

**151**

## **THE PROPHET IS GOD'S PRESENCE IN SOCIETY**

**Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**8 July 1979**

Ezekiel 2:2-5

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Mark 6:1-6

Dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience, I believe that, given the situation of our country today, the advantage of coming to Mass every Sunday is greater than ever. On a natural level it provides true therapy, for we leave behind the contaminated air of the lowlands and rise up to the summit to be very close to God, and we are inspired by faith to experience once again the covenant God has made with his people. As members of a people allied with God, our Sunday Mass requires us to recognize the rights we have before God, for he has promised to be our God and to treat us intimately, as one friend treats another. But our alliance with God also and especially requires us to review our duties toward God, lest the Lord cast us off as a people that has not been faithful to his covenant.

Every Sunday your presence before God here in this packed cathedral is a great consolation. I am also consoled by the thought that through the radio there are many parish communities, base communities, and other Christian folk who cannot come to Mass but who are listening. There are people lying on sickbeds or living in miserable shacks who can't come because they don't even have money for transport, but these good folk share in our reflections. We even have hope for that group of listeners who tune in their radios in order to criticize us or simply to see what surprises them in the preaching. That contrast of motives shows that no one can be indifferent to Christ. Either Christ is given the homage of devout love and obedient following, or he is met with hatred, dismissal, slander, contempt, and rejection, which are another type of homage. If this were a matter of little consequence, one might well be indifferent, but before Christ no one can be indifferent. Similarly, this preaching about Christ runs the same risk of being given either a homage of love, for which I thank you profoundly, or else a homage of hatred, for which I am also sincerely grateful.

As we examine the scriptural readings that inspire our reflection today and shed light on our reality, we find a theme which greatly interests all of us because we are, I repeat, a people consecrated to God. We should always keep in mind this distinction: when we say «people of God», we do not mean the people in general. There are some political groups that would claim the right to define what constitutes «the people», but our people are very autonomous, very diverse, very multiform. No one has the right to claim, «I am the voice of the people». The people of God, then, is made up of those who follow God; it is the group of women and men who are inspired by faith to come on Sunday so that their conduct will be guided by the divine word and made more pleasing to God. Through their union with God they are a people who bring light to the people in general. That's what the church is.

I would like all of us to understand one thing clearly: my preaching and our shared reflection are done as the people of God, as a group quite distinct from the people in general. We respect the ideologies and the ways of thinking of those who do not want to belong to the people of God, but if our identity as a people of God leads us to believe in certain things, then we demand that others respect our way of believing and our freedom, for God has sent us into the world to love it and to proclaim his message in every part of it. The word of God cannot be chained (2 Tim 2:9).

Let us therefore submerge ourselves profoundly in being God's people. And if some of you do not feel yourselves to be part of God's people because you don't have faith or don't believe in Jesus Christ, still I thank you for joining in our reflection, and I respect your personal ways of thinking. In the end you will tell me if I am right nor not.

The topic which bursts spontaneously from today's three readings is this: «The Prophet is God's Presence in Society». The first point will be that the initiative comes from God; it is God who wants prophets. Second, prophets are nothing more than instruments of God; they go because God sends them. And third, society accepts or rejects God in the person of his prophet.

### **The initiative comes from God**

The initiative comes from God. In the first reading we encounter Ezekiel, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, proclaiming a great truth: «The Spirit entered into me, and I heard him say to me, "Son of man, I am sending you"» (Ezek 2:2-3). This is a magnificent definition of what a prophet is! «The Spirit entered into me», he says, even though I am nothing but a «son of man», which has also been translated as «son of Adam». We are not God, and we do not possess the absolute truth. We are children of the earth. Our only greatness is our openness toward God and our telling him, as the prophets did, «Here am I, Lord, send me» (Isa 6:8). But the initiative to send is not yours. No one can make himself or herself a prophet of any people unless called by God, consecrated by God, and sent by God. These three things unite the prophet to God, and the initiative in calling, consecrating, and sending a prophet belongs to God alone.

The Second Vatican Council explains this initiative of God in the document on divine revelation, which states, «In his goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will, which was that humanity might have access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and come to share in the divine nature through Christ, the Word made flesh. Through this revelation and out of the abundance of his love, therefore, the invisible God speaks to men and women as friends and lives among them in order to invite them and take them into fellowship with himself» (DV 2). This is God's initiative; the whole idea of communicating with human beings and revealing his infinite mystery begins with God. We would know nothing of his plans of salvation unless he had told us of his own accord, «I want you to know that I no longer call you servants but friends, for you will know my plans of salvation and love» (John 15:15).

Today's gospel presents Christ to us as a font of prophecy. Accompanied by his disciples, Jesus was arriving in Nazareth for the second time, but this time the outcome was unfortunate—we might even call it a failure. What I find very interesting is this phrase of Saint

Mark: «He began to teach in the synagogue» (Mark 6:2). This is what it means to be a prophet: to teach, to be a teacher.

Being a prophet doesn't mean just predicting the future. That's the popular idea we have, but a prophet is really someone who speaks in the name of another person. Christ came in the name of another, but he was also God, the eternal Word. By the Spirit's anointing, his human nature was united to the eternal Word, and since he was human he could speak a language that human beings understood. Nevertheless, his source and origin always represent the initiative of God. Let us therefore see Christ, in our reflection this Sunday, not as a prophet but as the God who has taken the initiative of coming to the world and bringing with him the fullness of God's initiative.

