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JOHN THE BAPTIST IS THE PARADIGM FOR THOSE COMMITTED TO GOD'S KINGDOM

Nativity of John the Baptist

24 June 1979

Isaiah 49:1-6

Acts 13:22-26

Luke 1:57-66, 80

Dear sisters and brothers, I want to highlight the one event that has moved us most this week and use it as a framework for our reflections. I'm talking about the murder of a priest. With the death of Father Rafael Palacios, who was cruelly gunned down in a street of Santa Tecla, there are now five priests who have fallen at the hands of criminals. The church cannot cry out for vengeance or for hatred against anyone, but she does call people to reflection so that both we Catholics and the church's enemies will repent and seek out the same path marked out for us today by the Lord's precursor.

I insist that we Catholics must also be converted, in the sense of having greater solidarity. Believe me—I say this with sincere sorrow—I am worried about something I pointed out to you a few Sundays back: the danger of insensitivity. We can become accustomed to seeing things and hearing news of this sort to the point where the killing of a priest no longer seems shocking for many people. I say with sadness that I felt great pain that the National Gymnasium was overflowing with student teams—many of them Catholic—who were playing with great gusto, while the body of a priest of their church was lying dead in the chapel, ardently crying out for the prayers and the solidarity of all the people. We have seen this insensitivity in many places, but we expect everyone to show their solidarity, just as a family expects it when one of them is suffering. Let us not give weapons to our enemies by our attitude of complicit insensitivity, as if we enjoyed having our beloved pastoral workers killed, whether they're priests or catechists or other church ministers.

This complaint that I'm tenderly voicing is not out of place at this time of the liturgical year. Sunday after Sunday we are trying to unfold the sublime mystery of Christ and of the covenant that God has sealed with humankind by the blood of his own Son, Jesus Christ. This is a covenant in which we not only give but also receive. Redemption does not result only from Christ's work; it also requires the active collaboration of people. That is why the liturgical year features not only the redeeming mystery of its principal protagonist, Jesus Christ, but also the accompanying cycle of the saint's feasts. The saints do not offer competition to our worship of Christ; to the contrary, they are the crown of Christ; they are the lavish realization of his redemption; they are men and women who have known how to be receptive to the infinite love of God who in Christ came to save us. They have tried to grasp that love and respond to it.

In this cycle of saints, we honor the memory of the birth of Saint John, the precursor of the Lord, on June 24, which this year falls on a Sunday. I want to take advantage of

this feast of the great precursor of Christ to immerse us more deeply into our concrete reality, which includes not only the tragedy of Father Palacios' death, but also the celebration of the men and women dedicated to the art of typesetting. As you know, Saint John is the patron of typographers. I want to keep them in mind on this their special day. The church loves progress of every sort, just as she fears the misuse of the great technical advances such as those we see in the press and typography.

We also unite ourselves with the towns that have Saint John as their patron. Today I'll also celebrate this feast day in Chalatenango, to whose people I extend my greetings beforehand on this day of their patron Saint John. He is the patron of many towns because devotion to Saint John exercises great force among our people. We send warm greetings also to everyone who has the name of Juan or Juana. May God give you the grace that he abundantly poured forth on your namesake, John the Baptist.

In order to frame all these things and other matters of the week that we're going to elucidate this Sunday, during our liturgical reflection on the word of God I'm going to title our homily, «John the Baptist Is the Paradigm for Those Committed to the Kingdom of God». The word «paradigm» means something like «model» or «symbol». John the Baptist did what every person committed to the kingdom of God ought to do. That's my main idea, which I will divide into the usual three parts for our reflection: first, the man; second, the precursor; and third, the martyr.

The man

The man. The readings have presented us with the birth of a man in the picturesque little town of Ain Karim in the mountains of Judea. It was there that Elizabeth, an elderly woman beyond child-bearing age, had received three months earlier the visit of a young virgin who also had the privilege of being a mother. For just as Elizabeth, having been sterile, was expecting by a miracle of God, so also Mary was now an expectant mother, owing to God that fertility which respected her virginity.

