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BAPTISM AS THE EPIPHANY OF THE MESSIANIC REALITY

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

The Baptism of the Lord

14 January 1979

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7

Acts 10:34-38

Mark 1:6-11

I want to express my agreement with the beloved priests here present¹. They represent many members of the priesthood, all of whom are free to think with all the diversity of ideas that the church allows as long as they remain in communion with the doctrine and discipline of the church. I repeat, I want to express my agreement with them because I feel proud of them, and I am confident of what they have said about their fidelity to the Gospel. I unite with them in faithful service to the people despite all the threats and difficulties that exist.

This statement they read was the fruit of a week we dedicated to «priestly identity». It was based on a survey that the priests' senate carried out among the priests. The survey was done anonymously so that they would feel free to express their thoughts and their judgments about the bishops and the pastoral policies being followed in the archdiocese, and then it was analyzed. Experts in sociology gave us their interpretation of the survey, experts in theology studied the theological aspect of the responses, and experts in pastoral ministry drew pastoral conclusions from the multitude of opinions expressed. In summary, I can tell you once again that I feel proud of my clergy because the great majority of them, speaking with complete liberty, have affirmed their agreement with us in everything. And even the minority not fully in agreement makes me feel confident that the survey was answered with complete sincerity. At the end of the meeting I told them, «If the survey had been one hundred percent positive, I would not have believed you, but because there is a small minority opinion—we wouldn't say of opposition, but simply of divergence in some aspects—I believe in the sincerity of this survey, which shows the esteem and support of the clergy and of the people they represent for this way of proceeding». I tell you this with confidence, dear sisters and brothers. Let us, then, move forward along the paths that I believe the Lord is inspiring this particular church of the Archdiocese of San Salvador to travel, for they are paths on which beautiful things are beginning to flower.

I commend these priests. Their practical gesture of coming to concelebrate with me today—those who have been able to come despite their parochial duties—indicates that the

¹ Before the homily, Fathers Plácido Erdozain and Rutilio Sánchez, in the name of the priests of the archdiocese, delivered a short message expressing solidarity with Archbishop Romero, who had received death threats. They also read a letter denouncing a flyer «which presents a list of the names of ten priests who are maliciously reported as being involved in the guerrilla movement of El Salvador». The full text of the letter can be found in *Orientación* (21 January 1979) under the headline, «Solidarity of Pastors».

past week was not just time spent on sentimentalities and superficialities but rather descended to the practical matter of communion and solidarity with the archbishop. And now I can repeat what I have said before and will say always: «Whoever touches a priest touches the archbishop».

We have, therefore, still another document that speaks on behalf of the people's needs and the people's cries. At the end of the priests' meeting, we considered the various groups that are seeking amnesty for prisoners and the repeal of the Law of Public Order—in other words, greater freedom—and we could not ignore their cries. I'm therefore happy to announce another event for the coming week: the celebration of the Day of Peace, which will be held here in the cathedral next Friday at seven in the evening. I am delighted that Bishop Rivera of Santiago de María, who is president of the National Commission of Justice and Peace, laid great stress on these petitions of the people at the end of his message on peace. He has interpreted well the judgments of that commission, whose members were here present with us, including all the lay people who make it up. When all of you applauded each of those petitions as Bishop Rivera recited them here, you made it clear that this is not just a matter of a few priests meddling in politics; rather, it's a question of priests and bishops who are trying to understand and interpret the people's feelings of anguish and suffering. In consideration of all this, therefore, when the priests finished up their week of identity, they addressed the following letter to the president of the legislative assembly:

The archbishop of San Salvador, together with his vicar-general and the clergy of the archdiocese, has met together during this week to analyze the serious crisis that presently confronts our nation and to examine the ways in which we are called to collaborate in resolving this crisis through our pastoral labor. Consequently, we have decided to ask you to heed the cries of the relatives of the 108 disappeared persons and the seventy-two political prisoners and to accept the petitions for general amnesty, for liberation of disappeared persons, and for repeal of the Law of Public Order. These petitions have been made by the archbishop, by countless national and international institutions, and by the people's organizations that are in solidarity with these families and that represent the convictions of our people.

We believe that the government's acceptance of these petitions, rather than being a sign of weakness, would show that the government's attitude was one of listening to the people's will and channeling it toward peaceful juridical resolutions. Moreover, it would contribute significantly to creating an atmosphere of greater confidence and less tension, which in turn would make it possible for all the sectors of the people to dialogue and collaborate in peacefully effecting a bold and radical transformation of the existing economic, political, and social structures of our country. Only such a transformation can bring about justice and equality among us, which are the indispensable conditions for genuine development and true peace.

