

127

CHRIST, THE CHURCH'S EVER NEW WORD

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

18 February 1979

Isaiah 43:13-19, 21-22, 24-25

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

Mark 2:1-12

Dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience, as I return to this sacred cathedral that the Lord has entrusted to me for the spiritual guidance of the archdiocese, I want to express my special thanks and my sincere affection for all of you. As God's people, you are not following the words and thoughts of a human being but the revelation of God himself, which you continued to receive even in the absence of your archbishop¹. While in Puebla I received a letter informing me that the cathedral Masses were overflowing in attendance and in fervor and that the presence of the Spirit could be felt here. The letter ended by telling me, «We extend our hands to Father Fabian just as we do to you, with the same faith in Christ, who is the one preaching to us». I think that what's important is what Saint Paul has told us today: it is «the same Christ who is being preached to you by me and Silvanus and Timothy»². (2 Cor 1:19). That is what fills me with joy. My desire is to awaken amazement and enthusiasm, not for my poor mortal self, fragile as all of you are, but for the immortal One, the eternal One who gives us cause for solid hope. I want to thank you all—priests, religious, faithful, communities—for the warm reception you gave me when I returned on Friday. And I want to express my special gratitude to the airport authorities who, to my delight and surprise, showed me exquisite respect. May God reward you.

My task now is to reflect on the word of God in my own community after having been in contact, through their bishops, with communities of the different countries of our continent and with other guests from Europe and Africa. We will also compare the life of the church here among us with what people there in distant countries are doing. I want to use this universal message of the Gospel as the framework for the concrete message that the bishops meeting in Puebla addressed to all men and women of Latin America, even those who are not of the Christian faith but have good will. We speak from Latin America with the testimony of a living church, and we speak for all the world.

Today's readings seem to me especially opportune for providing the biblical background for the message that is no doubt being proclaimed this Sunday in many cathedrals of Latin America. Since all the bishops have left Puebla and returned to their sees, they will be saying more or less the same as I want to say to you today. They will be taking these beautiful

¹ Archbishop Romero did not preach in his Cathedral of San Salvador on three Sundays (28 January, 4 February, and 11 February 1979) since he was in Puebla, Mexico, attending the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops.

² Romero mistakenly uses the name «Titus» instead of «Timothy».

readings from the Holy Bible and incarnating them in the reality of Latin America, thus preaching a valuable message that seeks to be a summons to faith, hope, and charity. That's the way the Puebla document begins³, and so it provides me my first reference for today's homily, to which I will give a title, as is my custom. The title today will be «Christ, the Church's Ever New Word» because I don't want my preaching to leave behind sad memories. As Christ said, «There are those who have ears to hear but do not hear» (Matt 13:13), but I am happy that there are people who have always understood and grasped what has been preached here. I will speak like Saint Paul: «I want to preach nothing else but Christ, and him crucified» (1 Cor 2,2). This is the eternal message of the church, which was already being proclaimed seven centuries before Christ, as the first reading from Isaiah declares, «Remember not the things of the past; behold, I am doing something new» (Isa 43:18-19). Isaiah was announcing the redemption from sins that would come in Christ seven centuries later, in the fullness of time. For it is Christ who appears in today's gospel with the power to forgive sins and to lead people along the paths of true liberation. This is the Christ that Saint Paul preaches, and with Paul we will bring the homily to a close and then approach the altar. Christ is our amen. In Christ we express our full confidence in God, just as God through Christ is the yes of God's love for us. «Christ, the Church's Ever New Word» becomes incarnate in history—that is my first idea for today. The second idea will be that our history needs a theology, the theology of history; there is something of God in all concrete events, no matter how trivial, no matter how criminal. And third and finally: Christ and his Spirit give us the right to have hope for our history.

Christ is the Word who becomes incarnate in history

God does not despise material realities. It is impossible to preach the Gospel without referring to the history in which one is preaching. Many people want a spiritualist type of preaching that leaves sinners at peace. They want preaching that doesn't accuse as idolaters those who bow before wealth and power. Any preaching that fails to condemn the sinful realities within which we reflect on the gospels is not the Gospel. There are plenty of flatterers, plenty of false prophets; in times of conflict such as our own, there are plenty of people whose pens are for hire and whose words are sold cheap, but that is not the truth.