These two mothers soon to give birth spent three months in conversation. They surely spoke of all the things that happened in the beautiful chapter of Saint Luke that tells us about how John was conceived in the womb of Elizabeth. The priest Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, was offering incense at the altar when he had a vision of the angel Gabriel, who announced to him that his prayers for a son in his childless marriage had been heard (Luke 1:5-13). But Zechariah doubted, and God, who desires complete commitment in faith, punished his doubting: «You will be speechless until the day when the one promised by God is born» (Luke 1:20). So John was born on the day we celebrate in today's Mass. As you heard in the gospel, when the time came to give the baby a name, everyone wanted him to be named for his father, Zechariah, but Elizabeth said, «No, John is his name». They objected, «But there's no one with that name in your family. Let's ask Zechariah». The poor man was deaf and mute, but he wrote some words on a tablet, as it was done in those days: «John is his name» (Luke 1:59-63).

Thus was born a child revealed by God and conceived by miracle, and his birth leads us to reflect on other figures that appear in today's readings. The prophet Isaiah, in his mysterious prophecies about the messianic era, tells us that the Servant of Yahweh would also appear in this way: «I was still in the womb when the Lord called me. I was in my mother's bosom, and he pronounced my name» (Isa 49:1). Similarly with Christ, even before he was

conceived in the womb of Mary, the angel announced God's plans for him: «He will be called Jesus because he will take away the sins of the world» (Luke 1:31). And to close this parenthesis we have Saint Paul who, now converted to Christianity, tells us, «I was set apart while still in my mother's womb» (Gal 1:15).

All this lends itself to profound reflection: every person is a special design of God. What John Paul II wrote in his first encyclical impressed me greatly—let us put ourselves in that context. The pope states:

Human beings are «willed» and «chosen» by God from eternity; they are called and destined for grace and glory. This is true of «each and every» person, «the very concrete» person, «the most real» person. This is the human person participating in all the fullness of the mystery by which each of us has become a sharer in Jesus Christ. By this mystery each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment of our conception beneath the heart of our mothers. ... The church cannot abandon human beings because their «destiny»—that is to say, their election, calling, birth and death, salvation or perdition—is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ ... Because they are «persons», all men and women possess a singular reality and a life history that is completely their own (RH 13,14).

There is no anonymous person among those of us who are here. All of you have your own individual histories, even the humblest of persons, even the smallest child who has come to this Mass, even the poorest and sickest folks listening by radio, all those people about whom nobody will talk in the history books. God has loved each of you singularly, as an unrepeatable phenomenon. God has not made human beings in a mold. He has made each of us with a very particular history. If there were plenty of time and we could sit here and tell the history of each and every one of you and my own as well, how different those histories would be! Let us keep that in mind.

The pope sets out for us the different chapters of this history (RH 14). There is the eternal election: «Before you were born, I knew you» (Jer 1:5). There is only one woman who can say, «He loved me even before I was born», because in that way God wanted to make an image of creation. The fertile woman is the image of a God who conceives in his mind the project of each life and of the many lives of which history is woven. That's why we can say, «Despite my sins and my insignificance, I was already existing in the mind of God. I was chosen».

The pope speaks about «being called». God calls us first to life. It was not my parents who gave me being; they were simply instruments or means that God used to give me life, but it is God who has called me to life. The pope then speaks of «birth». Birth is not the beginning of life. Before birth there are nine months in which I am already history. What is more, even prior to the months of my gestation, I existed in the mind of God as a project which, if brought to fulfillment, would make of me a saint because a saint is nothing else than the full realization of a life according to the design of God.

Then, says the pope, there follows «death». How quickly he passes from birth to death! A life can last forty, sixty, eighty, or a hundred years. But what are a hundred, eighty, or sixty years except a tiny drop in the immense ocean of history? How small we are! But how great we are!

But my history continues even beyond death to «salvation or perdition». I will not end with death. I will live forever, either in heaven singing about the victory of divine desire or in hell mourning forever my failure, a failure for which God is not to blame but only myself because of my wrongheadedness and my misuse of freedom.

