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A HOLY CHURCH IN NEED OF PURIFICATION

Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

5 November 1978

Malachi 1:14b–2:2b; 2:8-10

I Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13

Matthew 23:1-12

Dear sisters and brothers, the whole of this chapter 23 of Saint Matthew is a model homily. It is a powerful denunciation of the abuses and the vanities of official religion and a call for authenticity. Remember that, according to the outline of Saint Matthew that we've been studying all year, these final Sundays of the liturgical year show Christ in the midst of the crisis that the kingdom of God must undergo before being established; the kingdom must confront opposition, misconception, calumny, and a determined refusal to understand.

Given this context, chapter 23 was written by Saint Matthew as something more than a biographical portrait of Christ designed to help the early Christians reflect on Christ's teachings and how they were to be lived out in their Jewish Christian community. Most of those early converts to Christianity were Jews, but they felt themselves a minority, surrounded by other Jews who were followers of traditional Judaism and also by converts from paganism who had been won over to the Jewish faith. These latter were much more fanatical in observing the law than the Jews themselves and viewed the Christians as renegades—or, to use modern vocabulary, «subversives». But these subversives who were faithfully following Christ reflected on the nature of their community and realized that it was not subversion but true following of the Lord.

Let us also take into account another tragic circumstance that appears in the chapter we read today. Around the year 70 of the Christian era, when Christianity was still taking its first steps, the Romans besieged Jerusalem and conquered it. For the Jews this was a frightful catastrophe for it meant that right there in the capital of Judea the people were feeling in the flesh divine condemnation for not having paid heed to God's messenger, the Messiah who was to come. That is what we hear in today's gospel: how the blood of many prophets was shed during persecutions and how countless crimes were committed resulting in the flood of pain, hunger, and bloodshed that culminated in the siege and capture of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70.

Keeping all of this in mind, we do well to reflect on what this means here in El Salvador on this fifth of November, the day when our country commemorates the first cries of national independence—we might almost say the first cries of childbirth because true freedom was even then not quite born. We do well to reflect also on the cry of Christ that stands out in today's passage: «Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how many times I yearned to gather your children together as a hen gathers her young, but you were unwilling!» (Matt 23:37). I seem to remember hearing an echo of these words two weeks ago when the pope was speaking on

television from Saint Peter's Square. He was just coming from a region of Europe where Christ was prohibited entrance, but from there he had looked back toward the western world, where entrance is also forbidden to Christ by a form of Christianity that is allied with capitalism, which is also atheist. «Open up the doors», cried the pope. «Don't be afraid. Christ alone has the words of eternal life»¹.

Sisters and brothers, I'd like to give today's homily a title that is daring—one might say almost sacrilegious—but it is one mentioned by the Second Vatican Council itself. It is this: «A Holy Church in Need of Purification». This phrase is found in section 8 of the constitution *Lumen Gentium*; the whole text reads: «While Christ—holy, innocent, and undefiled—knew nothing of sin but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the church, embracing sinners in her bosom, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, must always follow the way of penance and renewal» (LG 8). For me this is one of the most beautiful statements of the Council. We would be very mistaken to think that the church is the best thing in the world. That is the way many people conceive of the church: incapable of sin, immaculate, and untouched. But the Council has said that this is not the case for the church contains sinners in her bosom. Bishops, priests, religious, and married people—we call ourselves Christian, and yet we are sinners in need of purification. The true path is the path of penance and renewal. Woe to the Christians, woe to the bishops, woe to the priests who feel so perfect that they can scold others! They are the ones that Jesus Christ will now teach a lesson!

In this homily on our holy church in need of purification, I will present, as usual, three thoughts: first, the sins of the church; but second, the holiness of the church, of which Saint Paul gives a marvelous example in the second reading; and third, where is the source of this holiness for a church that is sinful but desires to be holy? The source is found in what Saint Paul tells us today, «In receiving the word of God from us, you received not a human word but what is truly the word of God» (1 Thess 2:13)—therein lies the secret!

