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## THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

7 August 1977

*Wisdom 18:6-9*

*Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19*

*Luke 12:32-48*

My dear sisters and brothers.

This week the church of the archdiocese has celebrated the grand exaltation of her patron. I want to congratulate the faithful for the devotion and the enthusiasm they show to our Divine Patron, and I want to thank in a special way all those persons—priests, religious, and lay people—who contributed in one way or another to this magnificent festivity in honor of the Divine Savior.

### Life of the church

This week has also left us a mournful toll. On Thursday we buried in Cojutepeque the venerable priest, Father Manuel Guardado, seventy-nine years old. He led a hidden life like that of a violet but, like the violet, filled with great spiritual beauty. He was very intelligent, a doctor who spent his life studying. He was an example of the elderly person who stays up to date with the church's thinking. Among the testimonies at his burial I was delighted to hear Father Ayala, the pastor of Cojutepeque, say that despite the difference in their ages Father Guardado was a guide for him and they often consulted together. He lived intensely the church's renewal in the Second Vatican Council and Medellín, and instead of being scandalized, as were many of his juniors, he knew that the church cannot be mistaken. He loved the church and so followed her until the end of his life. Despite his eighty years Father Guardado kept up with the thinking of the church. How we wish that this spirit of an aged man would infect the whole community and people of every age so that they learn about the current teaching of the church! This is the greatest tragedy of our time, the refusal to understand the church.

Despite all the things that occurred this week, God is working his salvation, or it might be better said that God is taking advantage of the concrete history of our nation, our families, and our diocese. Yesterday, I announced to you that a pastoral letter is being published.<sup>1</sup> A pastoral letter is one that contains the teaching by which we bishops seek to orient the diocese. In this pastoral letter we especially want to orient those minds that are confused; we want to help the people of good will who are surprised by the present changes in the church and those who are tottering in their faith and having

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<sup>1</sup> *The Church, the Body of Christ in History*, second pastoral letter of Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador (6 August 1977).

doubts. We want to tell you that there is no reason to be doubtful. Those who out of ill will persecute the church are sinning against the Holy Spirit. Far from being a special grace of God, their actions are very sad, and it will be hard to convert them. The pastoral letter is therefore addressed to good people, to people of good will, and also to those who doubt in good faith and are searching for light and truth. At the same time, we do not lose hope for those who are hostile, those who persecute and malign, those who, as Scripture says, have perverted their hearts by serving creatures rather than the Creator. Let us pray, sisters and brothers, that we may all be truly converted to the Lord. Our thinking in this pastoral letter is marvelously illuminated by today's readings of the word of God.

One change that has taken place in our church is that she has broken that dichotomy or separation between the church and the world. The church has come to understand the unity existing between profane history and the history of salvation. Previously in our spirituality and our religious conceptions, we thought of the world as despicable; we believed that the profane history of humankind was only a passing affair, a time of testing that moved parallel to the spiritual history of God's salvation. There was an almost insuperable separation between the material and the spiritual, between the profane and the sacred. People were advised to resign themselves: «Let us get through life and history as best we can, and then will come heaven and eternal salvation. Let us just be careful not to be condemned to hell». In this way we kept history quite separate from ourselves.

But as the present-day church goes deeper in her meditation, above all on the word of God as found in the Bible, she discovers that God has a plan to save humankind precisely by making use of profane history, which is the history of God's people. In Israel God was weaving his plan of salvation, and that same paradigm works itself out in the history of all peoples. The history of El Salvador—with its heroes, with its politics, with its defects, with its concerns, and with so many good things—is the history of Salvadorans, and that history of Salvadorans is where God wants to encounter Salvadorans and to save them.

For that reason the church as the kingdom of God on earth loves this history and loves this nation more than anyone else does. But as the kingdom of God the church wants that kingdom to be reflected on every page of history. And because the church has become more identified with this world and with this concrete history, she also sees the shadows of that mystery of iniquity which is sin. If our profane history does not coincide with salvation and God's saving designs, it has itself to blame because we Salvadorans have made this history sinful and have allowed sin to reign in our history. The church, as a force that is with God and against sin, has the mission of rooting out sin from history. That is why there must be moments of great conflict between the church and our history, for she cannot tolerate sin and knows that her mission is to sanctify the history of El Salvador and free this history from all that makes it a slave of sin. This is the mission of the church and of all of us who make up the church—not just the priests, but all of you dear Catholics, for you who are baptized are the kingdom of God.

