

**143**

## **THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD IS A PROCLAMATION OF HUMAN TRANSCENDENCE**

**The Ascension**  
**27 May 1979**

Acts 1:1-11  
Ephesians 1:17-23  
Mark 16:15-20

Dear sisters and brothers, when I was a seminarian I heard a story that comes to mind given the circumstances of today, and I want to share it with you. It was a story about a sailor who was sent to fix something high on the mast; as he climbed high up and looked down at the roiling sea, he became dizzy and was about to fall. When the captain noticed this, he told him, «Young fellow, look upward!» and that was his salvation. When he looked upward he could no longer see the heaving ocean, and he did the job calmly.

I say this story comes to mind because most of our fellow Salvadorans find themselves in the same situation; they see the stormy seas of our history and feel confused and almost hopeless. Quite opportunely, then, the liturgical year now offers us a warning cry in the midst of these historical circumstances: «Look upward! It's the feast of the Lord's ascension!» We see that human body—which is at the same time divine—rising above the flux of earthly things in order to help us to view transient things from the perspective of eternity. I think this is the best orientation for us in this time of confusion.

Our situation is very tense. Many people have died and have already presented themselves before the tribunal of God to give account of their lives. We might almost say that our country has become a war zone. There are many homes in mourning. Many of these are no doubt filled with Christian hope and are praying calmly, but there are others that are nursing feelings of vengeance, rancor, and violence. Many have been wounded. Two strong forces are now engaged in a bloody confrontation and are frightened of one another. There's much hatred and much fear; there is tension and alarm. The people, feeling themselves in a state of siege, become at moments more timid and at other moments more aggressive. In a word, we are called to celebrate the ascension of the Lord at a time when everything here below on earth tells us that we should not flee—for true Christians never flee—but should incarnate ourselves even more in history, but always with the perspective of heaven. Christians judge history by the criteria of eternity.

This, then, is the call we make from this cathedral today. (It's a shame that our radio station is also submitting us to a test: a technical problem is preventing us from broadcasting this homily today.) Nevertheless, the cathedral is the symbol of a ship that is being repaired after a storm. It was occupied for a time and closed to worship, but finally this week, thanks be to God, it's open again for our celebration. The esteemed rector of the cathedral has offered the

customary prayers of reparation over the church in order to prepare it anew for worship as a ship that keeps sailing on the sea of history.

Those who enter this ship realize that this is a symbol of unity and doctrine, the calm and eternal voice of the church. Even when disrupted by other voices that find no other channels where they can be heard, the church's voice continues to be heard as it seeks to be a voice that preaches the Lord's eternal message despite the distortions, the ill will, the calumnies, and the defamation. From the heights of heaven this voice draws all things unto itself and explains to us the meaning of death and life, the meaning of government and righteous struggles, the meaning of the good life and the miserable one, the situations of marginalization and sin. Guided by this vision of eternity, let us make this earth what earth should be: not a battlefield and not a place for passions run wild but the antechamber of heaven, the caravan of all God's children following that head—as we just recited in the prayer—that head who has already entered heaven and is drawing after him all those who wish to follow him with love and faith and hope.

This is the true Easter grace that we have been meditating on all during this season of Christ's resurrection. The culmination of God's many blessings comes now with this message of the ascension, the stupendous gift of Christ raised heavenward which reveals to us the true meaning of life and death.

We are therefore going to title our homily today: «The Ascension of the Lord is the Proclamation of Human Transcendence». As is our custom, we divide our theme into three parts: first, the risen Christ is the source of Christian transcendence; second, the church has a mission of transcendence in the midst of the world; and third, the vocation of all persons without exception is a vocation of transcendence.

What does transcendence mean? It means breaking through limitations. It means not letting ourselves be imprisoned by matter. It means reflecting on how we rise above the things that want to enchain me. Nothing can deprive us of this transcendental calling: not death, not life, not money, not power, not flattery. There is something beyond history. There is something that shifts the thresholds of matter and time. Consequently, there is something that we call transcendent, eschatological, the final goal. God does not let himself be constrained by things but rather encompasses them all. This is the goal to which the risen Christ calls us.