Paul himself received from Christ the vocation and the mission of going to the Gentile nations, and he was consecrated for that. Some Christians at that time were suspicious of Paul and said of him, «But that man is a persecutor. How can he say that he's going to be an apostle?» The response of Christ was this: «Do not call him a persecutor. I have converted him, and I have made him an apostle to carry my name to the Gentile nations» (Acts 9:13, 15). The great mission of Paul was not bringing the Gospel to Judaism; that was the job of the other apostles. The persecutor Paul, the last of the apostles, was chosen for a more arduous mission, and the initiative belonged to Christ: «Go to the Gentile nations, and preach salvation to them». Paul himself stated, «I am not worthy to be called an apostle, but he has chosen me and has also made me an apostle» (1 Cor 15:9-10). Such is the origin of the prophetic spirit: God takes the initiative.

### **Prophets are nothing more than instruments of God**

My second point follows closely on the first: prophets are nothing more than instruments of God. Here, I believe, we can elaborate more on the Sacred Scriptures that were read today. Prophecy has always existed. Every religion has needed people who can interpret the will of the gods. Even if they were false religions, there were perhaps also false prophets—although, as we've said here many times, salvation was not an exclusive prerogative of the Bible or the church. God has a thousand other ways, using inspired persons and even naturalist religions, to bring the message of salvation to those who are not baptized but who will no doubt reach the joys of heaven. Perhaps they will reach even higher realms than many baptized persons because they listened faithfully to the voice of the Spirit speaking through those who were inspired. But here we're referring especially to the classical prophets, those whom the Holy Bible tells us were called by God to be his instruments.

Let us look at how Ezekiel is presented in the readings today: «The Spirit of God entered into me and set me on my feet» (Ezek 2:2). This is the first effect. Human beings are nothing more than sons and daughters of Adam, creatures made of clay and mixed with the lies of the earth. If God calls a child of the earth and gives that person the capacity to receive the Spirit of God, then the first thing experienced by this piece of clay is being put on its feet and being lifted up so that it has a vertical dimension uniting it with the God in whose name it must speak.

Another effect is this: «Go and say, "Thus says the Lord..."» (Ezek 2:4b). The prophet, filled with the Spirit of God, goes forth to the world and becomes what we've chosen as the theme of this homily: the presence of God in society, in history, in the world. People will

no longer be able to say that God has not spoken to them, «Thus says the Lord!» «Whether they pay attention to you or not, you are the presence of God in the midst of society, and God often upsets things. Do not be afraid». Then the people will say, «There was a prophet who announced to us the presence of God» (Ezek 2:5-6).

Even when well prepared, prophets remain earthen clay who look to the mission God has given them. When God told Moses, for example, «Go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people leave Egypt», how small Moses felt! «But Lord, who am I to present myself to the ruler and free my people?» (Exod 3:10-11). These are impossible missions. They are missions that infinitely exceed our capability. They are something that only God can do. When God told Jonah, «Go and preach to Nineveh», the prophet preferred to take flight for the mission was daunting! So God had to force him to carry out his mission of preaching to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2-3). The first thing the prophet feels is smallness and inadequacy before the greatness of his mission. Nevertheless, God tells the prophet «Do not say, "I cannot do it". I will go with you» (Exod 3:12). And no one is able to oppose this presence that accompanies the prophet.

This calling naturally brings with it the danger of vanity, and the second reading tells us how the prophets ward off this danger. The mission of the prophets is so identified with God's message that often, as happened with John the Baptist, people think that the prophet is the Redeemer himself (Luke 3:15). Similarly, the people wanted to adore Paul, and they wanted to offer victims to Peter. The apostles had to tell them, «No, be careful. We are simply human beings. Adore God and obey him, for it is God who speaks to you through us. We are his humble instruments. We are human persons, so direct your homage, your respect, and your obedience to God» (Acts 14:11-18).

Saint Paul defends his prophetic mission today in the second letter to the Corinthians, saying that he had marvelous visions that made him feel superior to all other people. In his vision he saw clearly the majesty of God, the outcome of history, the terrible end of the wicked, and the deliverance of the righteous. He had more knowledge than anyone else and felt almost divine, but in the letter he says, «Lest I become too vain or elated, lest I think that I was more than I am, clay of the earth, the Lord placed a thorn in my flesh, an emissary of Satan to beat me and keep me from being proud» (2 Cor 12:7). This is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible. What was this thorn in the flesh? According to the latest commentators, it was some kind of chronic illness. Whatever it was, whether painful attacks he suffered or some stomach problem or other malady, it was something that made him feel so useless that he declared, «What is happening is not my work but God's. He has given me this thorn so I won't feel proud». This is what sickness, pain, and humiliation look like when you have faith: they are thorns of Satan because he is the only one who can place obstacles in the way of the kingdom of God.

Paul then tells us in today's Scripture that he asked the Lord three times to remove from him that spur of Satan, that wearisome weakness. The Lord did not remove it but told him instead, «My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness» (2 Cor 12:8-9a). What revelation could be more consoling for a prophet! Health is not necessary, for God says, «Even with all your ailments, you are the instrument I want. Since you are weak and appear useless, the majesty and the power of the Lord will shine more brightly in you!» And Saint Paul humbly concludes, «Therefore, I am content with my weaknesses because through them the strength of Christ will reside in me. I am happy amidst infirmities, insults, privations, persecutions, and all difficulties suffered for Christ» (2 Cor 12:9b-10).