Someone told me that when they were getting my bag from customs the day before yesterday, someone said, «There goes the truth». Those few words filled me with optimism because in my bag I wasn't carrying contraband or falsehood—I was carrying the truth. I went to Puebla to learn more about the truth. A reporter said to me, «They say that after Puebla you're going to change your preaching. What do you think?» I told him, «The truth has no need to change. The truth is spoken always, sometimes with more finesse, sometimes with less. Given our limitations, the truth is always the concrete expression of a person who has a particular style and a way of being, but the person is never anything more than an instrument of God».

Truth is found in our concrete history, dear sisters and brothers, and today's readings give us an example of that. What is the first reading if not Isaiah reflecting on the reality of his moment in history? The Israelites were prisoners and captives in the Babylonian exile. In this beautiful chapter Isaiah declares that God is going to undo the locks on all the prisons and let

³ *A Message for the Peoples of Latin America*, document of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla. Unless otherwise indicated, the parts of this homily in quotation marks are citations for this document which Romero reads and comments on throughout the homily.

the captives go free. «Remember not the past, for behold, I am doing new things; even now they are bursting forth» (Isa 43:18-19). The image of rivers flowing in the desert indicates that God can accomplish even what seems impossible if people place their confidence in him. And Isaiah speaks of a return. For the Israelites in Babylon, everything seemed to have collapsed. Many had lost hope, but there was still some awareness among the remnant of Israel; that awareness was always there, something of a «remnant of hope». That was the awareness that the prophets nourished.

The Israelites grew nostalgic, sisters and brothers, when they remembered their history and the days when God had freed them from Egypt and led them through the desert under the guidance of Moses. It was a history of great expectations, but now they were saying, «All that has collapsed. Once again we are in captivity, and there is no hope». Isaiah tells them, «Forget those extraordinary events of the past because greater things are yet to come» (Isa 43:18). The God of the history of Babylon is not the God of the history of Egypt. He is the same living God, but this is a new chapter. This is a reflection for our own community. It's wonderful to see the multitude of people I'm seeing here in the cathedral and the multitude I can sense through the radio, all of them reflecting in hopefulness. That God of Egypt, that God of Babylon, that God of the first Christians—that is the God that Christ also senses in his people when the time of fulfillment arrived.

These chapters two and three of Saint Mark describe the ideological struggle that was waged by Christ as he announced the new salvation prefigured in the time of Isaiah and now made real in the curing of the paralytic as a sign and a sacrament of true salvation from sin. «Which is easier», he asked, «to say to this paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Get up and walk!"? Since forgiveness of sins cannot be observed, God gave the people this sign of a sick man who could «get up» (Mark 2:9-11). God can heal just as easily as forgive, and so the argument was settled: forgiveness is the salvation God brings us. That paralyzed man felt happier with having his conscience cleansed than with having his body restored to health.

The Gospel of Saint Mark was not written as a biography of Christ. It was written as a reflection of the church in Rome, where Peter was preaching and where Mark, his secretary, was recording what he saw and heard. That's why the present pope, John Paul II, when he took possession of the Lateran Cathedral, stated that he is the present bishop of Rome, successor to the bishop of Rome who came from Galilee⁴. Anyone who studies this «Gospel of Peter», as written by Saint Mark, discovers that it is not an orderly narrative. Instead, it is an application of the life and the doctrine of the Savior to the concrete reality of that community in Rome. That's what this gospel is: the reflection of a particular community. Therefore, sisters and brothers—and this is a beautiful thought—the figure of Christ is not captured in any biography but is rather reflected in the primitive church and from there transmitted to the universal church. When we read the four gospels today, we should not forget that the earliest Christian communities were doing the very same as we are doing today: reflecting on the life and the presence of Christ in the world. That is what the base ecclesial communities are doing, and that is what our homilies are doing when they have the good fortune, as this one in the cathedral does, to be heard and reflected on with rapt attention—and I am the first to be moved by that!

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the Basilica of St John Lateran», 12 November 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (19 November 1979).

We are reflecting on a living divine presence among us, and that is why the gospels reflect something more than the events they narrate. In today's gospel, for example, what we see reflected is not just the healing of the paralytic but also the way that healing was meditated on by a human community that called itself Christian. As a result, certain phrases in the text came later than the event itself. Saint Mark says, for example, «So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins» (Mark 2:10), but certainly Christ did not say that to his enemies, the Pharisees. Rather, that saying reflects the understanding of the church community: they realized that the sickness that was cured miraculously could be the sign of a divine presence that forgives sins.

Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians describes for us a particular situation. Paul was unable to travel a second time to Corinth, so he wrote them this second letter, which has all the characteristics of a letter: it is simple, sociable, even a bit disorganized. In the letter he expresses his feelings and defends himself against certain murmurings in Corinth. People were saying, «He said he was going to come, and now he's not coming. He's not serious». Paul answers in return, «My preaching is not yes today and no tomorrow. It is always the yes of Christ» (2 Cor 1:18-19).

In other words, sisters and brothers, if we follow a straight line from God in Egypt and God in Babylon, through God in the time of Christ and God in the time of the apostles, we arrive at this community that is all of us here today. We are receiving the same message, and it has been made concrete for our Latin American history by Puebla, where we just met with pastors from all over America. In their message these bishops declare, «Upon this continent of ours, inspired by Christian hope and overwhelmed with problems, "God has poured out a great light which shines forth in the revitalized face of his church"». Puebla cites these words of Medellín to affirm that Puebla is also an official act of the church and to make it clear that those who would find a contradiction between Medellín and Puebla are forgetting that the same God of history who ten years ago had inspired the message of Medellín is also inspiring, now in 1979, the message of Puebla.

The same God of our history is present in this magnificent message that is now more concrete than ever, and it comes from our dear brother bishops who wanted to express their solidarity with the Diocese of San Salvador. This is the message they have sent me to deliver: «By this message to you we want to address the whole people of God who are in your archdiocese and all the poor people in your country to whom you announce the Good News of Jesus Christ in your present situation. As you wrote in your pastoral letter, they are the Body of Christ in history. Through your voice they have been present here in Puebla». That means all of you, sisters and brothers, were present there. «We know that yours is a people of great dignity who are distinguished for the hard work they do just to preserve their lives. Yours is a people suffering oppression and repression that has been condemned by you, and we know that you will continue to declare in a Christian spirit: "Enough is enough! It cannot continue like this!" Yours is a people who, whether they know it or not, are a living and suffering servant of God. By their pain and by their willingness to surrender their lives for the sake of dignity, they are creating a communion that bears within itself the seeds of a new life for today and for the future»⁵.

⁵ Letter of Bishop Cámara, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, Bishop Leonidas Proaño, and twenty-two other bishops to Archbishop Romero, 10 February 1979 in *Orientación* (25 February 1979).

Events of the week

Such is our history and the God of our history. Therefore, sisters and brothers, since returning from Puebla I have studied the concrete reality of our particular history. The history of our people in El Salvador is very dense indeed, and I haven't had a lot of time to deepen my knowledge in these days. Reading our weekly paper, *Orientación*, however, I learned that the Human Rights Commission and our own Legal Aid Office have taken up the case of Manuel Antonio Rodas⁶. He is a small businessman, age twenty-nine, who was arrested in Usulután and was later brought, badly beaten, to the hospital in Usulután. Thank God, he is now under the jurisdiction of the courts, but there is still reason to fear for his life.

Also in our archdiocesan paper I found the story about José Macario Miranda Mejía⁷. He was arrested on the highway to Zacatecoluca by the National Guard. His family says he has no links with political organizations. He was simply working on a construction project, but they're trying to implicate him in the case of a mysterious house that's located near the project. And then there are the many labor problems, about which you can read yourselves in our paper.

San Miguel has also gone through a week of terror. Following the capture and the murder of Professor Oliverio Gómez and of José Leocadio Umanzor Guevara, employees of Saint John of God Hospital, a situation of fear has taken hold. Many people are reporting indiscriminate searches and arrests carried out in the military operations.

I also learned that terror still reigns in Tecoluca. Even though San Miguel and San Vicente are not part of my diocese, I am moved by human and patriotic sentiment to experience as my own the suffering of these citizens who fear for the fate of their loved ones.

I was delighted to see that someone wrote in *El Diario de Hoy* on February 12 criticizing the indiscriminate searches being carried out. Many young people are arrested unjustifiably and the treatment they receive at the hands of the security forces gives every indication of strong repression. With such conditions of terror, they are doing more harm than good.

Two corpses were discovered on the shores of Lake Ilopango, and I was astounded by the circumstances surrounding the discovery, as described in *El Mundo* on February 15: «The judge said that both youths were undressed in order to examine their bodies and establish that there were wounds. No one lives near where the bodies were found. In order to bury them, it was necessary to remove the handcuffs, using several keys of the watchmen and National Guard agents who were present at the investigation». How is it, I ask, that the keys of the Guards coincided with the handcuffs on the bodies?