### **The risen Christ is the source of Christian transcendence**

First of all I declare that the risen Christ is the source of Christian transcendence. What does the church celebrate in the Lord's ascension? The church gives it a concrete setting as a historical event that occurred forty days after the resurrection. Jesus had already appeared many times to his apostles and had spoken to them about the kingdom of God. These were all events that the evangelist had to situate historically, at least in a symbolic way. The period of forty days is not meant as an exact chronological measure. In the gospel it serves as a symbolic number, representing the time necessary for imparting God's message to those who would serve as witnesses of the risen Christ. Forty is the number of perfection or plenitude, like the number of days in Lent. Forty days were needed to coordinate the message of Christ with that of the witnesses who would carry the message forth. In those forty days Christ completely connected with humankind.

But this is not the most interesting thing. In our teaching about the ascension what interests us more than the forty days is the theological dimension, that is, the glorification of the Son of God. Shortly before dying, Christ summed in a single word the moment of glorification. (For it is all a single theological reality: the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit.) «It is better for you that I go away because if I do not go and am not glorified by the Father, I cannot send you the Spirit who will join my divine life with your own divine life in the church» (John 16:7). What interests us most today is the theological reality we are celebrating. It is the reality that Christ has assumed with all his merits, with all his teachings, with all his church. Christ and the church are taken up today into the glory of the Father. That is why Christ presents himself today more than ever as the road toward transcendence.

The gospel tells us, «The Lord Jesus Christ, after he spoke to them, rose into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God» (Mark 16:19). We shouldn't take literally this expression about sitting at the right hand of God because God doesn't have a body or a left side or a right side. This concept was taken from Psalm 110, a psalm that sings about the royal dignity of Israel's king: «The Lord said to my lord, "Sit at my right hand"». (Ps 110:1). For the Hebrews and other peoples of the East, those who reigned and had authority shared in God's power, and the king was seen as seated at the right hand of God and participating in his royal dignity. That explains why we have in our creed an article that says, «He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father». It means that Christ has been taken up to share in God's authority, greatness, and glory. He is a man born of woman but also the incarnation of a divine person. When he finished his historical mission on earth, he ascended to become God and participate in the divine—and what ascended was not just his divine self but also his human self that was born of Mary, the man of flesh and blood like us that bears our humanity. As a man seated at the right hand of God, Christ enjoys all the prerogatives of God, and we who have been carried up with him have also received a vocation of divinity. We are on the path toward transcendence that lifts us up to see beyond history.

Today's first reading invites us to join the apostles in «waiting for the Father's promise to be fulfilled» (Acts 1:4). He is the one who gives everything, and we have to wait patiently to receive from that transcendence the power that can transform the world.

The second reading calls God «the Father of glory whose power surpasses every power» (Eph 1:17). There in God is to be found the true transcendence from which is derived our human intelligence and our organizing abilities. All the talents that we have come from there, from the fount of transcendence, and that is why our talents are still turned in that direction.

The Sacred Scriptures today have spoken to us about the power of the Holy Spirit. We are told that Christ was «moved by the Spirit» when he ascended. We can advance along the road of transcendence only by force of the Spirit. The ascension is the triumph of Christ over all of nature. Christ once said, «When I am lifted up above the earth, I will draw all things to myself» (John 12:32), and Christ appears today in his ultimate destiny.

Saint Paul reveals the secrets of God's projects and views Christ as the culmination of all of God's ideals: «Everything was created by him and for him» (Col 1:16). Every creature is created, even the most intelligent human being. No creature has any reason to exist except that

of being oriented toward the One by whom all things were made and for whom they still exist. Today's second reading also speaks of the Christ who «fills all in all» (Eph 1:23), for all creatures are empty when they seek divorce from the Creator. Just as a ray of light becomes darkness if it tries to separate itself from its source, so created beings—humans, sun, stars, all that exists—remain empty if separated from the fullness that gives them being. The human person is an absurdity when no longer oriented toward God. Christ appears today, then, as the key to all of history. Christ is the source of transcendence.