What a marvelous experience it is, brothers and sisters, to serve Christ even a little and in return receive from the world a broadside of insult, distrust, calumny, suspicion, and loss of friendship. All that had already been prophesied, and Paul exulted in it as one who knows how to exult in weakness: «The more worthless I appear to others, the more contemptuous I become through persecution, and the more useless I am to those who perhaps thought me great and now see me as a plaything or as rubbish, all the more will I be filled with joy because that is when the strength of Christ resides in me! For whenever I am weak, then I am strong!» (2 Cor 12:10).

How paradoxical the prophets are! «Whenever I am weak, then I am strong». It is the work of God. That is why we do not fear the prophetic mission the Lord has entrusted to us. I can imagine someone saying, «Ah, so he thinks he's a prophet!» It's not that I think I'm a prophet. It's that you and I are all prophetic people. It's that every baptized person is expected to take part in Christ's prophetic mission.

Christ, the great prophet who came to bring the prophetic mission to its culmination, has made himself the messenger who sent the apostles out as messengers, and these in turn sent out their successors so that the commission of Christ would reach the farthest ends of the earth. But it is not only the hierarchy, dear sisters and brothers. I want you to reflect on these wonderful words the Second Vatican Council addresses directly to you: «The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; they spread abroad a living witness to Christ, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to his name. The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful", they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals» (LG 12). We all form the people of God, and that includes you as the people of God and me as your pastor and my priests as the collaborators of God's people; Christ the prophet has made all of us—bishops, priests, sisters, Catholic institutions, faithful, Christian families—participants in his prophetic mission. The Spirit of Christ has anointed us from the day of our baptism, and so we form a people that cannot be mistaken in our beliefs.

What comfort this gives me, sisters and brothers! You aren't mistaken when you listen to your bishop and when you come to the cathedral, with a constancy that moves me, to hear my poor words. There is no rejection on your part but rather the contrary. I feel that in the hearts of people the credibility given to the bishop's words keeps growing. I feel that the people are my prophet; they are teaching me through their anointing by the Spirit in baptism, which makes them incapable of accepting an erroneous doctrine. As the people of God, you would reject a mistaken doctrine in the same way that an organism rejects the foreign elements that sometimes enter into it.

It is wonderful to think that both the fidelity that I try to bring to the Gospel in my preaching to you and the fidelity with which you desire to be faithful to Christ—not to me—come together to grant us certainty about the infallibility which the Council has proclaimed (LG 25). This infallibility has its source, not in any human force or any type of fanaticism or politics, but in the Holy Spirit, who anoints the people and their hierarchs so that they always live by the truth that Christ has brought us. In this sense, then, you and I are prophets; we are a prophetic people. As such, we have the obligation of carrying out our

prophetic mission. We are all prophets, dear sisters and brothers: the father is a prophet in his home, the mother is a prophet for her husband and her children, young people are prophets in their school. If we really want to carry out this mission of truth initiated by Christ for the purpose of disclosing the lies of the world, then we have to realize how difficult it is.

But we know that we are not alone in this mission. We are untruthful, we are prone to sin, we are inclined toward evil passions. How bad off the church would be if she rested only on human strength! Like Ezekiel, we are clay of the earth, but from the day that the Lord lifts us up and sets us on our feet by baptism, he makes us children of God and anoints us with a charismatic vocation. Then he sends us forth all together as the people of God, some as bishops, some as pastors, some as chaplains, some as religious, some as parents, some as laborers, some as professionals. And if we truly experience the beauty of this faith of ours, we will all form the prophetic people of God.

The Council states, «Christians and non-Christians live together in the world, and no one makes any distinctions. Nevertheless in the heart of Christians there is an anointing that makes them responsible for this world, even though others may not be able to see this responsibility». I would like to appeal this morning to this prophetic vocation which you all have, sisters and brothers. And I want to tell you what I said to you once before: if some day they take away our radio station, if they close down our newspaper and don't let us speak, if they kill all the priests and the bishop too, so that just *you* are left, a people without priests, then each one of you will have to be a microphone of God; each one of you will have to be a messenger and a prophet. The church will always exist as long as there is even one baptized person, and that one baptized person remaining in the world will be responsible for holding up to the world the Lord's banner of truth and of divine justice.

We therefore feel ashamed to think of the cowardice of so many baptized Christians and the betrayal of others. What are those baptized persons doing in their high political positions? Where is their baptism? There are baptized persons in the political parties and in the people's political organizations. Where is their baptism? There are baptized persons in the professions, in the markets, in the fields being tilled. Wherever there are baptized persons, there also is church, and there also are prophets. In those places something must be said in the name of the truth which discloses the lies of the earth. Let us not be cowards. Let us not hide the talent God gave us on the day of our baptism. Let us truly take up the beautiful responsibility of being a prophetic people!

Those who laugh at me as if I were crazy for thinking myself a prophet ought to reflect. Never have I believed myself to be the only prophet among us all because I know that you and I as the people of God constitute a prophetic people. My role is simply to awaken in the people their prophetic sense, which I can't give them but which the Spirit has given them. Each one of you can in all truth say, «The Spirit entered in me from the day of my baptism, and he has sent me to our Salvadoran society, to the people of El Salvador». If today the people are in a bad way, it is because many persons who are baptized have failed in their prophetic mission.