Another event painful to report is the discovery of the body of a student on the beach of San Diego. The forensic report states that he did not die from drowning.

Still, I was given a little hope by two items I found in this week's papers. In view of the widespread violence, a request has been made in the Assembly to interrogate the Minister of Defense regarding what happened in El Despertar and other similar cases⁸. This seems to me to

⁶ «Solidaridad» in *Orientación* (18 February 1979).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *La Prensa Gráfica* (14 February 1979).

be a call for justice so that the many crimes and assaults won't remain unpunished. Even those who wear military uniforms are obliged to render accounts before justice for what they have done, and they should be properly punished if they have committed common crimes.

I also liked the newspaper headline, «Government Makes Known Measures of a Social Nature», and the announcement that some 37,561 *manzanas* of land are to be distributed by the ISTA. I was especially happy with the president's words: «I want to make it very clear that the focus we are giving to the agrarian problem does not consist simply in distributing land, because we are aware that that is not the only problem. What we are aiming for is to improve the living conditions of rural families in an integral way. We want to improve the human conditions of this sector»⁹. Blessed be God! This is what the church has been asking for from her evangelical perspective, and the church now offers her full collaboration. As John Paul told us bishops in Puebla, we must always keep the church's social doctrine up to date¹⁰. The church cannot resolve society's technical problems, but she can shed the light of the Gospel on all that contributes to human development. So we begin by saying that we hope that this distribution of land is not done by showing favoritism to party members. Rather, let it be a truly just project to help *campesinos*, without regard for political affiliation. Let it truly be for the benefit of the noble Salvadorans who work our fields.

Life of the church

This church that is reflecting here today has many reasons for heartfelt joy apart from the great joy with which people received me on my return. I want to tell you something about what I'm going to do at noon today in Talnique, where Sister Juanita is developing a very original project among the *campesinos*. Some people there are being duly trained so that they can receive from their bishop the authorization to bring communion to their villages. I hope they are listening to me now, because I learned that threats have been made concerning the meeting today. I was even told that perhaps it would be better for us not to proceed with this matter since something might happen. I'm not doing anything wrong, and I invite those who have denounced the ceremony to come and attend it, at twelve o'clock today in Talnique. You will see that it is a noble service that the church is offering so that the Bread of Life can be brought to communities where it's difficult for the priest to reach. I commend Sister Juanita and her catechists for this project, which corresponds perfectly with the liturgical renewal and with the life of our church.

I've also had the pleasure of greeting the superior general of the Congregation of the Assumption. She and her central council are here with us now, and I have communicated to her the satisfaction of our diocese with the work of the Sisters of the Assumption.

This afternoon I'll also have the pleasure of meeting the superior general of the Belgian sisters who are working here among us, and with great satisfaction I'll be commending the labor of Mother Chepita, a religious who has given herself heart and soul to the community of San Antonio Abad. She has been unjustly implicated in the tragic events that occurred there¹¹,

⁹ *El Diario de Hoy* (10 February 1979).

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to Inaugurate the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

¹¹ Sister María José Forrier, known as Mother Chepita, was arrested by the National Guard at the El Despertar retreat house after Father Octavio Ortiz and four youths were killed there on 20 January 1979.

but she deserves the full support of the archdiocese. I beg her mother general to leave her with us. Chepita will leave a community orphaned if she is taken away for reasons that are not evangelical.

In the name of our community I also want to congratulate those who are celebrating in Tontacatepeque, where they are commemorating the centennial of the establishment of that city. I told Father Casares to be the archbishop's representative at the event, and I trust he will extend my best wishes to that festive town that deserves the Lord's blessings.

Since returning from Mexico, I have encountered many false interpretations of Puebla and of the pope's discourses. I'm happy that I told you before I left that you should rely mainly on your own well-developed sense of discernment and maturity and that you shouldn't believe everything you read in the press or see on television or hear on the radio. The media are so manipulated and conditioned that they're capable of distorting even an address of the pope or a meeting as straightforward as that of the bishops in Puebla. And they do this to lend their support to many injustices and disorders that both the pope and Puebla consider intolerable.