This man, John the Baptist, is the paradigm of every person who is born. I want each one of us here and all those who are listening to me—whether with goodwill or ill-will, we are all human—to reflect on this: we are not alive to do with our lives as we wish; there is a design for each of our lives. It is not blind destiny, as many imagine. No one has been born destined for evil. We make ourselves evil because we misuse our will, but God's plan is to make every creature good: «God saw that everything he had made was good» (Gen 1:31).

We can conclude from that, sisters and brothers, the reason why the church works for the defense of human rights. It's not a matter of political ideas or opportunism. The church is demanding what is of the very essence of humanity. Her faith in God tells her that every person on earth is a design of God and must be respected as such. There are no first-class and second-class persons. Rather, all are called to life, all are called to grace, all are called to happiness, all are a project of God. If there are differences and conflicts, it's because of human malevolence.

What else can we conclude? That trampling on life is a grave offense to the Creator! I'm referring to the lives of adult women and men. I will never tire of denouncing the assault on human life by arbitrary arrests, by disappearances, by torture. Such deeds disgrace and shame those who commit them more than they do those who suffer them. Also sinful is every assault on the life of the embryo, which is equally a design of God. It's horrible to hear how abortions are multiplying in El Salvador. They have even brought in machines to suction out fetuses. The crime of destroying life in the womb of the mother now seems to be something fully authorized.

And we can go back even further. The church must also denounce the irrational severing of the founts of life by massive sterilization that leaves men and women unable to have more children. It's as if they were animals. That is not the way to fix the demographic problem. People must be taught that in every relation between man and woman there must be responsible parenthood that knows how to make use of the generative faculties only when the possibility exists of giving a good life to the child that results from that relation. Pope Paul VI has said, «We should not solve this demographic problem by suppressing life but by preparing more bread to put on the table of those invited to participate in life»¹. He is stating that there is a social, economic, and political problem and that we need a transformation of living conditions. The gifts God has given us, which are sufficient for feeding the population of El Salvador, should not remain in the hands of just a few people while others are dying of hunger. The children's bread should be distributed as God desires, to all those invited to the banquet of life.

God is the giver of life. Perhaps you know, sisters and brothers, about a marvelous letter that is a true literary work. It is a letter written by a child who was never born but is telling what she would have been if she had been born: «This day I would have been

¹ PAUL VI, «Message for All Humankind: Discourse to the United Nations General Assembly», 4 October 1965.

born. ... This day I would be in school ... This day perhaps I would be a medical doctor». Who knows how many useful lives God was preparing for those unborn children, just as he planned the lives of John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, the Servant of Yahweh—all those lives that were announced in the Bible even before coming into the world? Those lives are a revelation of God, a revelation of his thought. How many others like them would we have today in our country? But now only we are here, we who have been selfish, we who believe that there is no room for others and that others should be prohibited from being born so that we can enjoy ourselves.

As we contemplate those two fertile and holy women, the older Elizabeth and the young virgin Mary, I want now to consider all the women of our country and share with them these beautiful words of the Council: «You women have always had as your lot the protection of the home, the love of beginnings, and an understanding of cradles. You are present in the mystery of life at its beginning. You offer consolation in the departure of death. Our technology runs the risk of becoming inhuman. Reconcile men with life, and above all, we beseech you, watch carefully over the future of our race. Hold back the hand of those who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilization»². Dear mothers, wives, fiancées, young women, young girls, on this Sunday, the feast of the birth of the precursor, reflect on the model of these mothers who asked God for a child, for God blessed them with chosen sons who were a blessing for all humankind. Ah, if women were holy, how many holy men there would be in the world!

The precursor

My second reflection is on the precursor. What does «precursor» mean? The precursor is the herald, the one who goes before, announcing, «Here he comes! He's coming behind me!» When kings were arriving in a town, they used to send heralds on ahead of them. When the pope is going out to greet large audiences, first there appears someone who announces, «Now the pope is coming out, and we are going to proceed in this way!» That was the role of John the Baptist: «Now the time for the audience with God is at hand! The immortal King of the ages is now arriving!» We have said that every person has a vocation, and the vocation of John the Baptist was clear from the start: announcing the presence of Christ.