But I want to say also that, thanks be to God, in our archdiocese there is a prophetic awakening in the ecclesial base communities and in the groups that reflect on the word of God. A critical conscience is taking shape in our Christianity, which no longer wants to be a Christianity of the masses but a Christianity with awareness. It is a Christianity in which catechesis is given before baptism is received and in which instruction is given before marriage

takes place so that people realize the commitment they are making and so bring true honor to this people of God. I congratulate and rejoice with the archdiocesan church for these efforts being made to awaken the prophetic sense of our Christians. This charism will never be lacking among us.

After Father Rafael Palacios was killed in Santa Tecla and while he was lying in state here, I said that his corpse would continue to preach, denouncing both the crimes of those outside the church and the sins of those within the church. For prophets also denounce the internal crimes of the church. And why not? If all of us—bishops, popes, priests, nuncios, sisters, Catholic educators—are formed by other human beings and we human beings are sinners, then we need someone to serve as a prophet for us as well and to call us to conversion. We should not be allowed to set up religion as something untouchable.

Religion needs prophets, and thank God we have them, because it would be very sad for the church if she felt that she alone owned the truth and could reject everyone else. A church that sees and condemns only the sin of others and fails to see the beam in her own eye is not the authentic church of Christ (Matt 7:3). That's why a child will lovingly tell her mother, «Mother, you have a spot on your face. Do you want me to wipe it off? Mother, your dress is wrinkled. Do you want me to fix it?» As much as we love our mothers—indeed, precisely because we love them—we want them to look their best. Certainly, there are proper ways to offer criticism, and it's bad whenever criticism becomes carping, insubordination, and caprice in the church. But sometimes criticism becomes prophetic, and the prophet tells the church, «Thus says the Lord». Perhaps the prophet will preach the Gospel to bishops or priests who are not proceeding according to the Gospel so that they'll be converted by that love with which we are all to love and follow our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Society accepts or rejects God in the person of his prophet**

That helps to explain, sisters and brothers, my third point: society senses the presence of God in his prophets, and El Salvador would sense the presence of God among us if the people of the baptized were truly holy and prophetic. Thank God there are some holy parents in the home who condemn the sins of their children. Thank God there are some holy workers and holy owners in the factories who reject the injustices committed there. Thank God there are other prophets who keep rising up and awakening the critical spirit in the people of God so that there exists a true sense of the people of God.

But the lot of the prophet cannot be different from what the Sacred Scriptures tell us. This is the theology of Saint Mark, which is the gospel for this year. The first part of his gospel, which concludes today with this very sad story, seeks to present Christ as the Messiah. In the gospel there is little preaching but a lot of action. The prophet speaks with deeds rather than with words, but when he speaks, his presence attracts or repels, depending on who is listening to him.

This final episode of the first part of Saint Mark tells how Christ returned to his native village. He had gone there before and been well received, but now he was arriving after his compatriots knew more about his preaching and his demands, and they found them hard to accept. As a result they rejected him, expressing the doubts we heard in today's gospel: «Where did he get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are done by his hands? Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joses and

Judas and Simon? Do not his sisters live here with us?» (Mark 6:2-3). Do you see? Even Christ provoked the people to react. This is a tremendous thing to behold, society's reaction to the prophet! There are even insults contained in all those questions. Among the Jews people were never identified by their mothers; it was always the father who was cited to affirm legitimacy; the names of males were always followed by «the son of so-and-so». So when they asked, «Is this fellow not the son of Mary?» there was a perverse insinuation. In our context it would be like someone using that frequent and very offensive epithet, «*hijo de ....*», son of a disreputable woman. The insults against Christ reached that extreme.

In passing, I want to make a clarification for those who believe that Mary had other children and that Jesus had brothers and sisters. Today's gospel refers to his brothers, James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, but please don't think that they were children of the most blessed Mary. The Gospel of Saint John tells us that Joses and James were sons of another Mary, Mary of Clopas (John 19:25). This Mary married a man named Clopas and had two sons who were Joses and James. The gospel here refers to them as brothers of Christ, but as you can see, they are not sons of Mary [the mother of Jesus] but of another woman who was perhaps a relative of Mary or Joseph. In oriental languages «brothers» also refers to cousins and stepchildren; close relatives were called brothers.

Let us therefore remove from our heads the idea spread by many Protestants that Mary had other children. That's something we Catholics cannot believe. Certainly there is a Catholic dogma which say that Mary was always a virgin<sup>1</sup>; this is a truth about Mary that Catholics should truly respect. It would not have been wrong for Mary to have other children with her legitimate spouse. What's wrong with that? But those who criticize us only want to impugn the great honor we pay to Mary as Virgin Mother. In any case, there are serious studies about all this, which is not the main purpose of this homily. Rather, our purpose is to explain how people resort to human factors when they don't want to believe a prophet. How small the faith of Jesus' relatives was! Unlike his own blessed Mother, they could see nothing divine in him but only his human surface, as if God could not take clay of the earth, a simple man, and raise him up to be a prophet. Even though Christ is more than a prophet, this story shows you how people react against their prophets.