Thus, we hear in today's gospel the tender words Christ speaks to his apostles and to his Catholics «Do not be afraid, little flock» (Luke 12:32a). What a beautiful designation! Someone might condescendingly think: «Among the crowds that processed

in the *Bajada* and that attended the outdoor Mass on August 6 were there only ordinary people? Were there no distinguished people present?» Yes, there were many distinguished people present, but the church is not interested in that consideration. She does not reckon with the social, economic, or political category of persons. The people who create authentic history are those who follow Christ enthusiastically. It is not those who set up idols in history to draw people away from worship of the true God. That is why the authentic people of Christ, the authentic people of God, are called the little flock in the gospel. God is not interested in massive numbers or in people of high rank. God is interested in this little flock that he has chosen, because he has given them the kingdom: «Do not be afraid, little flock, for to you has been given the kingdom» (Luke 12:32).

### **The history of salvation**

Right there in the first reading we find this people chosen by God. The history of salvation is described beautifully in today's three readings! What I would like to give you now is a beautiful catechetical lesson on the history of salvation, which begins with the vocation of Abraham. In the letter to the Hebrews—we are not sure if Paul wrote this letter which is being studied very carefully these days—but whoever the author might be, the letter is an analysis of the history of Israel into which the history of salvation is inserted.

God chooses an Israelite, a humble shepherd—it is always some poor person—and God tells this shepherd of Israel, «I have chosen you. Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you» (Gen 12:1). And this man believes. The word we hear this Sunday is a call to faith, and the supreme exemplar of this faith is Abraham, the father of believers. He hears God tell him, «I have chosen you. Go to the land that I will show you», and without knowing where this land might be he leaves his home, uproots himself, and goes forth believing in the word. This is faith: believing in the word of a God who cannot deceive me. God knows where that land is, and I do not, but I leave my land, my security, my herd, and I go with God. So Abraham begins his pilgrimage, his pilgrimage of faith, not knowing where it will lead him. The word of God is his surest goal. Abraham walks, unsure of where he is going, guided only by God. The Lord gives Abraham another test. He has promised him that a people will be born of him, and by that people all nations will be blessed, but he is elderly and his aged wife Sarah is sterile. The promise is impossible! Nevertheless, God has spoken, and Abraham believes. And when the sterility of Sarah is one day made fertile with their son Isaac, Abraham jumps with joy because from that son will descend the people that God has promised. But how absurd are God's ways! God tells Abraham, «You are going to sacrifice your son to me» (Gen 22:2), and Abraham obediently goes with Isaac to the mountain. He is ready to take the knife and sacrifice his own son, the son of all his hopes. Saint Paul, commenting on this moment, says, «Abraham knew that God is able even to raise someone from the dead» (Heb 11:19). This is faith in the impossible. At the very moment that Abraham is about to kill his son, God stops him because he simply wanted to test his faith. Paul then compares the faith of Abraham with the faith of Christians who believe in the One who died on the cross, who rose, and who now lives. Isaac is the figure of the dead Christ because God asked him to die and to rise, because God restored life to him.

Abraham is the first believer in the paschal mystery. That son of his hope rose as if from death, a death to which he was brought by obedience and faith in God. Saint Paul praises that faith as the faith of Christians who believe in a Christ who died but who has risen and now lives forever. Thus, the faith of Abraham is a sign of our faith. When Abraham dies without knowing the land that God has promised him, his descendants, the patriarchs of the Old Testament, live by that same faith, knowing that God cannot deceive. In the midst of pagan peoples they appear deluded, but that faith gives consistency to their history.

The imprisoned patriarch Joseph became an important figure in Egypt during an extremely difficult time in its history. See how God enters the history not only of Israel but also of Egypt, because in Egypt another precious chapter of history will begin, the story of Moses. Moses became God's confidant, and God told him, «I have heard the cry of my people, and I want to redeem them. You are going to present yourself to Pharaoh to tell him to let my people travel to the land I have promised them» (Exod 3:7-10). When will God finally fulfill that promise of land made to Abraham? The people still have no land anywhere in the world, but the faith of Israel remains alive. There is hope for the freedom of an oppressed people. Lacking confidence, Moses says, «Who am I to go before Pharaoh with all his political power and his army and his chariots?» (Exod 3:11). Human arrogance confronted by human smallness—those are the moments of God's history. Moses is encouraged by hope and faith, knowing that God is with his people, and so begins the exodus in the second book of the Bible. Read it, my sisters and brothers. In these times of repression in our land of El Salvador, let us not despair. The situation of Israel in Egypt was much more difficult.