The sins of the church

Let us focus on my first thought: the sins of the church. Today's first reading, which as always is related to the gospel, is taken from the prophecy of Malachi, and with what frankness Malachi speaks! He was prophesying when the Jews were reestablishing worship in the temple of Jerusalem and there was general prosperity in the land. Prosperity is often a problem. Prosperity in the church brings with it laxity. If priests feel everything is fine in their parishes, they should watch out! If Christians think that the Gospel is no bother, they should watch out! This tremendous prophecy of Malachi criticizes those forms of worship that are «relaxed» and avoid commitment: «Now you priests are the ones I address», says today's reading. «You have turned away from the right path and have caused many to falter by your instruction. Therefore I will make you contemptible and vile before the people» (Mal 2:1,8-9). There is nothing worse than a bad priest. «If salt loses its flavor, what use is it?» asked Christ, and he gave the answer himself: «It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot» (Matt 5:13). How sad are the words of a priest when he has lost his credibility! He becomes just «a sounding gong or a clashing cymbal» (1 Cor 13:1).

¹ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the Official Inaugural Mass of his Pontificate», 22 October 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 October 1978).

«You have not kept to my paths but have been partial to persons in applying the law», says the prophet (Mal 2:9). If they're Mr. So-and-so or Mrs. So-and-so, then we hear, «Happy to do it!» But if they're some poor, despicable persons, they're almost ignored. The church of the poor is a criterion of authenticity because she is not a church of classes. That doesn't mean despising the rich, but it does mean telling the rich that, if they don't become poor in their hearts, they will not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. The true preacher of Christ is the church of the poor that looks to the God who hears those who are praying in the poverty and misery and pain of the slums in the hope that they will be heard. Only by drawing close to those voices can the church feel close also to God. «You are partial to persons in applying the law» (Mal 2:9). How well the *campesinos* put it: «The law is like a snake; it bites only those who walk barefoot».

But to reinforce this prophecy, today's gospel is even more powerful. I don't want to limit my commentary just to the verses we read for this Sunday, so I brought a Bible with me. The whole of chapter 23 is a frightful denunciation based on the early Christian community's reflections about the teaching Christ left us and how we are living up to it. In the official reading for today we find some sins of the church that we've already mentioned.

«The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, observe all the things they tell you, but do not follow their example» (Matt 23:2). The first sin of the church is when there is a contradiction between what is taught and what is practiced. Sisters and brothers, in March of last year the bishops in an official statement wrote these words: «Everyone who denounces another must also be willing to be denounced»². Well, this Sunday our turn has come. In our community reflection today I extend this earnest invitation to all of us who, as a prophetic people, are committed to denouncing the world's injustices: let us all, both pastors and faithful, examine ourselves to see whether our denunciations turn out to be hypocritical: we talk a lot, but we do little!

Another sin mentioned in today's reading is this one: «They lay heavy burdens on their neighbors, but they don't lift a finger to move them» (Matt 23:4). This is the sin of interpreting the law rigorously and almost inhumanely. Many moralists and some of us who are confessors and counselors are only too ready to impose burdens, but we aren't ready to carry them ourselves!

Another more frightening and very frequent sin in church circles is hypocritical vanity, which Jesus condemns: «They do everything to be seen by the people. They widen their phylacteries» (Matt 23:5a). Phylacteries were little boxes containing texts of the law—they were tied to cords and worn by the Pharisees to fulfill literally God's commandment: «Keep my law before your eyes» (Deut 6:8). But the Pharisees understood the command so literally that they kept copies of the law in the little boxes and hung them before their eyes. That's what the phylacteries were. «And also», said Christ, «they lengthen the tassels of their robes» (Matt 23:5b). The Pharisee wore flowing robes as they walked through the plazas, and the length of their tassels reflected the majesty of their sacred power and their wisdom. What a vain bunch they were! Thanks be to God, the modern popes have now renounced the tiara, the long capes, and all that vain ecclesiastical pomp that did so much harm. It was pure religious ostentation. Of course, people want to be recognized as important. According to customs of the East, the

² «Message of the Bishops Conference of El Salvador on the Present Situation in the Country», 5 March 1977, in *Orientación* (20 March 1977).

more important a person was, the longer was the greeting extended to him or her. The Pharisees enjoyed receiving lengthy greetings in order to feel themselves important, but Christ tells them, «Do not be called “rabbi” or “father” or “teacher” because you are all brothers and sisters and there is only one Father, one Teacher, one Master: God, Jesus Christ» (Matt 23:7-8).