In today's second reading we hear how Paul presented John in one of his discourses in Antioch: «Before Christ arrived, John preached a baptism of conversion to the whole people of Israel, and as his life was about to end, he declared, "I am not who you think I am, but one is coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to unfasten"» (Acts 13:24-25). John the Baptist was so eloquent and so effective in his vocation of announcing Christ that many people confused him with Christ. What a great honor for a preacher! «Is this the Christ who is to come?» people asked, and John in his humility had to explain to the people, «I am not who you say. I am not the Christ. I am not even a prophet. I am no more than a voice crying out, "He's coming! Prepare the way for him!"» (John 1:19-27). That is what makes John so great!

And that is why, when speaking one day of John, Christ uttered this incredible statement: «Among those born of women, no one is greater than John the Baptist». Nevertheless he added, «In the kingdom of heaven the greatest of humans is the smallest» (Matt 11:11)³. What did Christ mean? Here he was describing the mission of John in history.

² «Message to Women», Second Vatican Council, 8 December 1965.

³ The biblical text cited actually states, «Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he [John]».

John was like a link joining together two pieces of a chain: on one side was the Old Testament with its patriarchs, its prophets, and its promises, and on the other side was Christ, who was fulfilling those promises and prophecies and announcing his coming to the world.

In other words, it's the same as what the first reading told us when it announced the role of that precursor who was called the Servant of Yahweh; he was the one to whom the Lord had said, «It is not enough for you to be my servant and to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel. I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation reaches to the ends of the earth» (Isa 49:6). This is what God said also to John the Baptist: «Your role is not only to summon the people of the promise to do penance and prepare for the time when God's promise arrives with the Redeemer's birth. You are to preach repentance so that this privileged people is not blind at the moment when the great promise arrives, but that is not enough for you to do. Announce me! Announce the Redeemer so that my redemption reaches the ends of the world!»

John the Baptist encompassed all the wealth of ancient promises, and he bade the people, «Let us be worthy of the promises made to us». Thrusting himself toward the universal horizons of the future, John declared, «The promises of the Old Testament have now come alive in Christ and must be announced to everyone». He was at the center point between the old covenant and the new covenant, very close to Christ. He was not the light, but he bore witness to the light. «I am not Christ, but simply the voice announcing Christ» (John 1:8).

That is why we celebrate John the Baptist on this day. Although he was a simple man, child of a barren marriage, he was still the greatest of those born of women because God gave him a vocation which he lived out to the full. Sisters and brothers, this is a magnificent lesson! Every person has a vocation. All of us who are now reflecting on this have a vocation—and truly a great one! By our baptism we have a prophetic mission in the world. The Second Vatican Council states, «Christ, the eternal Prophet, continues to proclaim the kingdom of God on earth, not only by the ministry of the hierarchy and priests and bishops who have an obligation to preach, but also through the ministry of lay people who, through their baptism, have received the grace of faith and the grace of the word» (LG 35). You are able to speak much better than I, and through your holy lives you can give better witness than I. A holy married couple is like John the Baptist in their home. A holy lawyer, a holy professional, a holy doctor, a holy engineer, a holy laborer, a holy woman—they are all like John the Baptist, people on whose help God relies for proclaiming that the kingdom of God is nigh.

We are truly able to sense the holiness of persons who are upright! How often have we seen people using foul language and telling tasteless jokes, but when a decent person approaches, they all keep quiet out of respect for that person: «We can't joke that way in front of him». I was deeply moved when a young man told me that he was all dressed up to go out to party one night; as he was leaving, he looked above the door and saw the picture of his deceased father; he felt ashamed and said to himself, «My father never gave a bad example. I'm not going out». Holy people are always preaching by their lives! And that is what we need now: not only making demagogic demands of others but holiness of life. Such holiness can actually demand more than demagogic because «before a saint the shadows flee and injustice becomes vexed».