### **The church has a mission of transcendence in the midst of the world**

But the church has a mission that she has received from Christ himself—this is my second thought. In today's gospel, which comes from Saint Mark's final sacred pages, we are told, «Go into the whole world, and proclaim the Gospel to all of creation» (Mark 16:15). The second reading, which is a reflection on the glory that Christ assumed on this feast of the ascension, presents the church as the body that complements the existence of that glorious head who is Christ. Christ is king of the universe through the church which is his Body. What an honor this is for us who make up the church! We are the fullness of Christ. We are the complement of the God who became man. The church carries out in history the great mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. And since the mission of Christ is a mission of transcendence, the church cannot be understood apart from a profound sense of transcendence.

What does this mean? Today's gospel tells us that the first Christian believers performed signs: they were not harmed by poison, and they spoke diverse languages (Mark 16:17-18). These were signs that showed that the church was being assisted by the power of the God who created all things. The charism of speaking tongues and the miraculous cures were not playthings for the Christians; there was no vanity or exhibitionism among them. The signs were performed in a time when they were needed; they served «to water the sapling of the church», as Saint Augustine said. As a young tree, the church needed that water of the wondrous works of God. But once a tree has become strong, we don't keep watering it. The tree puts forth flowers and fruits, and each flowering and each shoot shows that the tree still has the freshness and tenderness of life even though it may be hundreds or even thousands of years old. That's how it is with the church. The church continues to be that wondrous work of God in history, but she will continue to be that only as long as she remains oriented toward transcendence. I want to place great stress on what this means, dear sisters and brothers, so that in this time of awful confusion we will understand well what the church is and what the church is not.

In his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* the pope states, «Jesus Christ is the chief way for the church. He himself is our way “to the Father's house” (John 14:2) and is also the way to each human person» (RH 13). Consider what a beautiful image this is! Christ is the path that leads us to the transcendence of the Father, but Christ is also the path that leads the church to humanity. At this moment you are for me not some multitude but rather a gathering of women and men. Each one of you has a path that connects you with God, and the mission of the church's preaching and sanctifying is precisely to put each one of you in contact with God. The pope tells us, «Christ is the way by which the church reaches out to every person» (RH 13). The roads you have traveled today so that we can all be together here in the cathedral are roads of the church. My words at this moment are traveling by roads of the church toward each one of you, and they would have no effect at all if they were not traveling by the true way that is

Christ. If I did not preach Christ to you and if I did not call all of you—righteous and sinners, oppressors and oppressed, as we say today—then I would not be traveling on the paths of the church. All of us have to walk along this path if we want to be saved, and the church is charged with walking along this difficult path of Christ, accompanying each one of us.

Listen to what the pope says: «On this way leading from Christ to humanity, on this way by which Christ unites himself with every person, nobody can halt the church» (RH 13). (Applause) I'm happy that your applause this morning is for the pope and that my own thoughts coincide completely with his. The church desires only to bring Christ to people, and nobody can stop her. «This is an exigency of our temporal welfare and of our eternal welfare» (RH 13). Notice that the pope mentions temporal welfare, but when the church speaks of temporal welfare, she is not talking about political involvement. The church knows that we will not attain to temporal welfare if we do not respect our eternal welfare and the path that connects us with Christ. «This is an exigency of our temporal welfare and of our eternal welfare», says the pope (RH 13).