What a beautiful reflection this is for the church, sisters and brothers! Saint Teresa of Jesus once remarked on how confused people get about the titles of prelates, whether it's «Your Excellency» or «Your Eminence»—people have no idea³! Often it seems like so much foolishness: imagine, «Your Excellency!» How much more beautiful is the simple name of «Christian». That is the name we have inherited, and today the Gospel is calling us to account. For my part, in all Christian honesty, I would like for all of us, beginning with myself, to be converted by the tremendous admonition of our Lord Jesus Christ: «The one who is first among you should be your servant» (Matt 23:11). This is the principle. This is the basis of the true greatness of human beings. Those who have more power and more authority should not manifest their status with phylacteries or fancy clothes. They should manifest it in simplicity and service and in being the first to offer themselves to others. For those who have been given authority by God have also been given the grace to serve the people. The authority is given for the purpose of helping the people, not for assaulting them or insulting them or laying heavy burdens on them.

Following the assigned gospel for today's liturgy, sisters and brothers, there are some verses which contain seven terrible warnings made by Christ (Matt 23:13-32), and I don't want to lose sight of them this morning. Let us pray together that we don't fall into these failings that the Lord condemns.

«Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the kingdom of heaven away from the people. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those who are trying to enter» (Matt 23:13). Here Christ is referring to the fact that the Jews excluded from their synagogues those who became Christians. They expelled them and considered them renegades. That's why Christ tells them, «Since you have rejected Christ, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven, and you're closing the doors to those who want to enter. You have the key of knowledge; you know the law very well, but you haven't been able to understand Christ, who is the fulfillment of the law». Let us not believe excessively in our theological wisdom or in our religious knowledge. If we're lacking the humility and the grace that open us up to Christ, then all that knowledge of the law is quite useless.

Second: «Woe to you, blind guides who say....». No. «Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when you get one, you make him twice as much a child of Gehenna as yourselves» (Matt 23:15). In these early years of Christianity the Jews were traveling everywhere in search of converts—somewhat the way Protestants are doing today—and when they succeeded in winning converts, they made them more fanatical than they were themselves, with the result that the converts hated the Christian

³ In a humorous comment Saint Teresa said that she once used the title «Excellency» with a person who in reality should have been called «Eminence». See SAINT TERESA OF JESUS, *Camino de perfección* [Códice de El Escorial], 37,1. Also, in her letters Saint Teresa of Jesus rejected the titles of «Madam» and «Reverend» for herself: «So now you give me the title of “reverend madam”? May God forgive you!» (Letter 133,1); «What discomfort is caused me by such titles as “reverend”, for I would like you to remove them from all your subjects» (Letter 175,3); «Please don't put “madam” in the title. It's not the way we talk» (Letter 181,1). ÁLVAREZ T. (ed.), *Concordancias de las obras de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos, Spain 1997⁴.

intensely. That is why Christ says, «You make them twice as condemned as yourselves». What use is it to win converts for condemnation?

Third: «Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “If one swears by the temple, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gold of the temple, one is obligated”. Blind fools, which is greater, the gold or the temple that made the gold sacred? And you say, “If one swears by the altar, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gift on the altar, one is obligated”. You blind ones, which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? One who swears by the altar swears by it and all that is upon it; one who swears by the temple swears by it and by the One who dwells in it. One who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by the One who is seated on it» (Matt 23:16-22). Such casuistry was common among the Pharisees and the scribes; these were distinctions they invented to avoid real commitments, and that's what Christ is saying: «You have invented formulas, but you haven't understood that the intention of the person pronouncing a formula is simply to swear or not to swear. If the person has promised under oath, then he is obliged. There's no call for casuistry as a way of evading the commitments you have made with God».

The fourth curse of the Lord: «Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cumin, but you have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity. These you should have done, without neglecting the rest» (Matt 23:23). There was a law that required payment of tithes for the good things God gives us on earth, but these legal experts went into such minute detail about minor matters like cumin and dill that they neglected what we talked about last Sunday: the weightiest part of the law. That's why Christ used this telling comparison: «You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel!» (Matt 23:24). The camel was the largest animal known in Palestine, so by this image Jesus was indicting the hypocrisy of those who focused on mosquitoes while failing to notice huge beasts. That's what Christ was lashing out against when he said. «Blind guides, you strain out the gnat and swallow the camel!»

«Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You cleanse the outside of cup and dish, but inside you are full of plunder and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean. Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, beautiful to behold on the outside but inside full of the bones of the dead and of everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you look righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness» (Matt 23:25-28). What a beautiful comparison! Wonderful façades, but full of pillage and injustice! How comical a society is in which everyone is clothed in cashmere and silk and where they greet one another with great courtesy, but inside they are biting at one another. How nice looking are the offices of the bureaucrats and the furnishings of the courtrooms, but there before them stands a terribly tortured man, guarded by agents of the National Guard, and the man has to keep repeating what he had confessed under torture because the judge is unable to get the guards to leave the court so that the poor man may speak the truth! What beautiful façades on the prisons and the military bases, but there within they are more like tombs for the dead, and the only ones who manage to escape from those hellholes are the disappeared persons who die!

«Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the memorials of the righteous, and you say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have joined them in shedding the prophets' blood”. Thus you bear witness against yourselves that you are the children of those who murdered the prophets»

(Matt 23:29-31). What a profound reflection Christ offers here! What use is there in singing the praises of the prophets who were killed by our grandparents, especially if the grandchildren are still killing the prophets? That's why Christ, referring now not to the past but to the present, when he is personally experiencing the people's contempt, says the following: «Fill up the measure of your ancestors! You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the judgment of Gehenna?» (Matt 23:32-33). «Fill up the measure» means, «Now you have before you the supreme expression of the prophets: it is I, the Christ, who speak to you. Now that you're devising ways to take me to the cross, you serpents, this sea of bloody crimes and hypocritical corruption is reaching flood tide; now the iniquity of your injustices is reaching its culmination, you brood of vipers».

«For this reason, I send to you ...» Here Christ is referring to the New Testament, and this is the history we all know. What a shame that even El Salvador finds itself indicted by these words of Christ! «For this reason, I send to you prophets and wise men and scribes. Some of them you will kill by crucifixion, and others you will scourge in your synagogues. You will pursue them from town to town so that there will come upon you all the innocent blood shed upon earth, from the righteous blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar» (Matt 23:34-36). When Matthew wrote, the year 70 was drawing near, and the Romans were planning their siege of Jerusalem. This was the inevitable result of the consummate ingratitude of those who had refused to receive the prophets sent from God. The greatest of the prophets, the very Son of God made man, was preaching to them love, justice, and freedom, but they refused to listen. Him also they killed, but now the hour of vengeance was at hand.

Sisters and brothers, God is infinitely good but also infinitely just, and all that bloodshed, all those crimes, all that hypocrisy—we have them right here! As I already told you at the start, I'm not referring only to people outside the church; we are denouncing our very selves. We are denouncing all the injustices of our pastors, all the hypocrisy of our priests, our own great lack of holiness and consecrated life, all the failures in fidelity of so many Christian couples who are adulterous, the lack of purity in so many young people who don't live as chastely as God asks them to. We are denouncing our own society where so many bordellos do business, where so many centers of vice flourish, where so much importance is placed on appearances. Things cannot stay this way! God would be meretricious and unjust if things stayed this way and there was never a day of the Lord's wrath. Well, now it's coming, Christ tells us.

And in the year 70 it came historically upon Jerusalem as an example and a lesson for the nations. The historian Flavius Josephus, who wrote about those catastrophic events, said that the Romans couldn't find enough trees to cut down around Jerusalem to crucify all the Jews who were executed. There was no food or water in the city; people were dying of hunger and looked like walking skeletons; mothers were eating their own babies⁴. May God free us, sisters and brothers, from all that is now happening in our own land. May we heed in time the call for mercy which ends chapter 23: «Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling! Behold, your house will be abandoned and desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"» (Matt 23:37-39).

⁴ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *The Jewish Wars*, VI,12; VII,8.

Observe how God, despite his anger, is always merciful. On a recent Sunday we considered how Saint Paul presents God's project in his letter to the Romans: because the Jews rejected God's message, the apostles went forth to preach to the Gentile nations, and the Gentile nations received their message. Paul's hope was that the Jews, seeing that the message they had rejected was welcomed by all the world, would also return, humble themselves, and be converted.

The destruction of Jerusalem was the sign Christ had announced to the Jews: «I am going, and you will no longer see me. You will no longer be the chosen people. God has already lavished on you every possible paternal affection, but you have not heeded him. Now your house will be desolate». How sad is a house that has been abandoned! How sad it is when someone who has lived far away returns and finds neither father nor mother, neither sisters nor brothers nor friends, but simply the ruins of the house where he spent his childhood. Where before there was much joy, now there is nothing. This is the comparison that Christ makes: the house will be left desolate.

When people visiting Jerusalem nowadays reach the esplanade of the temple, what sadness they feel! There is even something called the «Wailing Wall», where the Jews go to weep over what once was their temple. Now there is nothing more than an empty esplanade—«behold, your house will be abandoned» (Matt 23:38). Might not Jerusalem have conceivably been the scene of what we've seen in recent days—the election of the pope, the spiritual head of the world? That's what God wanted, but all that was left desolate. Now we have to go somewhere else.