There is violence that takes away life. Remember that we are reflecting here within a very concrete context, the life of Father Palacios. I'm not going to say that he was a

saint, but I *am* going to say that his preaching and his life declared a righteous truth that offended those who walk with twisted gait, and I would say the same of the other four priests who were killed. I remember well the rectitude of Father Grande and Father Navarro and the others as well—their passionate love of the poor, their immersion in people's needs and the sufferings caused by institutionalized injustice. They cried out on their behalf! If we ask now why they are killing our priests and other Christians committed to announcing the kingdom of God, there can be no doubt that it is for the same reason that they killed John the Baptist: because he was denouncing sin!

I would ask you to have a little patience with me, sisters and brothers, so that we can allow the Gospel of Saint Luke to tell us what the preaching of John the Baptist was like and compare it with the preaching of today. In that way we can see who is right, whether those who cry out against the world's injustices and violence or those who preach a bland doctrine that has no teeth and makes no demands. The latter may be pleasant to follow, but it quickly leads to religion with a toothless gospel.

In the third chapter of Saint Luke we read, «He went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God"» (Luke 3:3-6). What are these oriental images saying? They are calling for the censure of human sins.

John was preaching repentance to the crowds that were coming to be baptized by him. Listen to his language: «You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance, and do not go about saying, "We have Abraham as our father", for I tell you: God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax is laid at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire». Then the Baptist solves some problems that could well be problems of today: «The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" He said to them in reply, "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise"» (Luke 3:7-13).

Publicans also came to be baptized; they were the ones who collected tolls and taxes and cheated the people a lot. John told them, «Don't commit extortion, and don't make false accusations. Be content with your pay» (Luke 3:14). John would respond the same today to many organizations and institutions that have projects that are worth millions but benefit only a fourth or a fifth of the population. He would say the same thing to those who falsify documents. There is so much trickery in our history! And here we have the very words of John denouncing all this.

The people were filled with anticipation, and they kept asking John questions: «The soldiers also asked him, "What should we do?" And he responded, "Don't commit extortion, and don't make false accusations. Be content with your pay". And he told the publicans, "Collect no more than your rate"» (Luke 3:14,13).

Since the people expressed anxiety and thought he was the Messiah, John told them, «I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming who will baptize you

with the Spirit and with fire. In his hand he holds a winnowing fan to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire» (Luke 3:15-17). John was portraying Christ as a worker winnowing coffee beans or wheat so that the grains are separated from the chaff and the trash. When the wheat is thrown up in the air, the wind blows the chaff away so that only the grain remains. This is the image John uses: Christ waving his fan, the instrument for winnowing the grain, so that only the heavy wheat remains, only those who have practiced justice and done good works. All the rest is trash that is carried away by the wind to be burned.

The account of Saint Luke ends by saying, «He exhorted them in many other ways and preached good news to the people» (Luke 3:18). John was tireless in preaching repentance, pointing out sin, and unmasking disorder.

The martyr

«Now Herod the tetrarch had been censured by John because of Herodias, his brother's wife and because of all the other evil deeds he had committed» (Luke 3:19). Herod was adulterous and incestuous because he lived with his brother's wife, but that was not the only sin of that ruler. While John reprimanded him for that, telling him to his face, «That is not lawful for you; it is a sin» (Matt 14:4), the gospel also speaks of «the other evil deeds Herod had committed». There is never just one sin; there are always other injustices and crimes. Our own people are breathing the air of sin as we see all those evils descend upon John, for «Herod added to all his crimes by having John imprisoned and killed» (Luke 3:20). We already know the sad history of how Herod's power colluded with hedonism and the other sins of the world to have the prophet beheaded.