And he continues, «Out of regard for Christ and in view of the mystery that constitutes the church's own life, the church cannot remain insensible to whatever serves humanity's true welfare, any more than she can remain indifferent to what threatens it. The Second Vatican Council has also expressed the church's fundamental concern that our life in the world should be in conformity with our surpassing dignity so that it will be made ever more human (GS 91). This is the concern of Christ himself, the Good Shepherd of all human beings. The Council states, "The church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person"» (GS 76) (RH13). That is how the church acts: in the midst of all the political complexities, she does not engage in politics. She approaches the political arena in order to defend human transcendence and to address herself to all regimes, whether totalitarian or democratic, whether communist or socialist or of other historical provenance, and she tells them that the church professes no system because she must tell every system, «What is important are human beings and their transcendence, and every political system must respect that transcendence and people's union with God».

### **The vocation of human beings is a vocation of transcendence**

Finally, sisters and brothers, my third thought on this feast day is the transcendent vocation of every person. In light of what we just said, no one of us is able to define our nature or our relation with our Creator, not even the atheist who claims not to believe in God. Even if people protest against God, they are always transcendentally related to God. Even unbelievers must always in the end repeat the words of Saint Augustine, that great humanist who also walked along paths of disbelief but could not be happy until he exclaimed, «You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you»<sup>1</sup>. Only God can be the center of gravity in whom we find rest, as when a stone has fallen into the abyss, as when Christ has ascended toward God.

Therefore, as Jesus Christ ascends into heaven with the muscles, the nerves, and all that human life born of a women, he is declaring to us the true transcendent destiny of our lives. In a marvelous phrase the Second Vatican Council states, «The mystery of humanity can be

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<sup>1</sup> SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, I,1; PL. 32, 661.

clarified only by the mystery of the God who became man» (GS 22). If it were not for Christ, the Son of Man, all of us would be nothing but absurdity. If the struggles for human dignity and freedom and equality have any meaning at all, it is only by the light of Christ.

That's why the pope also says to the people who today are struggling for freedom and their just demands, «Do not be afraid of Christ! Open to him the doors of politics, the doors of the economy, the doors of sociology»<sup>2</sup>. Everything takes on meaning when illuminated by the light of God become man. If this is not the case, then we will only have more of what we have had in these days: blood, violence, vengeance, hatred. Human beings become wolves toward other human beings when their faith in the Lord does not make them «other Christs».

Today's word presents the alternative of life or death. When Christ sent his disciples to preach his message, he said, «Whoever believes will be saved, and whoever does not believe will be condemned» (Matt 16:16). This is a most frightful anathema. No one is condemned by God. God has commanded that all human beings be called: «Go and preach this message to all people» (Mark 16:15). We only condemn ourselves. Those who open themselves to this message of salvation are saved because they find the way to God, but those who believe only in their own efforts do not. Those who think themselves wiser than God and reject faith and the commandments cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. If there is any place where people enter freely, it is heaven. No one is forced to enter! The people who are saved are the ones who freely want to be saved. Those who do not freely want to be saved will have to go somewhere else, and Christ has said as much today.

I would like us to pay special attention to the second reading, where the problem of human transcendence is treated with matchless skill. Saint Paul utters a prayer as if beholding Christ ascending into the heavens: «May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...» (Eph 1:17). What a wonderful expression! For Saint Paul God is always the God of Jesus Christ. The God of Christians can be no other: he is the God of Jesus Christ, who identified with the poor and gave his life for others. He is the God who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to make an unqualified option on behalf of the poor. Without condemning others, Christ called everyone to the camp of the poor in order to be like him. No one is condemned in life except those who reject the call of the poor and humble Christ, preferring instead the idolatry of their wealth and their power.

«May the Father of glory»—as Saint Paul also calls him today—«give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him» (Eph 1:17). This is a privilege and a grace of God: truly coming to know God. Sisters and brothers, many people think they know God but in reality they are adoring idols. The church does not want to be an accomplice of false gods. The church has chosen a very clear path to encounter the true God of our Lord Jesus Christ and to stay far from false gods, false worship, and hypocritical piety. It is the true God who must illuminate our eyes and our hearts so that we come to know the true God and where to find him. We need not fear the idols that seek to compete with the only true God but are always defeated by him, as today's reading tells us.