Today's first reading explains this phenomenon better. When God called Ezekiel, he told him, «I am sending you to the Israelites, an unruly people that has rebelled against me. Both they and their fathers have offended me to this very day, and their children are stubborn and obstinate. I am sending you to them to tell them, "Thus says the Lord". Whether they pay heed to you or not (for they are a rebellious people), they shall know that there was a prophet among them» (Ezek 2:3-5). A prophet succeeds when the people who hear his preaching are converted. If that happens, then blessed be God! God will have achieved his end through his instrument. But if the prophet fails to get those stubborn people to convert, it doesn't matter. Success consists in this: that the obstinate, sinful, unfaithful people recognize at least that there was a prophet who spoke to them in God's name. And this is what is terrible about a society that calls itself Christian. It is horrible when a baptized society rejects the word of the Gospel because it is not in accord with their selfish desires and their injustices. That's when a whole bunch of questions arise: «So how does he come by such wisdom? Who is controlling him? That's not his idea!» All these accusations are truly foolish, and they keep people from going deeper and asking, «Is he right or not?» It is said that good advice should be accepted even if it

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<sup>1</sup> PIUS IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854.

comes from the devil. So even if it's the devil who's talking to me, I shouldn't reject what he's telling me if it's truly good counsel.

There's a frightening passage in the gospel that tells of the condemnation of a rich man; when he is there in hell, he wants to send someone to speak to his brothers. He tells Abraham, «Give permission to some dead soul to go and tell my brothers not to be the way I was, lest they too come to this place». Listen to Abraham's response: «No, they already have prophets. If they don't listen to the prophets, they won't listen either to a dead person who returns to life» (Luke 16:27-31). The idolatry of earth is so entrenched that people are worshiping gold, money, power, atrocity, injustice, passion. The idolatry is so fixed in their hearts that even if a dead person speaks to them, they pay no mind; they prefer their gods. Even less will they hear the voice of a poor prophet who commands them in the name of God, «Thus says the Lord: be more just. Do not be so violent». Naturally, the voice of the prophet is rejected.

The same prophet Ezekiel gives an explanation for this. You already know the passage, but I don't want to lose this opportunity to bring it to your attention again. Remember how God once told the prophet Ezekiel, «Get up and go out into the countryside, and I will speak to you there». Ezekiel says, «I got up, and I went out into the countryside, and God told me, "Son of man, prophesy what I command you to say. When you hear a word from my mouth, you shall warn them for me. If I say to the evildoer, 'You shall surely die', and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil conduct so that he may live, then that evildoer shall die for his sin, but I will hold you responsible for his blood. But if you have warned the evildoer, and he has not turned away from his iniquity and his evil conduct, then he shall die in his sin, but you will have saved your life"» (Ezek 33:7-9). The mission of the prophet is dreadful for he must speak even though he knows people will pay him no mind. If they do not listen to him, then they'll be lost through their own fault, but the prophet will have fulfilled his responsibility. The prophet declared, «Thus says the Lord», and if, thank God, the evildoer heard the prophet, then he was saved and brought glory to the prophet who preached to him. As a prophetic church in a world that is so corrupt and unjust, we cannot be quiet, dear sisters and brothers. If we keep quiet, then we'll deserve that awful comparison of being called «mute dogs» (Isa 56:10). What's the use of a mute dog who does not guard the property?

If we want to know what is happening in Latin America, I have here the document of Puebla, and I want to read to you just one thought from it. Puebla states, «The anxieties and frustrations found among our people are the result of sinfulness that has very extensive social and personal dimensions. If there are hopes and expectations among the people, they arise from their profound religious sense and the richness of their humanity» (P 73). Take note how Puebla praises the qualities of our Latin American people! They deserve a better fate than what they have now! They are a profoundly religious people, and it would take too long for us just to enumerate now all the riches of their humanity. If these people, with all their wonderful qualities, are suffering the kinds of disillusionment, frustration, anxiety, and fear that now grip them, Puebla explains what the cause is: «sinfulness that has very extensive personal and social dimensions».

What, then, must the church in Latin America do? Puebla also addresses this question: «The positive activity of the church in the defense of human rights and her commitment to the poor have led economically powerful groups who think they are champions of Catholicism to feel that they have been abandoned by the church and that the church has

forsaken her spiritual mission» (P 79). This reflects well the reality of Latin America. When the church, in her zeal to convert people to the Gospel, realizes that her place is by the side of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, and that she must speak in their name and plead their cause, many persons who belong to the upper echelons and who feel the church is their property come to believe that the church is now abandoning them and that the church is forgetting her spiritual mission: «The preaching is no longer spiritual; now it's only political». That is not true! The church is pointing out sinfulness, and society must pay heed to what is being pointed out and become what God wants it to be.

Puebla continues, «There are many others who claim to be Catholics “in their own way” but do not adhere to the basic teachings of the church» (P 79). That is why our current way of preaching, which is finding echo in those who want the church to engage with the world, cannot speak in any other way than by denouncing all the injustices and defending all the human rights that are being trampled on.

Finally, Puebla proclaims something that should be kept firmly in mind: «Many people place more value on their own ideology than on their faith and their belonging to the church» (P 79). The reference here is to those who, while struggling for just causes, take leave of the church and preach not Christianity but other ideologies that are far removed from Christianity. Realize, then, that the church, by prophesying on God's behalf, puts herself in a very difficult position. It is quite understandable that she is being criticized and scorned, just as Christ was scorned and despised and insulted. The apostles and the prophets have suffered the same fate, and so will all those who want to be faithful to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Life of the church**

It is at this point, then, sisters and brothers, that I would like to have us review what has happened both in the church and in world around us. It is an examination of conscience that helps us see whether we are truly the prophetic church that God wants us to be.

