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THE DIVINE SAVIOUR, FLESH FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

12 August 1979

1 Kings 19:4-8

Ephesians 4:30—5:2

John 6:41-52

Dear sisters and brothers, this Sunday, as we come to give thanks to our God and to launch ourselves into the new week, we keep in mind three events.

First, that today, the second Sunday of August, is the Day of the Priest though this is not generally known. It's not a matter of self-praise but simply to remind you of the need that priests have for prayer and understanding on the part of the people of God. I therefore take this opportunity to express my solidarity as bishop with all the priests of the diocese and to ask the people of God and their parishes and chaplaincies and all their works to pray especially for them. Show them your moral support and solidarity at this time when it is so difficult to be a priest. It is an indispensable mission despite its difficulty. Indeed, today more than ever, the difficulties should motivate them to be priests according to the Gospel.

The second event is related to the first. This week we buried Father Alirio Napoleón Macías, who was killed, as you know, in his own parish church of San Esteban Catarina. As Bishop Rivera said in his funeral homily, «He fell as prophets fall: between the sanctuary and the altar». As a result of his death, the past few days have been days of much reflection on the part of bishops, priests, religious, and seminarians.

But the light that brightens this reflection is the third event, which we celebrated last Monday: the feast of our patron, the Divine Savior of the World. Both today's readings and all these events of the past week invite us to shine the light of Christ the Redeemer and Savior of the world on the realities of our church and our country.

Life of the church

The first reality for our reflection is the death of Father Alirio. Yesterday the bishops had a meeting at the nunciature, where it was agreed that we would present an official denunciation so that this crime will be investigated and its perpetrators justly punished. The nuncio offered to support us in our appeal to the president of the republic.

Yesterday a great many priests and sisters—110 priests and 130 sisters—and a number of seminarians and lay people gathered in the church of San José de la Montaña. We put out a brief bulletin about this meeting, whose objective was to take measures to achieve unity in our church so that all of us together—bishops, priests, and faithful—can better defend our priests and demand a halt to all repression. The results of this meeting were as follows.

First, a letter was sent to the Holy Father informing him of the increasing repression against the people and the church and making specific requests in this regard. Second, another letter was sent to the bishops' conference asking, among other things, that they join together to defend the basic rights of citizens and to demand respect for the lives of priests. The bishops were also asked to speak out before the government and the people condemning the wholesale murders and demanding that the repression against the people and the church be halted. Third, another letter was sent to the governments of America that are interested in defending human rights, asking them to urge the Salvadoran government to put into practice the recommendations of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS¹. Among these recommendations is one that is very advantageous for us: the recognition that there exists in El Salvador a systematic persecution of the church. Another recommendation is that the dreaded ORDEN be investigated and, if need be, suppressed—it has caused tremendous evil in our rural areas! These are official declarations of the OAS and therefore cannot be criticized as being partial to the church. Another thing that came out of yesterday's meeting was the publication of a statement of the national clergy protesting both the death of Father Alirio Napoleón Macías and the increasing repression against the people and the church. All this was signed almost unanimously: 118 sisters, 108 priests².

In these circumstances we are also consoled by the publication of a statement by the bishops which reads as follows:

The bishops of Santa Ana, San Salvador, San Miguel, and Santiago de María and their respective clergy protest vigorously before the Salvadoran people the horrendous and sacrilegious murder perpetrated against the priest Alirio Napoleón Macías, pastor of San Esteban Catarina in the diocese of San Vicente. As we extend our condolences to our sister diocese, we ask:

First, that the civil, military, and judicial authorities investigate exhaustively this and other treacherous murders and that they see to it that the laws of the country are obeyed, especially those that protect the lives of all Salvadorans.

Second, that his Excellency, the Apostolic Nuncio, intervene immediately with all the urgency that the case merits, so that this wave of murders of priests be stopped and this murder not go unpunished like the previous five.

Third, we ask also that effective protection be provided for all priests and that the competent ecclesiastical authority be contacted immediately whenever individual conflicts arise. [In other words, the civil authorities should not take measures against the priests on their own but should realize that there exists a competent authority that can deal with the priest. The civil authority should make the denunciation before this authority and not take it upon itself to punish our priests, much less to leave unpunished the crimes committed against them.]

Fourth and finally, we call upon all the vital forces of the nation to work hard, with the help of our patron, the Divine Savior of the world, for the cessation of this crime wave that is bathing our beloved Salvadoran homeland in blood³.

¹ «Letter to the Presidents of the Governments of America», 11 August 1979, in *Orientación* (19 August 1979).

² «Statement of the Clergy and the Religious of the Whole Country», 11 August 1979, in *Orientación* (19 August 1979).

³ «Statement of the Bishops of Santa Ana, San Salvador, San Miguel, and Santiago de María», 10 August 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 August 1979), and in *Orientación* (12 August 1979). [The bracketed comments reflect Archbishop Romero's interpolation into the text of the statement.]