«May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of

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<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, «Homily on the Official Inauguration of his Pontificate», 22 October 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 October 1978).

his great might, which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come» (Eph 1:18-21). This is what is absolute, this is the power, this is the glory, this is the wealth, this is the truth. Let us not consume ourselves in struggles for earthly things.

Considering all the good and just things that are sought by the organizations that defend the people in the midst of so much sinful injustice, it's a shame that their perspective is so myopic: they seek only temporal goods, earthly freedoms, equality only in this world, if that. In my pastoral letter I wrote as follows: «The service that the church provides to people's just demands is precisely to incorporate all those noble efforts on behalf of freedom and justice within the great liberation of Christ»<sup>3</sup>, which supersedes all other powers not only in the present but also in the future. Therefore, sisters and brothers, when I say today that every person has a transcendent vocation, I want to remind you of the serene thinking of the church. The present time is quite appropriate for this reminder, and I'm happy that the pastoral letter took note of this before the storms of today engulfed us. The letter stated, «To struggle for justice in a popular organization, it is not necessary to be a Christian or explicitly profess faith in Christ. One can be a good politician or work effectively to bring about a more just society without being Christian, as long as the human and social value of every person is respected and taken into account»<sup>4</sup>.

Let this be quite clear. No organization can claim for itself the title Christian if it's a matter of political struggle; the field is open to believers and non-believers. No one should identify an organization with the church, especially if it is a terrorist force. It is impossible that every claim, even those made by force of arms, should seek to be endorsed by the church.

This matter is well defined in the letter: «Those who profess to be Christians and who organize as such have the obligation to confess their faith in Christ, and in their social and political activities they should use those methods that are consonant with their faith»<sup>5</sup>. I go on to explain how political fanaticism and the euphoria of making popular demands can make people forget the demands of Christian faith; they can make people forget that politics is not the only dimension of human reality and that for Christians faith is what comes first<sup>6</sup>. I therefore have a problem if some Christians are at first motivated by their Christian faith to make a commitment for the poor but then sadly lose that faith and consider it something worthless. It's like that popular saying we have: he climbed up the ladder and then kicked it aside. The same thing can happen with the church: people want to use the church, but then, when she's no longer of any use to them, she doesn't matter. We shouldn't be surprised! I urge you to be sincere, and I only ask that you not use a faith you no longer have in order to obtain political objectives, however just they may be.

I want this kind of clear reflection, sisters and brothers; it is badly needed in our time. But it's not because we're opposed to the just demands of the people. We have promised our support for them, and our pastoral commitment requires pastors to stand with the people when they make their just demands heard. But when people make their just demands, they do

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<sup>3</sup> *The Church and the People's Political Organizations* (6 August 1978) 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

not necessarily identify with the organizations, especially when the organizations want to travel paths that are not those of the people's faith. Let the people remain loyal to their faith, and if some of them want to join an organization, they should still remain loyal to their faith and keep in mind what we have said: the primary point of reference for Christians is not the political framework of any system or group but rather faith in Christ. This faith should never be betrayed. For its sake we should be ready to leave everything but never to leave our Lord Jesus Christ. That's what I mean when I say that the human person has a transcendent vocation.

I feel grief, sisters and brothers, when I think of how many people have died and presented themselves before the tribunal of God in these days. Certainly God will have taken into account the good motives of every person. We cannot judge anybody who has died! Only God judges! But certainly what is most important there before God's tribunal is the transcendence of those who tried to be just and who strove for justice—and who did so with Christ, seeking the justice of God's kingdom and not some other justice. The justice of God's kingdom is the justice that will shine forth for all eternity. That is the church that I would like to see, sisters and brothers, a church that has a clear awareness of how she is being built up.