There was a very prophetic act, it seemed to me, on Monday last week: the profession of two new Mercederian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. In a beautiful ceremony the two young women consecrated themselves as an example before the world of what it means to follow Jesus Christ in the religious life.

Another lovely and prophetic sign was the elderly woman who died in El Buen Pastor, Sister Luz del Perpetuo Socorro, who lived to a very advanced age. I can tell you that I was very fortunate to share Easter with her community, which sees death as a motivation for continuing to live the Gospel faithfully. Also, at the Liceo Salvadoreño a Mass was celebrated for the eternal rest of Brother Blanco, a Marist who was shot dead in the war in Nicaragua.

Here in the cathedral on Monday night there was also a beautiful prophetic gesture, the prayer vigil promoted by the confederation of religious men and women. Still another sign of our prophetic church was the meeting where the religious sisters involved in pastoral work explored new ways to awaken in the people the prophetic sense proper to the people of God.

Looking at the communities, our church also announces a change in the pastor of San José de la Montaña. The new pastor is Father Cristóbal Cortes, and collaborating with him

will be Monsignor Urioste, Father Salvador Colorado, Father Rafael Urrutia, and Father Raúl Angulo. We don't want San José de la Montaña to be simply a parish for worship; we want it to be an archdiocesan center for promotion of vocations. The new leaders have committed themselves to this task, so that there will be a very close connection between the people of God and the major problem of our diocese, which is the seminary.

In Ciudad Arce we've seen the retirement of Mother Josefina, and I've called upon all the Catholics of the parish to unite themselves more solidly under the prophetic guidance of their priest so that they'll know how best to nourish their Christian spirit of prophecy.

In the parish of La Merced I visited the Tinetti market. I admire the generosity and the religious spirit of our people in their devotion to the Heart of Jesus. Father Torruella told me that it was the market women who paid for the publication of the obituary cards for Father Palacios. I thank them for this great gesture of solidarity with the church.

I also celebrated Mass in honor of the Heart of Jesus yesterday in the Santa Tecla market, and I spent some delightful hours with the people there. We also announced that, following tradition, confirmations will be celebrated on the feast of El Carmen in the church of La Concepción at eleven o'clock in the morning, but only for youngsters over the age of eight.

Another prophetic gesture was seen in the parish of La Palma. The pastor gave me a beautiful leaflet urging solidarity with the death of Father Palacios and calling for donations to help bury three unknown persons who appeared murdered in that area. Father Guaratto says on this leaflet, «As we ring the bells, let us be mindful that this is an invitation to pray for all our deceased without discrimination and to abstain from all criticism because death, like life, is sacred and the dead are already judged by God». Very beautiful Christian and Franciscan sentiments!

The parish of Perulapía has protested because their cemetery is becoming a dumping ground for the bodies of those being slaughtered. The pastor says the cemetery should be respected as sacred ground for proper burials. I think the same could be said by many communities that are experiencing this shameful phenomenon of our days: the appearance of naked, decapitated, mutilated, and tortured bodies. What awful crimes are committed against human life before it is slaughtered and done away with!

The Colegio Sagrado Corazón has been unjustly accused of raising their tuition at mid-year, but Professor Moreno, the general director of education, explains that there is no substance to that accusation; in reality, they are only studying the differentiated tuition rates<sup>2</sup>. As other schools do, this school analyzes the economic situation of its students, and the present study is not aimed at raising tuition; to the contrary, it is explaining why each student is charged what she is. I think that we need to be very careful in making accusations, especially when a school has been targeted and when there's a desire to see everything as communism and subversion. I give my word that the Colegio Sagrado Corazón, which is in communion with the church, is imparting a true Christian education.

I also want to assert that, when Catholic schools stopped operating for two days, their objectives were made clear to the public: they were strongly repudiating and condemning

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<sup>2</sup> *El Diario de Hoy* (5 July 1979).

the savage murders of educators and other persons and were rejecting the systematic violation of human rights and bodily integrity. Catholic schools are also in solidarity with the families that are mourning the deaths of the many teachers who have been despicably killed, and they want also to manifest solidarity with the teachers who are still receiving death threats<sup>3</sup>. No one should misconstrue what seems to me a very eloquent gesture of generosity and solidarity on the part of the Catholic schools. Would that we were all united in such an expression of solidarity, for the church considers her schools to be at the center of the pastoral work of the archdiocese, not on the margins.

I rejoice with the Franciscans at the naming of their new superior general, Father John Vaughn. In this regard, let us remind people that there are 23,000 Franciscans in the world and that the new superior general is the 116<sup>th</sup> successor of Saint Francis Assisi.

Our information office has published a bulletin documenting the recent persecution of the church. This survey shows that there has been a total of seventy-six cases of assaults against priests, religious, and communities<sup>4</sup>. Since the church does not consist only of priests and religious but is also very identified with the Salvadoran people, we have studied the number of assaults against our people committed during the last six months by those who are supposed to be defending them. The total number killed between January and June was 406.<sup>5</sup> There is also an immense number of persons, at least 307, who have been arrested for political reasons; nothing more is known of many of them because they have disappeared<sup>6</sup>.