And this is not happening only in Jerusalem, sisters and brothers. It is happening here in this community that is reflecting now on history and on the projects of God that we humans have brought to naught. Let us not consider just the community where Matthew was writing this tragic chapter; let us look right here, for we are the ones who are now filling the cathedral or listening by radio. Every day brings me more consolation, for I know that the radio is carrying this reflection to so many towns and villages, to so many sickbeds, to so many prisons, to so many who are suffering, and also to the many people to whom Christ's cry is directly addressed: «Hypocrites, be converted!» May all of us who are reflecting together here feel that we are truly the ones being addressed by the voice of Christ who tell us, «Woe to you! If your righteousness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven» (Matt 5:20).

Life of the church

This community that is reflecting together, dear sisters and brothers, is our real community, and I now take delight in calling to mind some concrete events. There was joy yesterday here in the cathedral with the ordination of a young man, Rafael Urrutia. He is now rejoicing with his own people and celebrating his first Mass there in the Diocese of Santa Ana. I want to congratulate you, people of God, because some priests who came from the seminary in Guatemala where Rafael studied, commended us for the people's participation in the liturgy. It was really a beautiful ceremony, not only because it was impressive to see a man consecrate himself to God but because all the people followed the ceremony attentively with faith, with prayer, and even at certain moments with applause to celebrate this gift of priesthood.

Our community also rejoices with the celebration of the fifty years of religious life of Father Juan Platero, a Jesuit priest who dedicated his youth and his life to the seminary and who is now doing parish work in the parish of Guadalupe in San Vicente. Tomorrow at twelve noon we will celebrate his golden anniversary in the church of El Carmen in Santa Tecla. We invite you all there.

This community of ours, in its desire to reflect seriously and sincerely on how it serves the world, is organizing spiritual exercises for the clergy during these coming weeks. In fact, tomorrow some of the vicariates of our diocese will begin their spiritual exercises at the novitiate of the Somascan fathers; they will be directed by Father Jesús Delgado. This will be a week of reflection on how we can become the authentic pastors that today's gospel requires us to be. Father Delgado has asked me to advise all the priests attending these exercises to bring with them a Bible and the documents of the Second Vatican Council since the themes of the exercises will center on the sublime idea of priestly identity. So, all those taking part in the spiritual exercises for clergy this week, please bring along a Bible and the Council documents.

In the parish of El Carmen in the Colonia Roma there will be a change of pastors because the present pastor, Father Enrique, has to return to Mexico.

This community of the archdiocese takes great joy in the lively religious life here. I had a wonderful time in Ayagualo on the first of November, the feast of All Saints, when the CONFRES, that is, the organization that brings together all the religious of the country, met for a day of study and to elect new officers. It is marvelous to see all those congregations with such different charisms sharing together fraternally; their sole concern is consecrating themselves to God by serving God's people in our country. I learned some concrete things there. For example, the Oblates of Divine Love will be having a meeting in Rome in which Mother María Del Carmen Scaglietti will take part; we wish her well as she travels to represent her community, and we accompany her in prayer. I also learned that Sister Inés, a much esteemed Sister of the Assumption, will soon be leaving us. We truly regret this because she is one of those collaborators that we treasure greatly; since she is always here at our eight o'clock Mass, I want to tell her that we are grateful to her for all that she has done here. We hope that the memories she has of this church of our archdiocese will always provide her inspiration. Our community will accompany her in prayer. And since the world is small, we hope that she will return to us one day!

On October 31 there was a meeting of the diocesan pastoral commission with all the students and formative staff of the major seminary. It was a very unique meeting that also involved pastors who are interested in the seminarians either because they come from their parishes or because they work with them. It was a very honest meeting where the young men and the older priests took a hard look at the past and the present to see how things need to change in the church. We cannot simply cling to traditions when those traditions no longer serve as vehicles of what is eternal in the church, namely, the life that Christ has brought for priests and for the world.

We have made some very enjoyable visits to the communities. On November 3, the feast of Saint Martin de Porres, we were in Quezaltepeque, where this feast is celebrated in a colorful way: many boys dress up like Saint Martin and carry their little brooms, while many girls dress in the habit of Saint Rose of Lima. It's a delight to behold! The Dominican sisters and the Belgian sisters, along with Father Roberto, had prepared a group of young people for

confirmation. The community there is truly quite lively. What I told them was this: «I congratulate you, sisters and brothers, because the church of Quezaltepeque is not one that has been usurped by political activists. The church is this community of yours, a communion of love, of faith, and of life. This is what the church wants. As for material temples and convents, the church in her history has been accustomed to having them taken away and used for other purposes after she has built them. That matters little to us as long as the community remains alive. That's the important thing».