The wife of Herod hated the precursor. When her daughter Salome performed a beautiful dance at one of Herod's parties, he not only applauded her but told her, «I will give you whatever you ask, even if it's half of my kingdom». The girl went to ask her mother what she should request, and of course from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, «Ask for the head of John the Baptist for it is worth more than half Herod's kingdom». Of course it's worth more! It's worth more than all the world! It's worth more than all the powers and all the dances and all the riches and all the opulence of the world! Herod went down into history with ignominy, and John the Baptist was exalted as martyr, as one who gave his life for the Lord. The disciples went to get his body and buried it.

Life of the church

As I told you, dear sisters and brothers, the person whom I hold close to my heart as we reflect this week is this murdered priest. I still seem to see him fallen there in that street in Santa Tecla, lying in his own blood. Devout hands then picked him up to put him in his coffin and carry him to the church in Santa Tecla. There a wonderful Mass was celebrated the same night he was killed. The next day, in a very impressive procession of silence, we brought him to the cathedral, and here we celebrated his funeral mass in the presence of the bishop of Santiago de María, all the clergy of the archdiocese, many priests from other dioceses, and representatives from many communities of the diocese. Finally, we took him to Suchitoto, his adoptive town, where we also celebrated a very moving funeral after carrying him around the park. And there he rests today in the Sacred Heart chapel of the parish church of Santa Lucía.

In a word, this is the last visible phase of Rafael Palacios' life, but I think it invites us to deeper reflection. Several priests have already been killed, making us ask: why are they killing priests and other Christians who are trying to be faithful to their vocation? I am convinced, and I'm proud to say this, that the archdiocese of San Salvador cannot be indifferent to or complicit with the situation of sin and the structural violence that exists in our country. For years now the archdiocese has felt obliged, by virtue of its evangelical mission, to denounce injustices from a strictly Christian perspective. Doing this has cost the church the lives of some of her most beloved members. I want to remind you that this persecution of the church has already been denounced by an impartial commission. The Human Rights Commission of the OAS was asked by the president of the republic himself to examine the situation of the country. Among its conclusions was this: «As a consequence of the activities which the Catholic Church undertakes as an integral part of her mission, priests, men and women religious, and lay people who cooperate actively with the church have been the object of systematic persecution by the authorities and by organizations that enjoy official support»⁴.

General Romero has said that his hands are clean in regard to this murder, but I say that he should prove it by means of an investigation that doesn't just make promises but assures us that the killers are justly punished. (Applause) It's not enough for him to say, «I am innocent». He should prove that it was not the UGB, even though they threatened Father Palacio and without a doubt carried out their threat. He should prove that it was not one of those organizations that the OAS says «enjoy official support». I want to remind you that the UGB is the same group that was threatening the Jesuits. The threat subsided when the president spoke out, and for a long time nothing more was heard of them. Now, though, they are becoming more ferocious than ever. As I said when Father Palacios was killed, if they could be stopped then, why can't they be stopped now? The matter is urgent because there are many priests, teachers, and other people who are being threatened by that dreadful organization.

The priests had a meeting the day after the murder of Father Palacios, and they made several declarations. The clergy resolved to reflect more deeply on what is happening in the country and in the church. As an immediate measure to honor the memory of Father Palacios, the churches are tolling their bells every night at eight o'clock. If any parish hasn't been doing it, then I hope they will do so when they hear this. But the priests aren't just tolling the bells; they are also urging the people to reflect on this situation and to analyze it in the light of Christian justice. A third decision of the clergy was to celebrate a single Mass on Saturday, June 30, at twelve noon in the cathedral. So on this coming Saturday there will be only one single Mass in the whole diocese, the one at twelve noon, offered on behalf of Father Palacios. In doing this, we want the voice of the church to be heard in all the parishes, at least those of the capital, so that we can all pray as a single body for our beloved brother. We want people to understand what it means to take away the life of a priest who celebrates the Eucharist for us. From this moment, then, we are extending a heartfelt invitation to everyone to be here in the cathedral at twelve noon on Saturday.