Since I am communicating to you the message of today's sacred words within the reality of our archdiocese, I want to recall the words the bishops in Puebla used to describe the reality of Latin America: «If we direct our gaze toward our Latin American world, what kind of spectacle do we contemplate? No deep scrutiny is needed. The truth is that there is an ever-increasing gap between the many who have little and the few who have much». These are words that Puebla cites literally from pontifical documents. They describe perfectly our Salvadoran reality, and the bishops stated that this is the reality of Latin America. «There is an ever-increasing gap between the many who have little»—in El Salvador we would say, «between the many who have *nothing* and the few who have *everything*! This is not communism. These are the words of Puebla and the words of the popes. These are the words John Paul spoke in Santo Domingo and in Oaxaca and in Monterrey and in Guadalajara. It is a duty of the church today to serve human beings and human rights. What we understand by rights, the pope said in Santo Domingo, is that *campesinos* should have land, the workers should have their right to organize respected, and they should be paid a just wage¹².

When we heard these words of the pope, which have not been reported here, we thought that he would suffer the same fate as the archbishop of San Salvador: he would be silenced and marginalized whenever he touched on this duty of the church. But the bishops in Puebla have given us tremendous support; they have stated that this is the reality, and it reveals that our Christianity still has a long way to go. «The values of our culture are threatened. The basic rights of human beings are being violated». Those are the words of the message of Puebla.

This message also mentions other realities: «For evident reasons human beings are required not to practice physical and moral violence, not to engage in abuses of power or financial manipulations, not to abuse sex—in a word, not to violate the Lord's precepts—because everything that wounds the dignity of men and women wounds in some way also God himself».

¹² JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the Concelebrated Mass in Santo Domingo's Independence Square», 25 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

The bishops of Latin America also asserted the following: «Our pastoral concerns for the humblest members of the social body are imbued with human realism. Our concerns are in no way intended»—pay close attention to this part of the message—«our concerns are in no way intended to exclude from our thoughts and our affection other representatives of the society in which we live»—here they are speaking of the wealthy. «To the contrary, our words are serious and timely warnings to stop the gaps from growing»—and they *are* growing—«and to keep sins from multiplying so that the Spirit of God does not draw apart from the Latin American family. And because we believe that the examination of people's religious and moral behavior should be reflected in the political and economic processes of our countries, we invite all people, regardless of class, to accept and embrace the cause of the poor as if they were accepting and embracing their own cause, the cause of Christ himself who said, "All that you did for one of these my sisters and brothers, as humble as their state may be, it is as if you did it for me"» (Matt 25:40). Notice how the church in Puebla insists that the evangelization of Latin America be reflected in the political and social processes.

In this document agreed upon in Puebla you will find the best response to all those who object when we talk about the «preferential option for the poor». It does not mean excluding the wealthy. Rather, it is a summons also to the wealthy to experience the problems of poor people as their own and to undertake studies—along with the government and in dialogue with technical people—to see how El Salvador can escape from this dead-end alley. They must study the situation and make available all the means at their disposal, as if they were trying to solve some problem that affected them directly. The problem is not solved by sending capital overseas. Capital must be put to work with a true social consciousness, as the pope said so beautifully: «Don't forget that private property carries with it a tremendous social mortgage»¹³. Here, then, we see how the message of Puebla responds to the history of our peoples.

Our history needs a theology, a theology of history

So, sisters and brothers, now that we've considered our reality from the perspective of the Scripture readings and the bishops' message from Puebla, my second thought is a theological reflection. The theology of history is a science that is making great advances these days, especially since John Paul II has told us that we have to study the signs of the time in the light of the Gospel. God speaks to us out of our historical context. God cries out from all that is good and beautiful in human beings, as well as from all that is ugly and evil in human beings and human societies.

What do we find in today's biblical readings? In the first reading God invites us not to be content just with the delights of the past, because he is able to make all things new. God does not repeat himself. What a marvelous thing that is! What new thing is God offering our Salvadoran history? Let us believe because God has spoken, just as the captives in Babylon believed the prophet when he announced to them a liberation that never seemed to arrive, but then liberation did come because God does not speak lies.

Today's first reading tells us how God arrives to denounce sin. In that tremendous first reading God speaks to the people of Israel by means of the prophet: «You are wearing me down with your sins. You are making me your servant because you want me to do your will and not

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

mine. Therefore I summon you to judgment» (Isa 43:24). In the first reading a court trial is set up, where God judges his people in this fashion: «You would never be acquitted in a trial where only justice prevailed. If I forgive you, it is because of my good will and my love. Because of my love I forgive you» (Isa 43:25). This should give us confidence.