Today there's much festivity in another community, Santo Tomás, for the very deserving Father Teodoro Alvarenga. Today they're celebrating the twenty-five years that he has lived there as pastor. Despite his longevity there, he is not one of those priests who just settles down. He keeps working on new projects, almost as if he arrived there yesterday! A marvelous example of a priest who is a true pastor.

In the village of El Carmen, part of the parish of Cristo Redentor, we will celebrate confirmations in one week, on Sunday the twelfth, not on Saturday as was first announced. There is activity also in another community named El Carmen, the one in Santa Tecla. The Jesuits there are elderly but always young in spirit. They have organized talks on the Bible for every night from October 31 through December 21; rather, the talks are on Tuesday and Thursday nights at 7:30 o'clock. The people of Santa Tecla now have the opportunity to learn about the Bible in the church of El Carmen. Also, the children there in El Carmen are advised that on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at three o'clock in the afternoon there will be classes to prepare them for first communion, which will be on December 31. Another more distant community, but in communion with our archdiocese is Manaquil in Nueva Trinidad; they have invited us to a beautiful celebration in honor of Saint Anthony on November 13.

At the same time our community is saddened for I received a telegram from our beloved Father Gonzalo López, the pastor of Comasagua, who tells me that in Talnique they stole the sacred vessels and other objects from the church. There are also other reasons for sorrow and suffering in that community, and we commiserate with them because we are all sisters and brothers.

I also want to inform you that the archdiocesan information commission has published some annexes for the pastoral letter⁵. The pastoral letter on the church and the people's political organizations has been finding ever greater and wider acceptance, and I thank you for that. To help in your study of the letter, three annexes have been prepared. The first describes the national reality within which the church is working; the second shows how the word of God confronts human misery; and the third contains more recent church teaching in the form of documents. There is also a questionnaire which should help in the study of the pastoral letter.

There will also soon be published a series of lessons that Father Jesús Delgado has prepared to help people in the assimilation of the teaching of our pastoral letter. And I repeat, I'm very grateful to you for the eager reception you have given the letter even though the mass media have completely ignored it. But that doesn't matter. Much greater than all the mass media are our radio station, *Vox Panamericana*; our little newspaper, *Orientación*; and above all you, the people. As I've told you before, you are the church's microphones wherever you go

⁵ «Annexes to the Pastoral Letter, *The Church and the People's Political Organizations*», Pastoral Commission, Archdiocese of San Salvador (October 1978).

because what you announce by your enthusiasm is neither paid propaganda nor views tailored to particular interests, but love for the truth and defense of what is right. This is what bothers them terribly, and that's why they want to silence the church.

This community also experiences great confidence in certain personal matters. I was very pleased on All Souls' Day when someone requested a series of Gregorian Masses—that means thirty consecutive Masses; the person told me that they were not for a deceased family member but «for the most abandoned soul in purgatory». What gestures of love there are among our people! I also received a very nice letter from Comalapa, which stated, «I request prayers for our beloved Pablo León León, who was a faithful servant of the Blessed Sacrament». How I would love to be able to repeat here all these intimate personal confidences! They are the voice of our community! They are the joy of our people!

Events of the week

This church that rejoices and suffers, sisters and brothers, also sheds light on the historical reality of our country, on the situations that cause us pain and on those that console us. For example, on November 3, after the Colegio de la Sagrada Familia had generously opened its doors to students taking examinations, and some 300 students from the San Salvador Technological Institute were filing in (by arrangement with the Ministry of Education), a violent squad of soldiers soon arrived and declared, «There is a demonstration going on here, and someone was seen carrying a red flag!» The director and sub-director of the schools calmly told the soldiers, «But there's no demonstration here. The students are taking an examination!» Despite this assurance, a military helicopter almost descended on the school, and the troops kept guard over the whole campus, as if they were confronting some terrible revolutionary army. And these were just some poor boys and girls taking exams! Their parents have written to protest this invasion. Such things are really ridiculous, but they're the fruit of the repressive situation in which we live. Let us hope that we can avoid absurdities like this that bring shame upon our country.