We have decided to address you directly because it is your responsibility as president of the legislative assembly to advocate the execution of these petitions and because your handling of the problem at the university has led us to hope for a positive response from you. Such a response will doubtless bring great joy to the families of the political prisoners and the disappeared persons and will be a major step toward achieving peace and good order in the country.

For our part, we will appreciate everything you can do to achieve the amnesty, the liberation of the disappeared persons, and the repeal of the aforesaid law. For our

part, we will continue to inculcate in Christians a consciousness that we are all children of God and that as such we enjoy the same rights and obligations. We are all sisters and brothers, and we must help one another to be a nation worthy to bear the name «El Salvador». Sincerely yours...².

And it was signed by all the priests.

Sisters and brothers, these actions taken by our priests are fully in accord with the message of this Sunday, when we celebrate the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are still hearing an echo of the Epiphany. God has come, and he wants to make himself known. He is revealing his saving love to the world and offering it to one and all. Just as the star in last Sunday's celebration revealed the divine child to the first of the Gentile peoples who came to worship him, so also today the heavens open up, and there is a new epiphany, one that takes the form of a voice from heaven itself, and the voice proclaims, «This is my beloved Son. In him is the divine force of my salvation. The world must recognize him because in him alone there is salvation» (Mark 1:11).

Since this is the Sunday of the Baptism of the Lord, we will call our homily, «Baptism as the Epiphany of the Messianic Reality», understanding by baptism both the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism as Christians. This idea of baptism as epiphany, as manifestation of the messianic reality in the world, I will divide into three reflections. The first idea is that baptism is a sacramental sign; the second is that the sign of baptism makes evident in Christ the messianic reality that already existed in him; and third is that this sacramental sign of baptism gives us human beings what we did not have before, namely. participation in the same messianic reality that Christ reveals in his own baptism.

We will try to develop these ideas, and when we finish speaking about Christ's baptism, in which all his people take part, we will examine how all baptized persons here in El Salvador, as well as in any part of the world, have the responsibility of being protagonists in the salvation of their own people and how they accomplish this precisely by participating in the saving messianic reality that Christ brought into the world.

Baptism is a sacramental sign

I especially want us to have an understanding of baptism, for I think as Christians we should all have some idea about it. What is baptism, generally speaking? Let us begin with Saint John's words in today's gospel: «I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit» (Mark 1:8). The gospel continues: «In those days Jesus traveled from Nazareth of Galilee to where John was baptizing in the Jordan» (Mark 1:9). What we have here, then, are some sacramental gestures, but at the same time we hear that there are two different types of baptism. Also, there is a third type of baptism that appears in today's second reading, which tells us how Peter was called to the house of a Roman centurion, therefore a Gentile, in order to baptize him. So we have the baptism of a man who is not Christ, nor is he even Christian; he belongs to a world different from the Jewish world. What, therefore, does baptism mean?

² This letter, dated 12 January 1979 and signed by Archbishop Romero and eighty-four priests of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, was published in the «Solidaridad» section of *Orientación* (21 January 1979).

Here we are dealing with visible things. In every sacrament there are two elements, one of which is the visible element, called the matter of the sacrament. For example, we see one man approach another one; he pours water on his head and says some words. We see another man approach a Gentile family, and he also pours water on their heads. This is the material part, the sign. But every sign must signify something. If the sacrament is received and understood only with regard to its visible reality, then it becomes something insipid, something boring. That is why for many people the sacraments have lost their appeal. We want to try to recover for the sacraments what is most important: the significance of the sign. It makes no sense to bring a child to the baptismal font in a gorgeous church—and along with the child the godparents, also gorgeously dressed—and then throw a party where the child's baptism is what matters least; what matters instead are the social relations. People are left with only the shell, the wrapping, of the sacrament. It's as though there were no awareness of what we learned today in the scriptural readings about that man who approached another man by the Jordan. There is no sense of transcendence.

What does it mean, then? Each of the three types of baptism that we heard about today is different, depending on the content of the external sign. In the case of John the Baptist, he states, «I baptize you with water for it is a baptism of repentance, a call to conversion. I cannot baptize in the Holy Spirit because I do not possess the messianic gifts. I am preparing the way for the Messiah» (Mark 1:8). The people who went to John for baptism weren't like the Christians who today approach the baptistery. That's where our Protestant brothers are mistaken, when they say that people should be baptized at age thirty, like Christ. They forget that John's baptism was different and that Christ was going to give it a more sublime meaning. The baptism that Christ received is not the same baptism we give our children. The baptism of John was a preparation for the second baptism that was soon to come. So Christ arrived at the Jordan. He was not a sinner. He did not need baptism. That's why comparing ourselves with Christ and waiting until Christ's age to be baptized is an act of arrogance. How dare we think ourselves immaculate like Christ, as though we were not in need of redemption from the moment of birth! Christ went to the Jordan not because he needed baptism but in order to reveal a reality that he already bore within him.