Lord, our Salvadoran society has committed many sins. It has wanted to make you its servant. It has tried to make your church despicable. When I returned from Puebla, they told me about so many outrages that if I were more sensitive to these things, I might have said, «What ingratitude! I preach to them the liberation of God, and people respond to me with these paid propaganda ads, these offensive announcements, these crude commentaries». But none of this matters because God himself complained to his people through his prophet Isaiah, «You are wearing me down, but I want you to know that I forgive you for love of myself (Isa 43:24-25). So noble is my cause, so great is the salvation I announce and proclaim, that there is no sense in worrying about the rubbish in the street when we have a whole new history before us». (Applause)

What else do we find in the readings for today? Here we have the very heart of the Gospel message, the moment when this reflection on the healing of the paralytic becomes the reflection of the community. The lips of Jesus utter the words: «I have seen your faith. Your sins are forgiven you» (Mark 2:5).

Faith and conversion—that is how we could sum up the message of the bishops of Latin America: faith and conversion! God needs people to be converted, and that's why we have preached both to the poor and to the wealthy. It's not that we're pandering to the sins of the poor or that we're blind to the virtues of the wealthy. All of them have sins, and all of them need conversion, but poor people, because of their situation of poverty, are more disposed to conversion; they feel a greater need for God. And so, if we really want to learn the meaning of conversion and faith and confidence in others, then we all have to become poor or at least make the cause of the poor a true concern of ours. That is the moment when people begin to experience faith and conversion: when they are poor in spirit, when they know that wealth and politics and power are no use at all. Without God we are nothing. When we feel a real need for God, that is faith, and that is conversion.

Addressing Latin America from Puebla, we bishops spoke eloquently about conversion, and as pastors we even accused ourselves. Our message states, «Our aim is not only to convert others but also to be converted ourselves, along with everyone else, so that our dioceses, parishes, institutions, communities, and religious congregations are not obstacles but rather incentives for living the Gospel». And again: «For all our faults and limitations, we pastors ask to be forgiven by God and by our brothers and sisters in the faith and in our humanity».

Believe me, sisters and brothers, I pronounce those words with all sincerity. The person who denounces must be willing to be denounced. From the beginning I've said that I gladly accept criticisms when they are constructive and try to make me better than the poor soul I am. Most especially, I ask forgiveness from all those for whom my message has been misunderstood or poorly communicated. I want you to know that there is no pride or ill will in what I say; neither is there any distortion of what the Gospel is ordering me to preach to this archdiocese that has been commended to my care.

The true pastor experiences this need for conversion, and he preaches it as a personal necessity for himself and for all those who want to join him in forming the authentic church of Jesus Christ. The need for conversion has been the center of the church's message about the Word of God since Christ appeared in history. It was the message of the prophets who announced him, and it was the message of ecclesial assemblies, such as the one we just experienced in Puebla. The message of the church and the attitude of genuine pastors cannot be any different. We are not God. We are fragile, limited human beings, and we need to be converted. Believe me, sisters and brothers, when I tell you that I would like to be at the head of this whole procession of conversion that our diocese is undertaking. In Mexico my heart was moved when I listened to Salvadorans who live there but who are still interested in the history of their people. They told me that nowadays they have more love for the faith and the Gospel and more confidence in the church's preaching here in El Salvador. That's why I cannot change. I must seek more earnestly to adhere to the Gospel so that I can call out loudly to everyone, «Let us be converted so that Christ sees our faith and has mercy on us!»

Our history summons us to this conversion with words that at times seem violent, but they are simply the language of the church when she is calling sinners to forgiveness once they have repented. We have heard it said, for example, that the civilization we want is a «civilization of love». That saying is commented on at length in the central part of our message to the peoples of Latin America: «Let us all build a civilization of love». The saying is from Paul VI, who had a great genius for words. But what is the civilization of love? «Civilization of love» means taking seriously Christ's commandment: «By this people will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another as I have loved you» (John 13:35).

«The civilization of love is incompatible with any subjugation or dependence prejudicial to the dignity of Latin America». Consider how the church, holy in her desire to be converted, is almost demanding in her claims for human dignity because she knows that this treasure is not hers; rather it is the image of God that she must defend. We bishops in Puebla also stated, «We do not accept the condition of being satellites of any country of the world or of being adherents to any of their ideologies. We want to live in harmony with all nations, and we repudiate narrow, unbending forms of nationalism. Now is the time for Latin America to advise the developed countries that they should not hold us back or obstruct our progress or exploit us. On the contrary, they should magnanimously help us to overcome the barriers of underdevelopment, even while respecting our cultures, our principles, our sovereignty, our identity, and our natural resources». This is the spirit of the church! When they accuse us of defaming our homeland for the sake of other countries, they're forgetting that we are actually reflecting the reality of our homeland, precisely so that these values of our people will be respected. That is the spirit by which we will grow together as sisters and brothers, members of the same universal family.