The exodus is the song of God's victory. Today's first reading from the book of Wisdom captures beautifully that precise moment, that holy night when the angel of the Lord passed over the land, killing all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians to punish Egypt for its crime of killing the people of Israel. Sisters and brothers, there is no crime that goes unpunished. The one who takes up the sword will perish by the sword, as the Bible says (Matt 26:52). All those who abuse the power of a nation cannot remain unpunished. The exterminating angel passed over the land of Egypt, and that night there was wailing in the homes of Egypt, for God was punishing the crimes of Pharaoh (Exod 12:29-30). What a terrible thing authority is when it does not fulfill its obligations, when it seeks to make the force of arms prevail against the unarmed helplessness of the people. All of Egypt mourned, but the oppressed people began their exodus. The Holy Book has related to us today one of the passages that comments on this sacred night (Wis 18:9). The book of Wisdom has told us that on that night the Israelites felt that God was fulfilling his word. That is when they began the Passover celebration. The first Passover was when they ate the bitter herbs and the lamb that was slaughtered. Every year after that the people of Israel celebrated that night of liberation, and the feast was passed on through Christ to Christians. The Christian Passover continues to be the remembrance of an oppressed people, but a people whom God sets free because of their faith and their hope in the Lord.

Today's gospel and the reading from Saint Paul gather together all this history, this sacred history which in Christ becomes the history of all peoples. Blessed are the peoples who accept Christ as Redeemer! In him is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham. In him is the realization of the freedom that began with Moses. In him all the

prophets and patriarchs find fulfillment. The people God promised to Abraham and the people Abraham looked for, trusting only in God, were the people of Israel. Moses led this people to the Promised Land, which is not so much a geographical location but rather a whole people of saints and prophets which came to blossom in a woman who would also be a mother and a virgin. From Mary's womb is finally born the promise made to Abraham, the true Redeemer not only of Israel but of all peoples, Christ our Lord.

That is why yesterday, the feast of the Savior of the World, El Salvador was astir because the people sensed that all the emotion of Israel, all the richness of God's promises, and all that was announced by the prophets is being fulfilled in Christ, our patron and our Savior, the one in whom all nations will be saved. El Salvador will also be saved, as will all peoples who place their confidence in Christ. «Fear not, little flock», Jesus tells his people, «because though you may seem small and insignificant, yet you have been given the kingdom (Luke 12:32). You are Abraham; you are Moses; you are the new Israel. You carry within your hearts life-giving liberty. You sing the song of victory. Even though you appear to be oppressed, despised by others, and reviled by the powerful, you are walking with God».

### **Faith and hope will save the world**

What today's message seeks to do, sisters and brothers, is to sow faith and hope in every heart. Hope, along with faith, must be what distinguishes us true Catholics from those who have lost their faith and hope and have placed their trust in the things of earth. It is not political power, it is not human wisdom or technology, it is not the arrogance of wealth that will save our people. What will save our people is this faith in the smallness and the humiliation of Christ. Hope in the Almighty will save. This faith in God our Lord will save. No earthly revolution seeking to build a better world on the basis of hatred, violence, kidnappings, and resentments will ever be the true kingdom of God. God does not walk there, in pools of blood and torture. God walks on pure paths of hope and love.

Dear Salvadoran people, may our patronal feast of the Divine Savior awaken in us the faith of Abraham, the hope of Moses, the faith and hope of that people who even in the midst of oppression trusted in the Lord. And the Lord is coming. He will come when it is time for him to come and not when we want him to come. Let us live in this hope.

There is a wonderful chapter from Vatican II that seems to me the finest commentary on today's gospel reading, in which Christ our Lord says that the kingdom of God is like one who expects the master to return during the night (Luke 12:45). Woe to the person who is not on guard that night, who thinks that the master will not come and begins to beat the maids and the servants and thinks himself the owner of the house. When the master comes, he will surprise that bully who was not master of the house but simply another servant. In contrast, the faithful servants are prepared; they have girded up their flowing eastern robes in order to be ready for work. When the master arrives, they run and open the door and serve him. «Blessed are these», says Christ, «for the master himself will be their servant, so happy is he to have such faithful servants» (Luke 12:37).

This night is the history of the world, and we await the morning; we await the arrival of the master. The Council states, «The church that was initiated by the risen Christ twenty centuries ago for the renewal of the world awaits the fullness of its perfection which will be realized with the coming of the Lord» (LG 48). Let us not forget, dear Catholics, that we are servants waiting for the Lord who is to come. Let no one forget this, not even those who feel they own the world because they have power in their hands. They also are servants of the Lord who is to come. This gospel concludes on a terrible note: those who have been given more, who have greater responsibilities, will be judged more severely (Luke 12:48). Those who received more, those who could have made the world happy with their wealth but instead lived selfishly, are like the servant who for a night felt he owned everything. Just as he was dreaming, so are they. The day will come when they will be awakened, and they will find themselves face to face with the Master of all things, with the Master of all peoples, with the Lord of history.