Christian baptism came about when Christ sent the apostles to spread the messianic richness that he was bestowing on us; they were to do so using the sign of water and the prayers of the rite of baptism. Christ approached the Jordan not as someone who needed baptism but in order to endow the water with the force necessary to carry the seeds of divine life that he was bringing to the world. He immersed himself into the waters of the Jordan not to wash away his sins, for he had none. He could face the world and tell everyone, «Who can accuse me of sin?» He had no original sin and so had no need of baptism. He had committed no personal sins and therefore did not need to beat his breast alongside all the sinners whom John was absolving with his baptism of repentance. He was the Holy One bringing holiness to this earth, and he got baptized in order to enrich that sign that was still lacking content, for it was only meant as preparation. From that point on, however, it would be the baptism that John had announced, «He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit» (Mark 1:8).

Consider, then, sisters and brothers, that the sacrament of baptism contains the sign of a reality that our faith must discover. That is why much insistence is being placed on catechesis for the sacraments. And at this moment when the representatives of our dear fellow priests are here with us, I want to ask all the people to assist the priests in fulfilling their duties and to

support the policies laid down by our beloved predecessor, Archbishop Chávez. He used to say, «No baptism without cultivating the faith through catechesis!» Please don't try to avoid this commitment. I know there are some who say, «Let's go to that other parish because there they won't ask us to attend talks». Neither the priests who don't require talks nor the faithful who are looking for an easy way out are fulfilling their duty. The former are more interested in the offering for the baptism, and the latter are more interested in the social relations than in the sacramental sign. But we're not interested in those things. Even if we're paid nothing—after all, it's not a charge but an offering for those who wish to give, and the poor don't need to give anything at all—but even if we're paid nothing, we should stress what is important, for baptism gives us this messianic gift. How few people understand this! That's why we have a nation of baptized Christians, but they are unaware of the serious commitment of baptism; they are oblivious to the great dignity that was given us on that day when we were born as new creatures in the baptismal font. Do you understand, dear sisters and brothers, why some holy folk neglect to celebrate their birthday—the day we are born according to the flesh and nothing more—but celebrate instead the day of their baptism? On the day of their baptism they go and kiss the baptismal font as if celebrating their birth in a new crib under the sign of water and the Spirit. This is the reality that Christ reveals to us in his own baptism.

Christ's baptism reveals the messianic reality that already exists in him

This is my second consideration. What does Christ reveal? As I told you, Christ receives nothing that he does not already have. That's why it's wrong for people to wait to be baptized until the age that Christ had. We do not possess what Christ already had. Christ went to the waters of the Jordan as a manifestation, to reveal what he was bringing to the world. That is the message we hear in the beautiful Gospel of Saint Mark, whose main aim is to introduce us to the person of Christ. Even without speaking a word, Christ is the eternal message of the Father. At the Jordan he says nothing, but heaven speaks loudly, «As he came out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open, and the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon him. A voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son, my favorite"» (Mark 1:10-11). Christ's baptism revealed, not that he was becoming the Son of God that day, but that he already was the Son of God. His baptism revealed who he truly was.

To understand those words of God at the Jordan, we have to go way back in history. We don't have time to tell the whole story now, but in today's first reading Isaiah tells us something about a real person in history: Cyrus, the king of Persia, who was in favor of freeing the Jews in Babylon from their captivity. The Jews were thinking, «When Babylon falls before the power of Cyrus, he will free us, our oppression will end, and we will return to Jerusalem». That is why the Bible makes Cyrus appear to be something of a messiah. When Babylon finally did collapse under the assault of Cyrus, the destitute exiles of Babylon viewed Cyrus as a king who exercised saving power.

Later on, the messianic figure gets transformed poetically into the person Isaiah calls the Servant of Yahweh, the Servant of God. It is no longer simply the king of Persia; it is no longer just a man with human powers to save; it is someone more mysterious. In this morning's reading, the prophecy of Isaiah tells us that this mysterious figure will experience triumph and suffering, greatness and humiliation. The Servant of Yahweh will conquer and subject all the nations of the world, but he is not someone who will go shouting angrily through the streets. He is not unfeeling and violent but rather gentle and humble. Listen to what Isaiah

says about this Servant: «A bruised reed he shall not break and a smoldering wick he shall not quench» (Isa 42:3). What a magnificent image to describe the mercy of this redemption that is being offered to those who experience despair and to a people that feels like a candle that's about to be extinguished. Even if we feel profound frustration because of our own sins, the sins of the social classes, or the political abuses—even if we feel like a nation unworthy of the name, a people that does not deserve the mercy of God, today's prophecy should still fill us with hope: «A bruised reed he shall not break, and a wick that still has a flickering of flame he shall not quench» (Isa 42:3). In El Salvador we still have the ability to remake ourselves. The lamp of our faith and our hope can still be rekindled because our hope is here, in the Servant of Yahweh, Christ, the divine Cyrus who comes to free us from every form of slavery. He is our hope.