Let us therefore now review the concrete history of this church of ours, but let us not forget the transcendent meaning and the transcendent mission of the risen Christ, who is the source of all transcendence. I would like the essence of my message on these Sundays in the cathedral—or in another church when the cathedral is occupied—to be none other than what Christ commanded in today's gospel: «Go throughout the world and preach the Gospel» (Mark 16:15). Let it not be distorted, please! If we have to touch on the sad realities around us—and touching them sears the soul—it is not because we either want them or provoke them but because we try to shed light on them so that they can be seen and cured. We give them a sense of conversion, of kingdom, of eternal life.

## **Life of the church**

I'm very happy that our churches are no longer occupied so that we can celebrate our Eucharist here again. My congratulations and sincere thanks go to the beloved rector of the cathedral, Monsignor Modesto López, for his prudence and loyalty in managing the situation. I unite myself also to the concerns of the other pastors who had to endure a similar test of their priestly fidelity. Churches were occupied and then disoccupied in El Rosario, in Concepción, and recently in Suchitoto, where a fallen member of the FAPU was being waked.

I'm also concerned because we don't have our radio station working, but the problem has been technical difficulties, and I hope that very soon we'll be in communion with you again through the radio.

I lament the sacrilegious theft from the church of Tocanacatepeque, where a relic of the patron Saint Nicholas, a chalice and its paten, and a holy water container were stolen.

During May there was no decrease in devotion to the Virgin in our church. Even if other concerns about violence occupied our minds, we have always been thinking of Mary, our Mother, and we commended to her the difficult situation our church is experiencing. In María Auxiliadora parish on the twenty-fourth there was grand celebration as only the Salesian Fathers know how to do.

I'm also happy that the ecclesial base communities are celebrating a week of prayer, which continues today in the parish of Miramonte and tomorrow in the chapel Los Pinos. Prayer services are held at seven in the evening.

We will bring the month of May to a close on Thursday this week, the thirty-first, when the liturgy celebrates the feast of the visit of the Virgin to her cousin Saint Elizabeth.

I also want to remind you that next Sunday is the feast of Pentecost. This marks the solemn finale of the Easter season, when the church is splendidly revealed to be under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Seminary Day also coincides with this feast. I hope all the people feel that they have to pray and provide moral and economic support for the work of forming our future priests. I would also like this Pentecost Sunday to be distinguished by a celebration of our young people. You young men and women who are not yet confirmed, prepare yourselves, as many already are doing, so that next Sunday at this time, eight o'clock, we can give you the sacrament of the Holy Spirit and the strength that young people need to make a firm commitment with the Lord.

I also want to voice my thanks for the many expressions of solidarity that have arrived in reaction to what our people and our church are experiencing. Encouraging messages have come from the Secretariat of Justice and Peace in Barcelona and Paris, the Committee for Freedom in Santo Domingo, the Ecumenical Service Entraide in Paris, the Ecumenical Institute for the Development of Peoples also in Paris, a French commission for Justice and Peace, and more than two hundred priests, seminarians, religious, and lay people of San José, Costa Rica.

## **Events of the week**

As church we have viewed with sadness and concern the continued bloodshed this week and the resulting state of tension among the people.

A demonstration of the BPR was broken up in front of the Venezuelan embassy, resulting in fourteen dead and sixteen wounded. The minister of education, Doctor Carlos Antonio Herrera Rebollo, was assassinated. We unite in prayer and condolence with his family in their suffering, as well as with his faithful chauffeur, Fabio Rivas. Along with this prayer I ask also your prayers for the group that fell near the Venezuelan embassy and other deaths that have occurred. The UGB has attributed to itself two other assassinations<sup>7</sup>. They killed the accountant Carlos Humberto Montoya Ortiz, treasurer of the Cooperative Development Foundation, which is advised by the archbishop's office. He was a good church collaborator, and our church joins in the suffering of his family and in prayer for his eternal rest. There was also news of a confrontation near the Chilean embassy in which three people died, apparently two civilians and a policeman. The burning of buses continued in San Salvador and Santa Ana.