When we talk about the civilization of love, we are also announcing that love «repudiates violence, selfishness, profligacy, exploitation, and moral follies». There are still those who do not believe in love but place their confidence in violence and terrorism. The church cannot accompany them on those paths, and the bishops in Puebla issued a call to them: «At first glance, the expression "civilization of love" seems a feeble attempt to confront the serious problems of our times. But we assure you that no stronger word exists in the Christian lexicon than the word "love" for it is joined with the force of Christ himself. If we do not believe in love, then neither do we believe in him who said, "A new commandment I give you: love one

another as I have loved you” (John 13:35). The civilization of love proposes to all peoples the evangelical riches of national and international reconciliation. There is no gesture more sublime than forgiveness. Those who do not know how to forgive will not know forgiveness».

This is the call that the church issues from Puebla. Let us build a civilization of love among all of us. Let us give our history an evangelical meaning and impulse so that nothing slows us down or tarnishes the brightness of our optimism. Sisters and brothers, like the prophets who announced times of freedom and joy to the captives in Babylon, so the church can appear ludicrous when she calls for love, reconciliation, and forgiveness, since other people place their faith in violence, kidnapping, and terrorism. The church will never walk those paths, and any assertion to the contrary is false; it is a calumny that only further enhances the aura around the persecution of our church.

Christ and his Spirit, the guarantee of our hope in our own history

I conclude, then, with this thought which is also found in the word of God today: Christ and the Spirit of God infused into the Christian people are the guarantee of our hope. We said we were going to put some final brushstrokes on our reflection with the second letter of Saint Paul [to the Corinthians].

Saint Paul was subject to criticisms, as were all the apostles and Christ himself. The story about the healing of the paralytic forms part of a narrative that extends through chapters two and three of Saint Mark. The narrative, which details the ideological struggle between Christ and the Pharisees, ends in chapter three, verse six, with the fateful words: «The Pharisees took counsel with the Herodians against him to see how they could eliminate him» (Mark 3:6). If anyone ran a risk of being attacked, it was Christ. Nevertheless, he was faithful to the point of being able to say, «It is accomplished», even when he was nailed to the cross (John 19:30). Christ too experienced attacks, and there were attempts to eliminate him—and not only attempts, for they finally succeeded.

Saint Paul must have had a difficult time as well when they ridiculed him in Corinth, telling him that his language was inconsistent; they accused him of saying yes today and no tomorrow. Saint Paul took issue with the calumny and told the Corinthians, «Our message to you is not yes and no. We announce Christ, who is the eternal yes of God» (2 Cor 1:18-19). What a beautiful name for Christ: the yes of God’s promises! Christ is the yes in whom God has promised such extraordinary marvels as a new salvation, forgiveness of sins, and a call to all nations to form one single people united in love. God does not repent of his promises but fulfills them in Christ, even when that Son of his heart is taken and nailed on a cross. If that is the necessary condition for the fulfillment of God’s promises, Christ is willing to die crucified. The sacrifice is the seal on God’s great promises, and that’s why Saint Paul says that those who try to be faithful to God say amen to him (2 Cor 1:20). This morning, dear sisters and brothers, let us reassess that timeworn word, amen. Perhaps we use it so much it has lost its meaning for us, for in the liturgy when we say amen, we are really making an act of faith. The most beautiful word we can say is yes, for it is our human yes to God through Christ.

Christ is humanity’s amen to God. In Christ the hopes of all nations and of every person become amen because in Christ the promises of God become yes. In Christ is found the zone where those who are most needy and hopeless—the sinful peoples, the benighted societies—

can glimpse the hope offered by a God who still loves us. That statement of Saint Paul, «Christ continues to be the yes» is a Greek grammatical construction, a tense that doesn't exist in our Spanish language. It means that what happened then continues to be a reality down through the centuries: Christ is alive, and he lives in his church, and he lives in Latin America.