The concept of messiah has evolved. «Messiah» is the word that yields the title «Christ» because it means the same thing. «Messiah» is from an oriental language, Aramaic or Hebrew, while «Christ» is from the Greek. They both mean the same thing: «anointed». But what is anointing? Today's second reading tells us that Jesus of Nazareth was «anointed by God by the power of the Holy Spirit» (Acts 10:38). The anointing is what has made that man from Nazareth not simply a man but also the power of God. As a boy in that carpentry shop, Jesus of Nazareth was a man just like any one of us. So many times I have been amazed to think that if Christ were living here today in 1979, being thirty or thirty-three years old, nobody could pick him out. Perhaps he would be living in some village, together with his mother; she would be the Virgin but nobody would recognize her. Or she might also be here among us. Therefore, as a man Jesus is like all of us, the Sacred Scripture says, except for sin, because he has within himself an opposed reality, one that is antagonistic to evil and in absolute conflict with sin. This is what I am today calling the «messianic reality», which is the Messiah, the Christ. This word, «Christ», meaning «anointed» or «messiah», has become so commonplace among us that we always add it to the name «Jesus». «Jesus Christ» is the combined expression of two names: the name that God indicated, «You shall name him Jesus» (Luke 1:31), and that other name that was inspiring hope in the nations: anointed One, Messiah, Christ.

After all, all those men who had been anointed by the power of God to carry out a mission in the world were «christs» for the people. The Old Testament presents many persons who were anointed: the kings, the priests, the prophets, the patriarchs. Anointing was a gesture of approval, such as the time when the priest Samuel was inspired by God to go to a family in Bethlehem, where God would show him who was to be anointed king. He took along a jar of oil so that, when God pointed out to him the future king, Samuel anointed him by pouring oil on his head. The one pointed out by God and then anointed by the priest Samuel was the young boy David. From that moment on, all his brothers, who were older than David, respected him as the anointed one. And history proved this to be true, for David was the greatest king of Judea. Later on the Messiah would come to be called the Son of David because he would be a savior king, a great king who would unify the people, a king who would lead the people in singing praises to God. From that messiah, King David, would descend the Messiah King who is Christ, whose «kingdom will have no end» (Luke 1:33).

How beautiful it was when the lepers and the paralytics cried out as Jesus was passing: «Jesus, Son of David!» (Mark 10:47). They were telling him, «Messiah, have compassion on us!» How wonderful it was when Christ met the Samaritan woman who was thirsting for that mysterious water. When he asked her whether she knew who the Messiah was, she told him, «I know that he is to come». This was the hope of all: that he «would come». Jesus told her, «It is

I!» (John 4:25-26). What beautiful epiphanies were these moments when Christ presented himself this way: «It is I! I now possess the powers announced by the prophets and the kings and all the great figures of the Old Testament». The other anointed ones simply foreshadowed Christ, the anointed One par excellence, the Christ who embodies in himself the fullness of treasures and powers that God wants to bring into the world to enrich us human beings and to save us from sin.

That's why Jesus was very careful in his preaching to explain what it meant to be messiah, because there were many false notions. That period when Christ made his epiphany in the midst of the people is very similar, dear sisters and brothers, to this moment in 1979 in El Salvador. In those days also there were popular movements that wanted a messiah who would bring about a temporal, political salvation; they thought that the Christ who had been announced was going to shake off the yoke of Roman power. But there were others who had a more authentic conception of the messiah, and that was the one Christ himself promoted. That's why Jesus fled to the mountains when the people, thinking of a political messiah, wanted to make him a king. That was not the kind of salvation he was bringing (John 6:15).

Likewise, the church makes this very clear to the salvation movements of today, and also to those who are intent on calumniating the church and saying that she is stirring up guerrilla movements in her pretensions to power. That's a lie! The church is preaching the same kind of messianism as Christ preached. Christ told the people's movements of his time, «Don't think that I am a worldly king. Don't think that I'm a rival of Pontius Pilate or Herod». Certainly such leaders would have to give an account to the divine King for their actions as secular rulers of their people, and the Lord would be severe in judging those who were anointed rulers, for they had the duty to respect God's will for the good of the people and not to oppress the people and lord it over them.

Christ said that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). As Pope Paul XI explained when he proclaimed the feast of Christ the King, this does not mean that Christ has nothing to do with the power and the riches of earth (QP 11). What the pope was saying was that Christ will judge from a religious perspective the consciences of the politicians and the rich, and he will judge those of the poor as well. He will judge them from a transcendent, eschatological perspective, in the light of the kingdom of heaven. Christ has said that all these powers will be judged by him because he is the Messiah, the universal king of all nations.