### Events of the week

Turning now from our church community toward the world, perhaps the most noteworthy item of the week is the presidential report of July first. I didn't want to say anything about it because I've already advised my beloved audience that they should read and listen with a critical mind, for not everything they hear or read is the truth; they must know how to test the words against the deeds. But since I have a duty as pastor, I would like to point out how extremely dangerous it is when the president says, «I reiterate categorically that we are against violence, regardless of where it comes from and regardless of the social position or political hierarchy of its victims, because those victims are first of all human beings and because violence will never solve our problems»<sup>7</sup>.

This statement is beautiful and one that I would accept. I would only like it to be made reality without committing two logical fallacies in practice. The first logical fallacy is this: if it is true that violence is repudiated wherever it may come from, then where are the punishments for the security forces that have committed so many violent acts? (Applause) If violence is repudiated whatever its source and if even the OAS has named ORDEN as a source of frequent violence against the people and of persecutions against the church, then where is the justice against the violence being provoked by ORDEN? (Applause) We have our own clear case of the murder of Father Octavio in El Despertar in San Antonio Abad. An evident error: where is the punishment for the criminals? (Applause) And here I want to become the voice for

<sup>3</sup> *La Crónica del Pueblo* (5 July 1979).

<sup>4</sup> «Persecution Against Priests and Religious» in *Orientación* (15 July 1979).

<sup>5</sup> «Repression Against the People» in *Orientación* (22 July 1979).

<sup>6</sup> «Persons Disappeared for Political Motives» in *Orientación* (5 August 1979).

<sup>7</sup> «Message of President Carlos Humberto Romero on Completing Two Years of His Government» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (4 July 1979).

so many voices choked with grief; they are relatives or witnesses who have come to the archbishop's office or to our pastors, telling us that they have seen security agents kill or at least arrest individuals who later appeared dead in some other place. Why are there no investigations? These crimes do horrendous violence to our people. (Applause) These same families, with full legal documentation, have gone before the Supreme Court of Justice, but they have been ignored. So this is the first falsification for which I would criticize General Romero when he says that he rejects violence from whatever source. We await the fulfillment of his words. (Applause)

And there is another logical fallacy. It seems to me that, when calling attention to violence and its sources, we must also point out that the deepest source of all forms of violence is social injustice and the violation of freedom. In that same discourse the president said that he is aware of «the social problems of the country. Their causes are complex and profound, and we must find without delay a path that will lead us to develop authentic justice in a climate of peace»<sup>8</sup>. He also recognized that «democracy is justified by the values it defends, such as human freedom and dignity. Democracy allows dialogue and the right to dissent, whereas in totalitarian dictatorships individuals are obliged to accept the decisions of the state without discussion»<sup>9</sup>. The many injustices and great violence therefore have two sources: when the state becomes something absolute and doesn't allow people to think differently from itself, and when social injustice becomes firmly entrenched. Calling on the official documents of the church, we have often denounced the scandal of a society where «the rich become ever richer at the expense of the poor who become ever poorer» (P 30). (Applause)

These are the points I now make as pastor, responding to the demands of Sacred Scripture: «Tell them, thus says the Lord: at least let them know that there is a God who is not in accord with those atrocities and that there is a church that defends the people and is on the side of those suffering injustice».

I also want to repeat the denunciation that the teachers have presented to the president of the Supreme Court of Justice, Doctor Rogelio Chávez, who has just been reelected to this position. I repeat it here, but not only for the teachers. Indeed, I repeat it for them because they are a profession that merits great esteem, and I am profoundly grieved by what they're doing to them. But let us also extend their denunciation to the priests (whom the president did not see worthy of mention in his message), and let us extend it to all the people, even to the humblest *campesinos*, who also have a right to life. The voice of the teachers addressing the Supreme Court of Justice is the voice of our people: «On this occasion we appeal to your conscience as a public official so that you will take notice of a situation that violates the most elemental principles of justice. In a word, we teachers do not want more murders, more assaults, more threats, or more persecution. You must make a declaration; you must do something. The teachers demand prompt clarification of the murders of teachers and their families and punishment for those responsible. You have the power to intervene»<sup>10</sup>. Very courageous and very true! (Applause) And if the Assembly reelected Doctor Chávez to serve two more years as president of the Supreme Court of Justice, with great praise for his judicial ability<sup>11</sup>, I hope that their praise is not in vain and that during the next two years the people

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> «Letter of the June 21 ANDES to the President of the Supreme Court of Justice», 3 July 1979, in *La Crónica del Pueblo* (5 July 1979).

<sup>11</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (6 July 1979).

will see what they have not seen until now: greater justice and a Supreme Court that advances the history of our Salvadoran homeland during these dark hours of bloodshed and mourning.

I also want to lend my support to another demand made by the teachers. They are demanding a halt to the defamatory campaign the government has mounted against them. They have told the president of the Supreme Court of Justice, «It is within your power to intervene in order to put an end to the aforesaid campaign of propaganda»<sup>12</sup>. This is a campaign we see continually on television and hear on radio, as if the teachers did nothing but teach subversive doctrines. The same is applied to Catholic education, as if our Catholic schools were indoctrinating their students with Marxism. I join my protest to that of the teachers, and I ask the justice of our country to punish those responsible for this propaganda. And of course I ask that support be withdrawn from all these campaigns that are defaming the teaching profession and the schools and are dividing our teachers. (Applause)

The medical interns have also addressed a very courageous letter to the vice-president of the republic, Doctor Julio Ernesto Astacio, taking him to task for the promise he made to them but never kept. In one part of the letter they state, «Various anomalies are occurring in the different clinics, and reprisals are being taken. We do not believe that you are responsible for this situation, but you are able to intervene with the Presidency of the Republic, as the supreme authority, to resolve these difficult situations and so carry through on your promises»<sup>13</sup>. It is the case, then, that actions always speak louder than words.