Repression continues to spread in the zone of Cinquera. ORDEN and the National Guard continue to inflict turmoil, violence, and torture on many of the workers there, such as Helio and Elfidio Fuentes, who were tied up and savagely beaten in front of their families. Also in Arcatao, Chalatenango, a military operation took place that mistreated the men of the area and carried them off to a still undetermined destination⁶.

Last Sunday I received a visit from an old man, and it was very painful for me. He told me he had heard the declarations of Reynaldo Cruz Menijívar, who stated that he had left behind in the prison of the Treasury Police one Cecilio Ramírez, who was almost blind as the result of torture. This old man said to me, «He is my son! I've presented a petition of habeas corpus, and they give no reply. Can you offer two Masses?» «For what?» I asked him. «To see if God will soften their hearts». So I celebrated them. Let us hope, sisters and brothers, that God will pay close heed to the agonizing pain of an elderly father who knows that his son is dying in a hellish anguish, and also to our own prayers that ascend to the Lord. And there are so many other situations like this one!

⁶ «Solidarity» in *Orientación* (12 November 1978).

I am happy that the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador has made a statement concerning the case of Isabel Rodríguez Barrera, which we mentioned last Sunday. This vendor of novelties was shot in a truck on August 19, and he is now in the hospital under close guard. Not even the executive judge named by the Supreme Court of Justice is allowed to see him. What kind of democracy is it when justice is made subject to arms? Every person has the right to effective recourse, but this poor man who is recovering from his wounds knows nothing of his fate because he is at the mercy of the armed men who are guarding him.

We also deplore the ongoing labor conflicts⁷. At ADOC there are complaints of unjustified firings; likewise at Sacos Sintéticos. At FYNSA, the factory of Fantasías y Novedades, the workers are denouncing assaults, firings, and other injustices. The INDECA union denounced that certain publications have unfairly confused twenty of their members with guerrillas. There is a tendency to violate the right of workers to organize, a topic treated precisely in our pastoral letter. If the situation of workers is made so difficult that they cannot exercise that right to organize and defend themselves, then, sisters and brothers, the situation of *campesinos* is far worse. Their voice is simply not heard, even though they've protested that the meager wage increase they've received doesn't even cover today's cost of living.

I received an instructive letter from someone who claims to be a small coffee grower. He does not spare me my offenses, but there are some good points in his letter. I especially note that he says that the small coffee growers are exploited by the big ones; he also says that labor inspectors keep close watch over them, but that the small coffee growers prefer to pay bribes rather than taxes. Now, isn't this precisely what I'm saying? The small people are exploited by the big people, and bribes are used to cover up the flouting of the law. Those who end up losing are always the barefoot folk, the *campesinos*. However, I'm not justifying all *campesinos*. I know that among them there is also much vice. I'm not in agreement with them in that regard, and I counsel them to use well what they earn. The money they earn at harvest time is the only cash income they have all year, and they should use it to good advantage. But it's unjust to say that they're all irresponsible and for that reason should be treated roughly. What is worse, such reasoning is used to justify exploitation.

Sisters and brothers, this community of ours, looking beyond its borders, takes an optimistic view of its work and its struggle because it knows it is not alone. What delight I felt when I read that the bishops' conference of Brazil has published a document about the social situation in that country⁸. The document declares—pay close attention, you hypocritical Pharisees!—that the church's mission is to express her views about the national realities and in that way to take responsibility for helping to develop the people's political consciousness. The Brazilian bishops are quite blunt in their analysis of the reality of their country and in their criticism of the government.

Also, in Santiago de Chile the pastoral vicariate for workers is supporting the seven trade union federations that were declared illegal because of their Marxist tendencies. It's clear that these accusations are similar wherever you go. The vicariate, speaking for the church, has presented a petition of protection because the measures taken by the government against these federations are unconstitutional and the form they've taken cannot be considered legal.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ «Reflection on the National Situation» (26 October 1978), Bishops Conference of Brazil.

Another reason for rejoicing is the ecumenical outreach of the Catholic Church, which in the United States is joining with Jewish synagogues and the Orthodox churches in a Thanksgiving Day campaign against hunger in the world. We are well aware that one-third of children in developing countries die of hunger. I am happy that campaigns like this are being promoted.

The Organization of American States has reported on the costs incurred for maintaining peace between El Salvador and Honduras. Our own country has paid no less than \$1,200,000 already, and this outlay will continue until agreements are reached. And when will that be?