Christ wants us to understand his true messianic role so that we will always find in him a critique of all political systems. That's why it's laughable when people say that the church is promoting a socialist system. The church does not side with any social system. Suppose that our democracy were transformed tomorrow into socialism. The church would still act as a judge, criticizing the unjust attitudes of socialism just as today she encourages the good aspects of democracy. The church is always illuminating the social reality with light from an outside source. Christ wants to be the Messiah who sheds light on the progress of history. The nations are free to adopt the regimes they want, but they are not free to act capriciously. Whatever political or social system they choose, they will still be judged by the justice of God, for God is the judge of all social systems. Neither the Gospel nor the church can be dominated by any social or political movement. There is no social or political organization that can claim to be the church and that can claim to be the only path to follow. Christians are free to make the specific options they wish, but no political, popular, or government organization should be so arrogant

and abusive as to want to impose its political option on a base community or any other Christian group. The freedom of all Christians should be respected as they carry out their work of evangelization and conduct their reflections in Christian groups. If some people want to join another group, then their decision should be respected. If others don't want to belong to any group, then their decision should be respected. Let them all grow in their faith. Let them prepare themselves to render accounts to God about how they have worked to make the world a better place. It's on *that* that the Lord will examine us.

That's why we said in our pastoral letter that Christians who belong to the people's political organizations must always try to make the criteria of faith prevail. If at a given moment there arises a conflict between their Christian faith and the organization, then they must decide between two things: either being political with the organization or always being Christian, with or without the organization³.

Accordingly, dear sisters and brothers, Christ presents us with a messianic reality that is defined by the three categories of anointed persons I mentioned before: Prophet, Priest, and King. That is the messianic reality of Christ. He is true priest, the one and only priest. All of us who are called bishops and priests are nothing more than minor epiphanies, lesser manifestations of Christ, the eternal priest, the only one who consecrates the world to God. He is also prophet, for a prophet is one who speaks in the name of someone else. «My teaching is not mine», Christ said, «but his who sent me» (John 7:16). And we, when we preach from our pulpits—with all our limitations and deficiencies—are nothing more than small echoes of the great prophet who is Christ our Lord. We try to be a faithful echo of that voice of Christ, but it is he alone who speaks to the people and to conscience. Finally, Christ is king. Pontius Pilate asked him, «Are you a king?» Imagine, the greatest political power in the world, the Roman empire represented by Pontius Pilate, was asking Jesus, «Are you a king?» Jesus showed no fear and simply answered, «Yes, I am a king; for that I was born. But my kingdom is the kingdom of truth, not a kingdom of lies, of intrigues, of oppression, of outrage, of hatred, of calumny. My kingdom is truth, and for that reason all those who live the truth belong to my kingdom» (John 18:37). So Christ, who is King, Prophet, and Priest, creates the means by which we also can share in this triple dignity.

The baptism of Christians is the sign of their participation in the messianic reality of Christ

My third thought, then, is the baptism of Christians. On this morning of the feast of Christ's baptism, let us all remember where each of us was baptized, where the humble baptismal font is located—perhaps many people can't remember that. Let us remember which priest was the minister who bestowed on us that grace. Personally, I love that little village where I was baptized. It was there that I took my first steps and played with the other children, but above all it was there that I was incorporated into Christ. In the parish church of that village is the baptismal font where I was taken by my Christian parents, who were assisted by my good godparents whom I still remember with affection. When they brought me to the church, it was as if they were bringing an empty golden vessel so that the Lord could fill it with his blood and with his hierarchical and charismatic gifts. That day I became a member of this Body of Christ. That day the messianic riches of the Savior became mine. Since that day I have been a member of God's people.

³ *The Church and the People's Popular Organizations* (6 August 1978) 32.

Today's second reading recounts Saint Peter's wonderful story in which he tells about the baptism of a pagan family (Acts 10). Read for yourselves the whole of the Acts of the Apostles, along with the chapter we read today, and you'll discover how God is visible in history. Peter was praying on a rooftop in Joppa, and far away, in Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee, a centurion was also praying in his own way since he was a pagan and belonged to the Roman army. The centurion was inspired to send for Peter. As Peter was praying, the Spirit said to him, «They are coming to look for you. Go with them». So that encounter between Peter and the centurion took place by the inspiration of God. A pagan family wanted to receive Christian baptism and so take part in the messianic riches.