Workers should be aware of the new pay scales that have been published in all the newspapers. As of the first of July, public employees will earn seventy-five *colones* more. Starting next week, July 15, male agricultural workers over sixteen years of age will earn 5.20 *colones*<sup>14</sup> instead of 4.25, and female agricultural workers over sixteen years of age and older will earn 4.60 *colones* instead of 3.75. Partially disabled workers of both sexes will earn 4.60 *colones* instead of 3.75. Commercial workers in San Salvador will earn 9.00 *colones* instead of 7.20, and in other municipalities they will earn 8.00 *colones* instead of 6.20<sup>15</sup>. I make this known because for many *campesinos* the only means of getting such knowledge is this voice of the Catholic radio station. (Applause) I would like to criticize only one aspect of these raises: the increase is just and it is good, but I don't know why, in a civilized country, discrimination still continues against women. Why should there not be an equal wage for equal work? These are questions for the Department of Labor.

I also want to insist again, sisters and brothers, that we should extend a helping hand to Nicaragua. None of you is ignorant of how terrible the situation is there. It's estimated that at least 800,000 persons have been displaced and are suffering hunger. A religious community here received a telephone call from one of their sisters there; her community and the people they had gathered in had gone three days without food. Our own Caritas is grateful for the good response to its appeal. and it continues to urge us to send as much assistance as we can to our Nicaraguan sisters and brothers, either through Caritas or the Red Cross, and to do so as soon as possible.

<sup>12</sup> «Letter of the June 21 ANDES», op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> «We Interns Continue Our Strike: An Open Letter», 4 July 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (6 July 1979).

<sup>14</sup> The figures in this paragraph refer to *colones*.

<sup>15</sup> *El Diario de Hoy* (4 and 7 July, 1979).

Because this voice of mine provides at least some relief for the families whose members are being arbitrarily arrested and cruelly disappeared, I want denounce the arrests of the following men and women: the *campesinos* Faustino Ayala and Ernesto Menjívar Castro of Chalatenango, now disappeared; Elena Gómez Flores, Santiago Gutiérrez Payés, and Juan Francisco Ruiz Rosales of the village of Nancintepeque in Santa Ana, their whereabouts unknown; Salvador Rubio Hernández of Oloculta; Gonzalo Segundo Merino and Daniel González of Tejutepeque; Cristóbal Zelaya Murillo, a worker of San Salvador; and the case of María Amada Galán de Rivera, who was arrested in her own home in the district of San José Los Sitos in Chalatenango, leaving behind two children, one six years old and the other four.

Another very painful case is that of Carlos Antonio Mendoza Valencia, a fifth-year medical student who disappeared on the morning of June 28. Presumably he was arrested, but as much as his family has looked for him among all the security forces, he is not to be found. I have been in close contact with the family, and his wife, who is two months pregnant, his anguished mother, and his sister are pleading for mercy from those responsible for his detention.

There is also the very serious case of the teacher Carlos Iván Burgos, of Fe y Alegría, who was arrested during a soccer game. They took him to the National Guard, where he supposedly signed a document freely, but we want to state that the same has happened with hundreds of political prisoners in other cases: they declare that they sign freely only after tortured interrogations. Is this another case like that? May God deliver us from such things, and may our teacher Iván Burgos quickly return to his family.

There are labor conflicts in Pan Lido, IMES, IMISA, Tipografía Central, Fabril de Aceites, and OCUSA. We ask God and the protagonists of these events to do everything possible to resolve them reasonably.

Speaking about the kidnappings, we thank God that, after so many Sundays of pleading for the freedom of two English bankers, they are now with their families in their homeland<sup>16</sup>. In addition, Miguel Armando Miguel, another person we were concerned about, has been freed<sup>17</sup>. However, this latter case had consequences that I would like to have attended to. A young woman named Yolanda Guadalupe Arbaiza was seriously wounded during the kidnapping of Miguel, so that her family has had many expenses; they have asked the archbishop's office to mediate with the ERP to see whether they would cover these costs since they were the cause of the young woman's health problems. The family was told that the cost of a trip to the United States for the urgent operation that is needed will be 33,000 *colones*. Let us therefore hope that the ERP will respond to this call. The family is using the Red Cross as an intermediary if the guerrillas want to fulfill their obligation in justice. Those who have caused harm must compensate for the harm done.

And so, sisters and brothers, forgive me that I have talked so long. The word today has challenged us in this difficult prophetic task of announcing the kingdom of God and denouncing the sinfulness opposed to it. There is a lot of hard work to do, and it is dangerous work in our present situation! But let us thank God that even this poor voice of mine can be

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<sup>16</sup> Ian Massie and Michael Chatterton were freed on 2 July 1979. *La Prensa Gráfica* (4 July 1979).

<sup>17</sup> He was freed on 30 June 1979. *Diario de Hoy* (1 July 1979).

lifted up to say in the name of the whole prophetic people, «Yes to the kingdom of God! No to the kingdom of sin and the devil!» (Applause)