Many combined military operations involving the army, the security forces, and ORDEN have carried out raids in the villages and captured *campesinos*. Four of them were killed. I want to mention this here because I believe mentioning it will be of some help to these poor people who have been attacked; those who were arrested have still not been brought before the tribunals. Let them not join the ranks of disappeared persons. Those whose families have

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<sup>7</sup> *La Crónica del Pueblo* (26 May 1979).

expressed concern to me are the following: Andrés Molina Clímaco of San Nicolás Lempa, Jorge Antonio Ascensio Álvarez of Zacatecoluca, Herminio de J. Orellana of Tecoluca, Adilio Pedro Abrego of Tablón in Chalatenango, Lucio Cándido Alfaro of Tecoluca, Luis Alfredo Amaya Dubón of Jiquilisco, Salvador Arana Flores of San Salvador, José Milagro Clavel Romero of El Tablón in Chalatenango, Edgar Antonio Fuentes, a worker of San Salvador, Marta Alas of the relocated city of Chalatenango, Cecilio Alas of the same place, and Misael Guillén. Other persons were captured with them, but we have no information about them.

I want to draw special attention to the case of the brothers Joaquín and Eduardo Gavidia who, after being arrested, appeared murdered and with visible signs of torture; one was found in Guacotecti and the other in the municipality of Cabañas.

In light of these events what has the church done? I have here a declaration of Bishop Barrera y Reyes of Santa Ana in which he calls the Salvadoran people and clergy to reflection and collaboration in the search for a peace founded on justice. His final recommendations are the following: «Let all the parties involved in this conflict put an immediate halt to every form of violence. Second, let us sincerely do our part to contribute to building on a solid base the peace we long for. Third, let all those who have responsibility, whether greater or lesser, create conditions that will bring us closer to our common goal, which is peace. And fourth, may all of us Salvadorans dedicate ourselves to praying insistently so that we not remain simply with intentions but move forward in the conquest of peace. Let us recall the words of Pope John Paul I: "The world is on the wrong path because there are more battles than prayers"»<sup>8</sup>.

I also issued a call in view of the situation in the embassies, especially the violence unleashed in the conflict near the Venezuelan embassy. It was published in some newspapers but not in all<sup>9</sup>. I would like you to know what I said so that we can collaborate closely with what the church desires.

Once again with profound sadness we have to repudiate the new massacre that has resulted in at least fourteen deaths and the assassination of the minister of education. Counting them, there have been eighty-five deaths and eighty-six persons wounded from the first of May until today as a result of the conflict between the government and several people's organizations.

We lament this continuing bloodshed, but what pains us most is that until now we have not seen evidence that any of the parties desire to put an end to the conflict. Rather, the conflict tends to get worse as it continues to cause grief to countless families in every social class of the country. The same actions of repression and vengeance are repeated over and over again.

As archbishop of San Salvador, I issue a call to the consciences and the hearts of those responsible not to continue showing a tough, intransigent posture but to be flexible in seeking a way to break this endless chain of bloody deeds as soon as possible.

What matters now is not to demonstrate to the nation and the world who is stronger or more victorious but to show who is more responsible and humane, capable of stopping this increasing spiral of violence.

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<sup>8</sup> «Call of the Bishop of Santa Ana and His Clergy to the People of El Salvador», 25 May 1979, in *Orientación* (3 June 1979).

<sup>9</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (24 May 1979).

I ask you all not to let yourselves be carried away with sentiments of pride, hatred, and vengeance but to do everything possible so that reason and forgiveness prevail at this time.

I make a special call to those persons or institutions who have the possibility of influencing the government or the leaders of People's Revolutionary Bloc. I ask that they talk with them, not to harden them in their positions but to convince them to be yielding and to adopt constructive attitudes that will achieve a rapid solution to this crisis.

Once again, on behalf of the archdiocese I offer our willingness to serve the cause of peace.

I also want to express my sympathy with the families of the victims of recent days. Let us accompany them in their sorrow and offer our prayers for them and for those who have died.

I invite all Christians and persons of good will to pray and to contribute to ending this crisis»<sup>10</sup>.