Today's reading gives us part of Peter's discourse to that family. Notice that there was a baptismal homily. Notice that there was also preparation for the baptism. What use would it have been to the centurion if Peter had simply poured water on the heads of his children, his wife, and the rest of the household and not explained the meaning of his action? Today's second reading contains Peter's pre-baptismal talk, in which he tells the family, «I have understood that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation and civilization those who fear him and act uprightly will find him» (Acts 10:34-35). Peter then told them, «Therefore, in the name of God, who you feel is calling you, I am going to incorporate you and all your family into this new people of God. You will no longer be pagans for there is no longer any difference between pagans and Jews. The only difference between people now is between being baptized in the faith and remaining outside the people of God».

In the case of John the Baptist, we understand the nature of baptism from what John said about Christ, who was asking to be baptized. John told his penitents: «I am baptizing you with water, but one is coming now who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit» (Mark 1:8). In saying this, John was declaring the function of Christian baptism, which gives us a share in the anointing of Christ. Christ was anointed not in the Jordan but at the very moment of his conception in the womb of the most blessed Mary. That's why the angel said to Mary when he told her she was going to conceive a mysterious being, «The holy one to be born of you will be called the Son of God because the Holy Spirit has worked this miracle of making you a mother and leaving you a virgin. And the fruit of your womb will be not simply a man but the anointed One, the heavenly King wrapped in human flesh, the Messiah» (Luke 1:35). That is why the church can now be compared with Mary: just as Mary gives birth to a man who is at the same time God, so our holy mother church shows her fertility by bringing people to birth in baptism. That's why I told you that the baptismal font is like a mysterious bed where our mother the church gave birth to us. The baptismal font is where she brought us forth as children of God, participants in the anointing of Christ, the anointing that make us priests, prophets, and kings.

You no doubt have noticed that after the child is taken from the baptismal font, the priest anoints the child with the oil that is called chrism. That word «chrism» is related to the word «Christ», and it means «anointing oil». It is olive oil mixed with balsamic perfume, and it's very precious because it signifies the messianic reality that the baby is receiving. When the priest rubs oil on the crown of the child's head, he says to the child, «Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin»—because baptism has cleansed the child of original sin—«and has given you a new life»—the life of Christ, the anointed One—«by the mystery of water and the Holy Spirit. May God consecrate you with the chrism of salvation so that you may enter today to form part of his people and so that you may be always a member of

Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King»⁴. What is the result of this, dear sisters and brothers? The result is this cathedral now filled with Christians! The result is this diocese and the many communities that are listening to me at this moment! I am thinking of all of you, dear Christians, even those in the most distant corners of the diocese. The result of baptism is you people in your Christian communities who can truthfully say, «We are anointed. We are participants in Christ who is Prophet, Priest, and King». Therefore the church is made up of her bishops, priests, religious, Catholic colleges, organizations, institutions, families—all these are the priestly, prophetic, royal church. We are a family of kings; we are descendants from anointed forebears; we are partakers of priesthood. Consequently, our mission as a people is to instill these three qualities in our families, in our work, in our offices, in politics, in sociology, in the professions, in the marketplace. Wherever a baptized person goes, the messianic reality of Christ should permeate that place. The Christian is committed to making present the saving dignity that Christ brought into the world. What a wonderful thing it is to have a people and a church that day by day is becoming more conscious of their baptismal anointing.

Life of the church

Therefore, dear sisters and brothers, since we experience ourselves to be the people of God, a people of anointed Christians, a people of priests, we look today toward Christ who, not needing baptism, was nevertheless baptized in order to incorporate us into himself and to inaugurate for us the baptism that we would all need. He is the head, and we are the members who are born in the course of history all over the world. We carry the presence, the life, the message, the courage with which he preached the kingdom of God and denounced injustices. This is how I want to explain the functioning of this church, which, as Father Plácido explained earlier, is a church that always feels the stirring of the Holy Spirit and is always being born anew to live in truth and not in a cowardly, anonymous, ambiguous way. Ours was a baptism that we at first didn't understand, but gradually we gained awareness of how it is alive in us and how it demands of us greater commitment with this people in which we are rooted.

In consideration of the church's desire to be faithful to her message and to work for greater church unity, I want to announce to you that our archdiocese is going to celebrate the Week of Christian Unity. The event is being prepared by Protestants and Catholics and will take place from January 18 to 25. It will begin next Thursday, January 18, at the First Baptist Church. At that time an announcement will be made regarding the other churches, Protestant and Catholic, where all of us Christians can go to request of the Lord what he himself prayed for before his death: that all those who believe in him and follow his Gospel will become one (John 17:21).

I also remind you that tomorrow the feast of the Holy Christ of Esquipulas will be celebrated in various parts of the archdiocese: in San Bartolomé, in Colón, in Aguilares, and in the Central Market. But I want to advise you that we should go on these pilgrimages with true Christian devotion, not because of the promotions or the pious scams that are seeking profit or pushing other spurious interests. Christ is to be loved and followed in spirit and in truth, for our baptism has bonded us with him.