The conflict at the university continues, and I think especially about all those young people. Just now as I was entering the church, I saw a young university student, and I could discern in his countenance and his spirit how our youth are yearning for a university that is not subjected to violence but is a true seat of culture. Let us hope that the professionals, instead of continually fighting, find a solution to the conflict so that this temple of culture becomes what our president, speaking at the inauguration of the International Fair, said it should be: an institution that does us honor beyond our borders.

Let us also hope that the International Fair that was inaugurated Friday will be a showcase open to the world. May it truly do us honor and not be just a distraction that covers over the deep layers of misery, injustice, and violence in our country. May it truly live up to the president's eloquent words: «Let us join forces and multiply our actions to restore a new international order in the social and economic spheres so that peace is guaranteed, justice is strengthened, and human dignity is promoted»⁹. These are lovely words spoken to the international community, but behind our backs are prisons where human dignity is totally shattered and where freedom of expression, given the laws we now have, is pure illusion. All the same, we greet the beloved visitors from other countries who honor us with their impressive exhibitions, and we urge them to make their solidarity with our country a humanizing force that helps to bring about the society the president described in his discourse, a society where there is a more equitable economic order that serves as the groundwork of peace, a society that does not believe only in repression.

We also want to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Hospital Bloom. The work they do is truly wonderful! So many children, so many families have found there health, consolation, and a true refuge!

Let us pray also for our poor sister nation, Nicaragua. Ten thousand Nicaraguans have taken refuge in Honduras, and more than ten thousand have fled to Costa Rica. The president of Nicaragua is suspending development programs in order to have more money to buy arms and defend himself. The outside mediation seems to have failed. We also weep with Mexico for the fifty-two people killed and others seriously wounded when a natural gas pipeline exploded.

Finally, we unite ourselves with the pope who in his desire to be a pilgrim will journey today to the land of Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Catherine of Siena. We accompany him spiritually, and our prayers go with him because with every passing day we feel greater

⁹ ROMERO C., «Discourse at the inauguration of the Eighth International Fair of El Salvador». See *La Prensa Gráfica* (4 November 1978).

solidarity with this pope who is truly one with the people. But even as he draws closer to the people—and with this point I'll conclude—he brings about the holiness of the church.

The holiness of the church

Dear sisters and brothers, in the second reading Saint Paul states that he is not working for his own interests. With great tenderness he writes to the Thessalonians, «We treated you as kindly as a mother cares for her children. We wanted to give you not only the Gospel but our own lives» (1 Thess 2:7-8). It's true, sisters and brothers, that the first reading and today's gospel were tremendous diatribes against the bad pastors. Nevertheless, there exists in this church that is holy but also in need of purification a rich arsenal of holiness. How wonderful it is to know that in these past few months, when the church was in need of pontiffs, she was able to select from among her pastors two men who before were hardly known but who, like Saint Paul, are true treasures! And there are not only pastors—there are also religious, priests, and lay people who are able to say, like Saint Paul, that they love the people as a mother loves her children and are giving themselves to the people.

Where is the source of this holiness?

We conclude, then, by asking this question—which was my third and will be my final thought: where is the secret of this conversion and this renewal of the church? Today's second reading ends with Saint Paul saying, «For our part we give thanks to God unceasingly that, in receiving the word of God you heard from us, you received not a human word but what is truly the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe» (1 Thess 2:13).

This is the secret of holiness. It is true that in the bosom of the church we see many sinners, but when we who are sinners accept the word of forgiveness and hope and faith, we begin to be converted. The past matters little when the word of God has begun to make a person completely new, and we see much of this in our archdiocese, blessed be God! Like Saint Paul I can also say to many of you listening by radio, though not all: I give thanks to God because you are receiving my word for what it really is, the word of God, because many receive it as just a human word, the word of an enemy, a subversive, a man who desires only evil. That is the tragic destiny of those who preach God's word: like Christ, they become a sign of contradiction. But blessed be God, for that also means that the vehicle, even if it's crude and useless, is only a vehicle. What matters is what is carried in the vehicle: the word of God that is received into people's hearts and converts them to holiness and life. And that's why there is much holiness in our communities.

I give thanks to God, and I invite us all to draw near now to the Eucharist, a word that means giving thanks to God because there is the source of all: Christ, who is the Word made flesh, nourishment, sacrament, life. It is Christ who now nourishes us. By means of this Sunday Eucharist, the word that is preached becomes a church of sinners, but also a church of holiness. [Applause]