We are hoping, and our hope is no illusion. The Council invites us to give reasons for our hope. Our hope is not irrational, nor is it a hope that preaches conformity. The church is not preaching, «Be conformed; soon you will find happiness in heaven». Right there in today's readings we find the eschatological meaning of the church, but not in the sense of Saint Matthew, for Matthew's Gospel presents us with an eschatology of Christ's coming that appears to be unconcerned about what occurs in the here-and-now of history. By contrast, Saint Luke was writing in a pagan environment that gave meaning to present realities, and so Luke also gave them value. The things of the earth are beautiful; gold and money are precious. Ambition, authority, and power all have great value, but Saint Luke insists, «Yes, they are valuable. Use them, but use them as one who will have to give an account». The Council says the same thing, for it has learned to dialogue with the present world. It tells the world, «Yes, all the things of earth are precious. Matrimonial love is beautiful. Creatures are beautiful because God has given them their beauty. All things are beautiful when they are given the transcendent meaning of the God who has created them and who will ask for an account of how they are used».

So much is this the case that the final judgment will not concern only the individual conduct of each of us; we will also have to account for social sin, that is, the sin which is born in the human heart and congeals in unjust situations. Such sin will be punished not only in the individual who commits it but also in the society which has allowed that social sin to exist. The same applies to what is good and virtuous in our lives. Not only will the individual be rewarded, but so will the society that reflects the kingdom of God on this earth. That is why we are called to work for a more just and more equitable world where all of us truly feel that we are children of God on pilgrimage toward the kingdom. This is not some naive hope that expects human beings to build an ideal world. For the church there is no ideal world in history or on earth, but the church still asks us to reflect on our own history and on that ideal world we are hoping for.

If we are reasonable in our hopes for a world where we will love one another as children of God and where there will be no enmity or violence or rancor, then we must work to make these qualities a part of our history here and now on earth. Everyone must contribute, especially those who have in their hands the ability to transform a

nation: the government officials, the wealthy, and the powerful. They have a greater obligation to reflect this hope and this faith. We are the little flock of the church's history, the humblest of El Salvador's social groups. The church is worth little in terms of money or politics but has great value because of the hope in the hearts of her children. The poorest *campesino* and the humblest woman of the village, simply by living this hope and this faith, by praying to God, by educating their children, and by bearing witness to their hope, are equal collaborators with the powerful in the construction of the kingdom of God that Christ wants on this earth. This kingdom of God has come already—it is in your hearts!

How wonderful would be the hope and faith of Christians if they were translated not only into individual prayer but also into public proclamation: God wants his kingdom on this earth! I want all my dear sisters and brothers—priests, religious, Catholic schools, parish communities—to experience this certainty of our faith and our hope. We are not dealing with a fantasy or some type of conformism. We are experiencing the reality that Saint Paul speaks of, the reality of things unseen (Heb 11:1), but they are no less real for being unseen. This reality is the true reality even though it is not seen, even though it does not shine like gold or seduce like the flattery of the powerful. This is the reality in which we place our hope, but it is not just for ourselves, for we are not deluded—and here I will conclude my homily. Like Abraham we trust in the promise, but now it is not only a promise but a reality since Christ has risen. During the Easter vigil here in the cathedral we heard people exclaim, «Christ lives!» My brothers and sisters, Christ is alive! The Divine Savior of the world is no pious illusion of our hearts. He is a real person, the God-man who lives as the center of all history and who urges all of us to build a world that is truly worthy of that life that will never perish. In him is our hope.

Yes, they laugh at us. I know that they laugh cruelly when they are torturing our catechists and our priests. They shout at them, «Where are your hopes?» And they think that the rifles that beat people and the feet that kick them are more powerful than the hope these victims have in their hearts. But after all of this it is hope that remains. Everything else will perish, just as that army was drowned in the waters of the Red Sea (Exod 14:27-28). The Red Sea buried the army that thought it could overwhelm the people of God, while the people hoped in the Lord and sang of victory in that canticle of Moses (Exod 15:1-18). This song is a sign of the eternal victory that we will all sing if we truly live with the humility of Abraham, Moses, and all the saints who have lived on earth knowing that in the risen Christ the transformation of the world has already been decreed and no one can stop it.

Fellow Christians, let us work with Christ and ground ourselves in holiness and prayer, in hope and faith! May the present circumstances of our church and our nation never extinguish this flame but make it flare more brilliantly so that we feel closer to that God who is nearest to those who hope in him and believe in him. So be it.