face.

Therefore I once again appeal for the unity of all Catholics. It is something for which I have a keen desire. But we cannot, as the price of this unity, abandon our mission. Let us remember that what divides us is not the Church's actions but the world's sin --- and the sin of our society. What has happened in our Archdiocese is what always happens in the Church when she is faithful to her mission. When the Church enters into the world of sin to liberate and save it, the sin of the world enters into the Church and divides her: it separates those who are authentically Christian and persons of good will from those who are Christian only in name and appearance.

The Archdiocese needs unity now more than ever before, to make it credible and to make it more effective. The Church becomes credible when she unifies all her efforts not for her own benefit but in the service of the gospel of Christ. And the Church needs unity to be effective. The Church has lost many priests and catechists in recent months. On the other hand, happily, her pastoral work is increasing through the increasing awareness of many Catholics. The Church sees that she must take on new tasks in social communication, such as by our weekly publication *Orientación* and our radio station YSAX, new tasks in the Catholic schools, to move forward in an authentically Christian and social apostolate, new tasks in the parishes where the laity really want to put their voice and their effort to the service of the Church's mission of evangelization.

In our particular circumstances, and at this especially privileged time for our Archdiocese, unity ought to be brought about around the gospel, through the authoritative word of the divine Pastor. I earnestly want all priests, diocesan and religious, and all other members of religious orders, to unite their efforts around the directives that come from the Archdiocese, even if that means giving up long-established points of view and perspectives. I above all want the laity also to be effective collaborators with the bishop, especially so today when the number of clergy has noticeably declined.

There is no doubt that courses of action taken by the Archdiocese in recent months have borne fruit in the interest shown by many young persons for the priestly and the religious life. But there is also no doubt that through the persecution of the clergy the Lord is clearly calling upon the laity to shoulder its responsibilities within the Church. This is a time when all of us Catholics should feel ourselves truly a Church, when we should give to all the testimony of our faith, when we should all collaborate in evangelization, both by spreading faith in Christ and by extending his kingdom, translating it into structures of justice and peace.

The Hope of the Church

It may seem paradoxical, but in our Archdiocese there has never been as much hope as there is now, at one of the most difficult times in its history. Persecution has not produced discouragement, retreat, or confusion. It has rejuvenated Christian hope. This has been demonstrated by the bravery with which many Christians, clerical and lay, rural and urban, have acted in recent months. It has been shown, too, in a tide of conversions. And, according to what has

been said in hundreds of letters and telegrams, it has been demonstrated by the solidarity of many Christians with our actions.

Christians have hope. *Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ*, said St. Paul (Romans 8:35). And taking this idea further, we may say that not even all the deaths, the expulsions, the sufferings are able to part us from the love of Christ, and from following his way. Here, in the love of Christ, is the foundation of our hope.

But this hope takes shape only when persons work together as brothers and sisters. That is why our hope in Christ makes us wish for a more just world, a more comradely world. That is why the Church of our Archdiocese takes interest in, and hopes for, a new and better image for El Salvador, at home and abroad. Precisely for that reason our Church says again that the object of her hope is linked inseparably with social justice, with a real improvement in the lot of the people of El Salvador, and especially an improvement in the lot of the impoverished, landless masses, with defense of their human rights, such as the right of life, to education, to housing, to medicine, and to organize, particularly in the case of those who more easily fall victim to the oppression that strips them of that right.

Finally I want to repeat my hope, which is the hope of all in the Archdiocese, that the government may understand how right and humanitarian has been the Church's course of action, and that the Church cannot cease to act in this way, for it is part of her mission of integral evangelization. The Church has no desire that her relationship with the government should continue to be tense. On the contrary, the ideal put forward by Vatican II was that of arriving at sincere cooperation. But for that to be the case, there has to exist a solid basis of sincere service to all Salvadorans. To the president's offer of dialogue, therefore, the Church repeats her readiness, so long as dialogue uses a common language, and not a vocabulary that runs down and defames the Church, and provided that events restore to the Church the confidence she has lost in the government. Examples of acts of justice and reconciliation would include: an explanation of what has happened to the many citizens who have disappeared; an end to arbitrary arrests and torture; permission to return home, under a guarantee of liberty, to all who have fled as victims of terror; the return to El Salvador of those of the clergy who have been banned without just reason; a review of expulsion orders served on clergymen, giving them a hearing in court.

Church-State conversations, in a climate of justice and confidence, of love for the common good of the people, would in no way be a matter of seeking privileges. They would not be based upon any competence of a political kind. They would be intended to bring about sincere cooperation between government and Church so as to create a just social order, one that would gradually eliminate unjust structures and would encourage the new society that the country needs in order to maintain and live within new structures of justice, peace, and love.

CONCLUSION

Each year this Body of Christ in history, this Church of the Archdiocese, understands better that the August 6 feast day is something more than just a titular feast. It is rather the celebration of a covenant that binds all Salvadorans to each other, all Salvadorans baptized with the baptism of the world's divine Savior, even to the extent of an identification in thinking and in destiny. All of us

who have been baptized from the Church, and the Church makes Christ present in the history of our country.

In constructing the history of El Salvador our Christian commitment leaves us no room for any inspiration, or for any objective, distinct from the message and the inspiration of Christ. If we are not faithful to this commitment, if we do not construct a better homeland that reflects, within our history, the final kingdom of heaven, then we would be betraying our faith, and even betraying our homeland. Our fidelity to Christ, the Lord of our history, will bring us the deep satisfaction of having been, with him, the builders of his kingdom here in El Salvador, for the happiness of all Salvadorans.

The Queen of Peace is also one of our country's principal patrons. She is the mother of the first body of Christ and so mother also of the Body of Christ that continues through history. May she look after our Church and our homeland with a mother's powerful protection. Beneath the sign of her peace may there come to be, here among the people of El Salvador, the kingdom of God that through his Church, Christ continues to preach, a kingdom that *does not interfere with your prerogatives but heals everything human of its fatal weakness, transfigures it, and fills it with hope, truth, and beauty* (Vatican II, *Message to Governments*).