As we reflect on the martyrdom of John the Baptist, I also want to announce the death, also by violence, of a Marist brother in Nicaragua whose surname was Blanco. He was from San Miguel, and we ask your prayers for him. We also express our sincere condolences to the Marist Brothers. May this death of Brother Blanco not intimidate them but help them to

⁴ The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the OAS visited El Salvador from 11 to 18 January 1978. The report was published a year later. *Orientación* (28 January 1979).

realize that this institutionalized violence that is slaughtering victims has no respect for persons; it is being directed indiscriminately against all those who form the church. That is why it is urgent for us all to agree on the best way to defend justice and faith.

Another item of church news made me very happy. Last Sunday, during the afternoon Mass on the feast of Corpus Christi, I was able to announce that we are again broadcasting over YSAX, «the Pan-American Voice». The applause from you on that Sunday is unforgettable, and I convey it with gratitude and admiration to all those who work in the radio station and who made it possible to overcome the problem. I want to tell you that we are continuing to work to improve our service of social communication.

The day before his death Father Palacios had organized and coordinated a wonderful meeting of the vicariate of Mejicanos. We met together—priests, religious, and laity—to evaluate and plan the work of that vicariate. Programmed to meet that same day was the priests' senate, but we had to change the agenda in order to reflect on the murder of Father Palacios. That was the beginning of the reflection I announced previously.

On the twenty-first of the month, as we were burying Father Palacios, we were also honoring Bishop Chávez on his name day. That's the way it is with the feasts of the church: with the blood of martyrdom, with the hope of Christianity. That same day I went to the district of San Luis Mariona to administer confirmation in the parish of Cuscatancingo. I want to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate the people there for their devotion.

This past Friday we also celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart in the basilica of that name here in San Salvador. I had cordially invited the community to attend, and they filled the immense church. We reflected on how the Heart of Jesus is not just a past memory but is a reality that continues to pulsate in the life of the church today, so that despising the church means despising the love of Jesus Christ.

That same day also the parish of Corazón de María celebrated five years of nocturnal adoration by having a festive spiritual assembly. I want to congratulate that vicariate of La Asunción Flor Blanca: they are working as a team, they are making the voice of the church heard, and they are announcing her true message.

We celebrated a Mass for school teachers on the day which the nation dedicates to them. We know that in some Catholic schools, instead of festive celebrations, they had a Mass for the teachers who have been killed. I also published a message that you can read today in *Orientación*⁵.

Events of the week

I also want to mention today those deaths we lamented just a month ago, on May 22, at the embassy of Venezuela. We have seen the suffering firsthand, and we have deeply felt it. I remember especially the student, Manuel Alfonso Girón Roque. To his inconsolable parents and to all families mourning the violent deaths during these days, I want to say: let us not lose hope! If the Lord is asking you to feel the pain of such loss and such injustice, raise your hearts

⁵ «Being Teachers Despite the Violence: Message of the Archbishop of San Salvador to the Teachers», 22 June 1979, in *Orientación* (24 June 1979).

up to God, and like Christ who was nailed to the cross by injustice, convert this whole situation into a prayer for the freedom of our people.

I must also mention the problem at the university, but I do so as a pastor not an expert⁶. I had many hopes for the present rector and his collaborators because they were aware of the cultural paths along which I believe the university should travel. If they are required to resign, then I would ask those who are creating this problem not to resolve it by permitting the crude manipulations of persons who have no true appreciation of the university or the country but only a sectarian spirit. They are placing their sectarian interests ahead of the greater good of the university, which should be an echo and a radiant reflection of the life of the whole nation. Please realize that what is at stake in the university is the welfare or the misery of our country. I therefore call out to you: allow the university to serve us as an authentic cultural voice and as an advocate for the true liberation of the homeland. I do this, I repeat, not as an expert but as a pastor and a Salvadoran.

With a pastor's affection I also want address the medical students, the interns, and the residents. I ask them and the other party in the conflicts to try to resolve them as professionals. There are no doubt injustices that must be corrected, but this must be done constructively so that we don't get involved in another of those irrational struggles that we have sadly become too accustomed to seeing and experiencing in our time.