I want to thank you for the many expressions of solidarity that have reached me as a result of what I said last Sunday regarding the threat against my life. I don't want to give much

⁴ The text for the anointing with holy chrism in «The Ritual for Baptism».

importance to this matter because we are in the hands of God. I also certainly want to thank the president of the republic for kindly listening to my homilies. They say that when the journalists asked him if he knew of the threat, he said that he had learned about it from listening to my homily. Many thanks, Mr. President, for listening to me. But I also want to thank you for having offered to provide me protection should I request it of you. I am grateful to you, but I want to repeat my position here: I never seek any personal advantage for myself; I seek only the welfare of my priests and my people. I would gladly accept your help in refuting the calumnies leveled against the priests that I alluded to at the start and in squelching those slanderous campaigns in the mass media. You can do that, Mr. President. The media feel so protected that they can say the most horrible things, and no doubt there is much connivance that has been easy to organize.

I also want to tell you that before my personal safety I would like there to be safety and tranquility for the 108 disappeared persons and their families and for all those who are suffering. (Applause) My personal welfare and safety are no concern to me as long as I behold an economic, social, and political system that is causing ever greater social differences among my people. What I would ask of the supreme government is a sincere effort to guarantee the genuine peace that all of us long for but that can never be gained by repressive measures and violence. It can be gained only with social justice, which is the most urgent need our people have. I must say that there was one thing that bothered me in the president's clarification; it was when he said, «What has happened is that certain members of the clergy have been surprised by the authorities in places where they should not have been. This has also occurred in all parts of the world where some sick minds that appear healthy allow themselves to be taken in by doctrines and principles that are not Christian». I believe that it is dangerous to assert things for which there is no evidence. Many of our priests have been expelled. Our priests have been captured and tortured. And when Bishop Chávez and his unworthy successor have requested explanations and reasons, they have received nothing except *fauts accomplis*. The most puzzling case is that of our dear brother, Father Neto Barrera, but even in his case we can do no more than repeat what we have already said: if the security forces killed the only witness who could reliably explain what happened, what assurance do we have that the president is telling the truth and not lying when he accuses the clergy of being in places where they shouldn't have been? (Applause)

Events of the week

This situation also makes us very worried about the three kidnapped foreigners, two English and one Japanese. We have been informed, thank God, that Doctor Bonilla has been set free⁵. We have given thanks to God, and we unite ourselves to the joy of his family. On the other hand, the Commission of Human Rights, into which I've been incorporated for this mediation, has been treating this painful situation of the kidnap victims with earnestness. I use this occasion to insist once again on the need to release our poor kidnapped brothers.

The Chamber of Commerce has also petitioned for a climate of security and calm because business leaders are reportedly being put under pressure of various kinds⁶. I want to state that it is only right to recognize those pressures, but I would also like to tell them that it is only right to seek solutions which do not favor only one side. What are business leaders

⁵ Doctor Manuel Antonio Bonilla was freed on 12 January 1979.

⁶ *La Prensa Gráfica* (12 January 1979).

offering society by way of providing conditions that promote a true peace based on social justice? A true, dynamic peace that brings progress and well-being comes with a price, and that price is mutual sacrifice. Therefore, just as I ask workers not to apply unjust pressure, so also I ask businessmen to pursue equitable solutions so that those relations that are so vital to the country are truly fair and just.

With regard to the Year of the Child, we are in solidarity with all ideas and initiatives that sincerely contribute to the welfare of children, stressing above all the responsibility of adults. There is a shocking study done in the United States that claims that forty percent of the world's population is deprived of human rights.

Family members and friends have denounced the unexplained arrest of Mr. Rigoberto Jovel by the National Guard this past Friday. This case worries me because I know that Mr. Jovel had his right hand amputated and is unable to move his left hand. He has undergone several abdominal operations and has a hernia, a condition that makes any maltreatment while he is under arrest very dangerous. In the name of humanity and of charity I ask that he be promptly brought before the courts or else released.

I also join in the pain of Professor Efraín Arévalo's wife, whom I met with a few days ago. She has been desperately looking for him since November 5, 1977, when Professor Arévalo came to San Salvador in search of their son, José Efraín, who had been left in the emergency room of Rosales Hospital after being tortured. I believe the National Guard is entering into a new, more humane phase and is aware of these sufferings.

Various labor problems have been brought to the attention of our Legal Aid Office, and you can hear about them on our radio program every Thursday at five-thirty in the afternoon. I'd only like to mention here that the problem that arose in the office of the archdiocesan Caritas was resolved with the appropriate legal indemnifications. And I want to say that in no way did the union apply pressure, even though it incorrectly seeks to take credit for this solution. The Ministry of Labor itself bears witness to the legality and readiness with which the archdiocesan Caritas has resolved the problem⁷.