That is why the bishops' message takes on that same attitude of Saint Paul. Putting all their confidence in Christ, the bishops want to awaken people to that same hope. They ask Latin America, «What is our contribution? What do we have to offer amid all the serious, complex questions of our time?» Often people have asked me here in El Salvador, «What can we do? Is there any way out of this situation in El Salvador?» As a man full of hope and faith—not only divine faith but also a faith in humanity, for I also believe in people—I tell them, «Yes, there is a way out—as long as the exits are not blocked». What are those exits? What we bishops said from Puebla was this: «How can we collaborate in promoting the welfare of our people when there are those who persist in maintaining their privileges at any cost, while many feel discouraged, and others are initiating actions to promote their survival and the clear affirmation of their rights?» This is a serious problem, sisters and brothers. Even as the situation becomes more desperate, people harden their hearts and defend only their self-interest.

But the church can make a contribution, the bishops say: «What do we have to offer you? We are like Peter when he was asked for alms at the temple entrance». The person asking for alms was a paralyzed man in front of the Jerusalem temple. One day, when Peter and John were on their way to pray in the temple, the poor beggar watched them, expecting them to give him something. That's when Peter spoke the words: «We have neither silver nor gold to give you». And we bishops are saying the same thing: «We have neither silver nor gold, but we give you what we have: in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk» (Acts 3:6). Here the poverty of Peter becomes treasure, and the treasure of Peter is named Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose and is always present by his Divine Spirit in the apostolic college and in the communities that are formed under its direction. Here we recall what John Paul II said in his inaugural Mass as supreme pontiff: in Saint Peter's Square he exclaimed, «Have no fear! Open wide the doors to Jesus Christ! Open up the doors of nations, economic and political systems, the broad fields of culture, civilization, and development—open them all to his saving power!»¹⁴. This is what we have to contribute!

In this message we recall once again that it is not the church's job to provide technical solutions. That is why the church cannot identify herself with any political solution. Let the politicians study the political solutions; let the sociologists study the sociological solutions. The economists in El Salvador have materials for studying the economic solutions. The church contributes only one value: hope in human beings. The church can tell politicians, technicians, sociologists, all the wealthy people, and all those who hold in their hands the keys to the solution: do not despair, but open your fields to the doctrine of Christ. The church exercises no hegemony; the church is seeking only to serve and to inspire. Take her into account! That's why we ask forgiveness. If we are not taken into account, perhaps it is because our human mediation has been deficient. But don't fix your eyes on us. Seek Christ! He is the one whose teaching is the only hope both for you and for us. That's why Saint Paul ends today's reading by telling us, «God has given us the Spirit with which we have been anointed and sealed and made

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily at the Inauguration of his Pontificate », 22 October 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 October 1978).

worthy. He has made us capable of having thoughts about God and has given us the dignity of being able to call God "Father"» (2 Cor 1:21-22). A father is not happy when any child of his perishes.

This is the hope that the church nourishes, and we find it expressed in this Sunday's Bible readings, which give us a framework for presenting to you the call to hope that comes in the name of all the bishops at Puebla. We will now draw close to this life on the altar that gives us proof of an imperishable love. That eternal amen of humankind and the eternal yes of God are alive on our altars and in our people; they are the soul of our church.

In the message of Puebla there is a passage that states, «The great wealth of women and men in Latin America is their hope and their Christian faith». Let us not waste these gifts we have! If these words can serve any purpose, then let it be this one, sisters and brothers. I have few pretensions, but one thing would make me very proud: to see this treasure that we've inherited from the evangelization of past centuries strengthened and not weakened or crippled. Let us not lose the hope of our church!

The church is a living organism. The church is all of you who are baptized and anointed by the Spirit of God. The church is you, Christian politicians; the church is you who have wealth and are Christians; the church is you who are sociologists, technicians, and professionals; the church is you who have the keys to the solution. But the church gives you what you still do not have: hope, the spirit to keep struggling, the joy of knowing that there is a solution and that God is our Father and keeps giving us strength. In the gospel story, the paralytic who wanted to be cured needed other men to lift him up on the roof and lower him down in front of Christ (Mark 2:2-4). So also, Christ and God could bring about the salvation of our people all by themselves, but they want there to be stretcher-bearers, people who can carry to the Lord this paralytic that is called our republic. They want us to carry our society with human hands and human solutions and human thoughts, and place it before Christ, who is the only one who can say, «I have seen your faith. Rise up and walk» (Mark 2:5). I do believe that our people will rise up and walk. (Applause)