Returning to the context of our church, I want to tell you how happy we are that the two sisters whom immigration forced to leave Arcatao have returned. However, even though the authorities say that it was a mistake and have allowed them to return, there still hangs over their heads the threat of vague accusations without any solid evidence. It is the fate of our church to be preaching a truth that is not even well enough understood to make a valid accusation against it!

Therefore, in view of the state of siege that was promulgated on May 24 for a period of thirty days, I want to remind you that such a state of siege diminishes the exercise of certain rights, but it does not prohibit meetings for cultural and work purposes. Our gathering this morning in the cathedral is perfectly legal, as is any religious meeting in a parish or a village within the religious-cultural setting that the church preaches.

I also want to remind you that the limitations of the state of siege in no way affect article 157 of our constitution, which refers to religious freedom. We hope therefore that the state of siege is not used as an excuse to persecute the evangelizing labors of our church. Those who work in our evangelization efforts should have no fear as long as they remain within the cultural and religious context of our preaching of the Gospel.

In this regard I also want to address those who decreed the state of siege. Let us hope that what we have experienced in the past will not be repeated now. The state of siege should not be used to suppress other people's rights or to authorize the crimes of the extreme right and the defamation of the church and her ministers. (Applause) In other words, let the law be equal for all. If rights are to be restricted, then the right to attack the church abusively should be especially restricted, and the church should be given the respect that the law guarantees.

The embassies of France and Venezuela continue to be occupied. The government is offering an alternative to the occupiers: to hand themselves over or to seek asylum in Panama. Panama has done its part in offering asylum to those occupying the embassies, but it seems that the People's Revolutionary Bloc has until now not accepted the offer. For my part, I call

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<sup>10</sup> «Stop the Spiral of Violence: A Message of Óscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador», 23 May 1979, in *Orientación* (27 May 1979).

both sides to reflect and seek mediation so that this conflict does not provoke more bloodshed and violence but rather finds a just and reasonable solution that brings it to a happy end.

Finally, the national forum convoked by the president of the republic has held its first session. You have heard the various communiqés expressing skepticism about this meeting, which fails to inspire people's confidence<sup>11</sup>. Some very significant people were absent from the working session. The bishops' conference was invited and sent two representatives. In this regard I want to express my own personal desires. It is my desire that the credibility and trust that must be the foundation for dialogue be shown by deeds. I believe in the need for dialogue; it is truly necessary and urgent, but it must be founded on trust and credibility. This is what I would ask so that the forum be truly effective. Deeds speak louder than promises. (Applause)

I want to conclude by sharing with you some hopeful news. The two bankers kidnapped by the FARN appear to be alive, and there is still the possibility of negotiation<sup>12</sup>. Let us hope so! Once again I make a plea that their lives be spared so that there not be another cause for disturbances.

This Sunday the pope consecrated twenty-six new bishops in Rome, among them the new bishop of Estelí, Nicaragua. As you know, Archbishop Obando of Managua has been threatened. There is information that he was called to Rome, where he is certainly participating in the ordination of the new Nicaraguan bishop. This is a good moment for us to pray for our sister country, Nicaragua.

Let us conclude, sisters and brothers, by drawing near to the altar with a clear and bright vision of Christ ascending into the heavens with a perspective of transcendence. Let us not forget this message of transcendence, and let us not allow ourselves to be caught up in the material concerns that often consume our lives. Let us know how to break away from all those things that seek to reduce us to the worst kinds of servitude. Let us look beyond history and time so as to behold the figure of a Christ who from his eternity tells us that he is the head and wants to make all of us members of his Mystical Body. Let us follow our Leader so that after we have fulfilled our mission on behalf of human freedom and dignity on this earth, just as he did, we may partake in the joy of eternal justice beside the throne of the Father of glory. Let it be so. (Applause)

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<sup>11</sup> «Documents on the National Forum», *ECA* 368 (1979) 464-468.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Cameron Massie and Michael Chatterton, kidnapped on 30 November 1978.