I also want to announce to you that, in a desire to serve our community, an office for the distribution of publications has been opened on the west flank of the cathedral. There you can obtain all the literature we are offering, including the cathedral homilies, which are now being published. I want to thank those who have taken an interest in making these thoughts available despite their deficiencies, since I have no other intention than making known the true message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The pope is the object of exceptional interest here in the Americas. His recent homily speaks to us about a prophetic, priestly, and royal people, and we are delighted to see the pontiff, as head of God's people, coming to America. His visit will produce hope, joy, and enthusiasm. His teaching this week has been especially rich. He reminded women that motherhood is the vocation that distinguishes them⁸. The pope also had a delightful meeting with a group of street cleaners before entering the Vatican, and he told them that he preferred being there with them than being in the Vatican!

⁷ *El Mundo* (10 January 1979).

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the General Audience», 10 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (14 January 1979).

The pope said he rejects any kind of religion that serves as an opium of the people⁹. Naturally, our papers here have published this news with great satisfaction because they think that the pope is referring to communism¹⁰. Indeed, communism holds that religion is the opium of the people, but we have constantly been saying that that's a lie. The most eloquent testimony in this regard is our own archdiocese. Here, the more Christian and committed the church is, the less drugged and more alert the people are, and it's precisely because the church is not sedated that she's suffering persecution. So it's good to recall now that among the many documents being sent to the bishops who will be meeting in Puebla there is a wonderful letter from the Guarani. They sing the praises of the kind of Christian religion they are learning about; the preaching is no longer about the conformism they were taught earlier, but neither does it preach revolution. They say the Gospel is awakening their critical consciousness. It is teaching them that it can never be God's will that there should exist such tremendous social inequalities between a few people who own everything and all the rest who must resign themselves to having nothing. And so we say that the problem is not only communism but also the kind of capitalism that seeks to tranquilize the people: both of them want a religion that will be an opium of the people. When the pope talks about «a religion that is not an opium of the people», he is condemning both communism, which seeks to eliminate religion from people's lives, and capitalism, which seeks to manipulate the church for its own interests and profit.

We're also happy to see how the pope, by mediating between Chile and Argentina, was able to avoid war. We feel confident that God will not allow this hope awakened by the church to come to naught. Let us trust in the church! Let us gather round this church that lives in solidarity with the people! Bolivia is also considering asking for the pope's mediation in order to gain access to the sea.

Finally, sisters and brothers, I want to ask you to pray hard during these days when Puebla will be the focus of attention for Latin America's pastoral activity. The bishops' meeting begins on the twenty-seventh, but many people are already arriving there. In this regard, I want to remind you that this event in Puebla is not something unique to our times. Back in the sixteenth century, in 1582 to be exact, the first provincial council took place in Lima, Peru. In 1585 the pastors of Latin America met again in Mexico. Naturally, those times were very different from our own, but toward the end of the last century Pope Leo XIII summoned all the Latin American bishops to Rome to hold the first plenary council of Latin America. Its purpose was to communicate to the bishops the doctrine and the discipline of the First Vatican Council, which was held in the Vatican in 1870. Closer to our own time, in 1958, the first general Latin American conference was held in Rio de Janeiro. That corresponds to what is now called CELAM, the Bishops Council of Latin America. The second meeting, as you will all remember, took place in 1968 in Medellín. It's a shame that ten years have passed already, and still many people know nothing about the teaching of Medellín. And now we're about to enter the third meeting, which will be in Puebla in the coming days. The theme is «Evangelization for the Present and the Future of Latin America», and it will take in all the history of evangelization,

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, «Allocution on the Feast of the Epiphany», 7 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (14 January 1979).

¹⁰ *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* (8 January 1979).

from the beginnings right up to the present moment. We should thank God that there are always pastors who are concerned about the kind of evangelization that is attuned to the needs of our times.

Among the documents arriving in Puebla we have a very interesting one from the bishops of Ecuador. For lack of time I'm not going to read it to you, but it refers to the danger presented by the national security policies being imposed by military regimes. The bishops state that the military have become a privileged new caste in our countries. They say that bishops in Puebla cannot ignore this fact but must keep it in mind when considering the major problems of evangelization. Here in our own country we are taking due warning to prevent the military from forming that kind of privileged caste. Considering the situation of the majority of our people and realizing that most of the soldiers are from among the poor themselves, the military should strive to place their prestige, intelligence, and strength at the service of a society that is organized according to the heart of God.

Sisters and brothers, let us now pass to the altar with the understanding that we are a baptized people whom Christ has made participants of his messianic dignity so that we can make that dignity shine forth in the midst of the great social problems of our country. Let it be so. (Applause)