I want to repeat my plea that we provide moral, spiritual, and also material support for our sisters and brothers in Nicaragua. The archdiocesan Caritas has quite successfully begun our church's collection for the churches of Nicaragua. I ask you, therefore, to help your pastors and the Caritas commissions so that we can send off quickly and efficiently this aid which is urgently needed in Nicaragua. You already know that the only countries in the OAS that supported Somoza were El Salvador, Guatemala, and Paraguay⁷. How sad it is to see governments turning their backs on the desires of the people! (Applause)

Now I'm going to add more names to that list that began with John the Baptist, continued with Rafael Palacios, and now includes also the names of five priests and other people who were unjustly killed. I add to it these other murder victims: two *campesinos* of San Carlos Lempa, Rosalío Martínez and Santiago Merino; an elderly woman of Las Pampas Tecolula, Esther Durán⁸; and a young woman named Delmy Dúran. These deaths are related to denunciations they dared to make concerning assaults by the security forces against members of their families. There was the case, for example, of the youth Juan Carlos Durán and other cases besides. This was the response they got to their complaints: more murders. No voice is allowed to be heard. It's either «be quiet and watch them kill your relatives» or «denounce them and expect to suffer the same fate». What a sad situation!

⁶ On 19 June 1979 members of the Salvador Allende University Front of Revolutionary Students (FUERSA) captured for several hours the rector of the University of El Salvador and other university authorities; the university officials resigned a few days later. *La Crónica del Pueblo* (20 and 23 June 1979).

⁷ On 22 June 1979, during the seventeenth meeting of the foreign ministers of the OAS, fourteen countries presented a resolution demanding the resignation of Anastasio Somoza, president of Nicaragua. Initially Guatemala and El Salvador opposed the resolution, but in the final vote they abstained. *El Diario de Hoy* (23 and 25 July 1979).

⁸ Esther Escobar. *Orientación* (8 July 1979).

I also want to refer to other cases since this voice of mine may provide a little assistance, even if it's just so that they don't maltreat the persons arbitrarily arrested, many of whom end up disappeared. Six more have been arrested this week: José Vitelio Guzmán, José Arturo Salinas, José David Ayala Morales, Fidias Cruz González, Nicolás Surio, and Alfredo Rivas Guzmán.

When presenting a writ of habeas corpus to the Supreme Court of Justice, a mother who finds herself in this situation wrote as follows in her document: «Considering that in our country baneful precedents are being set that contradict the essence of the rule of law, and considering further that, given the present political situation, you as the Supreme Tribunal for administering justice are obliged by constitutional mandate to impose order with respect to the grave irregularities committed by public authorities, I hereby insist that you exercise your influence so that they are no longer committed». This is a priceless text, especially since it is signed by the trembling hand of a woman who is searching for her captured son and meeting with no success.

John the Baptist fully understands such a situation, so let us now on his feast day gather up all this blood and all this abuse of our people and draw near to the altar. John was concerned about one thing: not to be mistaken for Christ but to orient people toward Christ. Sisters and brothers, this is the same concern the church has: we should not limit ourselves only to earthly demands, and we should not trust only human prophets who will die, or even the priest who courageously defends his faith to the point of death. The one who should move us to work for our just demands more than anyone is Christ, for he is the only one who can make us free. He is the great Liberator in whom we trust above all. Even though John the Baptist had captured the attention of all of Israel and the people were expecting liberation from him, he also was wise enough to say, «Be careful! Not me! I am also a fragile man, and all I can do is bow my head and let them cut it off. Look toward him! I must decrease, and he must increase! I am not worthy to loosen the straps of his shoes! He is the one to follow!» (John 3:30; 1:27).

Dear sisters and brothers, let us not put our trust in earthly movements. Yes, they are providential but only if they remember that all the liberating force in the world comes from Christ! We will conclude this remembrance of John the Baptist as man, precursor, and martyr with the words he spoke as he firmly pointed toward Jesus and declared, «Behold the Lamb of God, the one who takes away the sin of the world, Jesus Christ! Follow him!» (John 1:29).