Since Bishop Aparicio wasn't present and since it was a message of condolence from the other dioceses to San Vicente, he for his part wrote the following when he returned to the country:

With great pain and indignation I have heard the details of the murder of Father Alirio Napoleón Macías, a priest of my diocese of San Vicente. It was perpetrated in cold blood in the very sacristy of the parish church of San Esteban Catarina by three assassins, known by sight to many inhabitants of the locality.

This sacrilegious murder speaks clearly to us about the historical moment in which we are living: the lack of security even within churches and the pervasive fear lay bare a society that is crumbling. Given the lack of respect for the right to life in the case of Father Macías and the horrendous attitude of those who reportedly ordered the murderers to carry out their wicked mission before the Blessed Sacrament, thus profaning the church, we are obliged once again to condemn the violent killing of Father Macías and any other citizen as a means for solving the country's problems or as a way to eliminate those persons who are seen as hindrances to the seizing or the preserving of political power.

Since the case of murder of Father Alirio Napoleón Macías is so very clear because of the circumstances of the place and the persons who witnessed it, we urge the judicial and military authorities, in accordance with the laws of the country, to investigate the murder of Father Macías and to punish both the physical and the intellectual perpetrators of the crime.

As a sign of our repudiation of violence and especially the treacherous death of Father Macías, the parish church of San Esteban Catarina, which has been desecrated by that crime, has been closed to worship until the proper religious acts of reparation can be carried out as required by the Code of Canon Law. The Bishops Conference of El Salvador is withdrawing its two delegates from participation in the national dialogue⁴.

So this is a clear sign of the bishops' repudiation of the lack of goodwill on the part of those who are sponsoring the national dialogue: the bishops are withdrawing the two representatives they had sent to the conference. (Applause) This refusal to participate has been the long-standing position of our archdiocese⁵, and I'm happy that the whole conference is now in solidarity with our position—as are you with your applause! This is a sign, then that God is guiding our church.

I also want to express my very cordial thanks to the United States ambassador for his solidarity regarding this bloody event. You may have read his statement: «The news of the murder of Father Alirio Napoléon Macías, the pastor of San Esteban Catarina, caused me great dismay and sadness. Every violent act is in itself deplorable and regrettable because violence, whether from the right or the left, can never help the cause of peace. This death has been a tragic event for the church and for the country. What is especially shocking and unnerving is the fact that the priest was killed inside his own church, where he had been called to officiate at prayers for a deceased person. The crime is thus aggravated by this show of

⁴ «Message of Pedro Arnaldo Aparicio, Bishop of San Vicente and President of the Bishops Conference of El Salvador», 10 August 1979, in *Orientación* (19 August 1979).

⁵ President Carlos Humberto Romero convoked a national dialogue on 7 May 1979. Archbishop Romero questioned this dialogue and took no part in it. (See the homily of 27 May 1979 in volume IV.) For its part the Bishops Conference of El Salvador decided to send two bishops to take part in the dialogue.

disdain and derision for religious acts. All people of goodwill repudiate this sacrilege and condemn this brutal murder»⁶. We thank the ambassador for offering the church such wise and consoling words.

The Christian Democratic Party also expressed its solidarity with the church and its repudiation of these criminal acts⁷. Out of respect for time, I won't read it all, nor can I read the superb statement of solidarity from the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, which denounces this awful deed before the national and international conscience and ponders its meaning. I will read only the final part, with its recommendations: «There must be an honest and objective investigation of the crime, and those materially and intellectually responsible for it must be punished according to the law. A complete halt must be called to persecution of the church, the people of God and their pastors, as well as to the generalized repression in all parts of the country. Let the government order at all levels complete respect for the rights and guarantees of both individuals and collectivities as guaranteed by the political constitution and by the international human rights treaties which our country has signed»⁸. The statement concludes by extending condolences to the priests and the diocese of San Vicente and to the whole church of El Salvador.

While recalling events experienced by our community during the past week, we also want to address those who are occupying the cathedral, which is the reason why we find ourselves here in the church of El Rosario, once again seeking hospitality from our good brothers, the Dominican Fathers. In truth, this is a home to us because the mother of the Savior, Our Lady of the Rosary, is here. In her presence we want to remember that the church and her places of worship are zones of freedom and truth; nevertheless, people should not abuse our hospitality. A week earlier the February 28 People's Leagues staged an occupation, and fortunately they had respect for our patronal feasts—they were gracious to vacate the premises. But as soon as the feast ended, the BPR occupied the cathedral again in support of striking unions, and that occupation has prevented us from worshiping there.

If it is true that the church is a sign of freedom and that she is preaching justice from the cathedral, then it is quite in keeping with the people's cause that the church's own speech be respected and that the places of worship be left exclusively for the purpose for which the church built them, namely, the service of the people. They were not built for lifeless worship but for what is happening in them today: lively denunciation of the realities of the country. If the occupiers are really interested in improving the situation of the country, it would be good for them to respect the right of the church to speak and not interfere with it by misusing the right to seek asylum in the churches. They should not impede the church from carrying out her particular mission of preaching Gospel liberation and fighting for justice and human advancement. The more clearly the church's language is allowed to sound, the better will be the service she renders to all just demands of other Salvadoran groups. I ask you, then, to reconsider this matter and have more respect for the churches, all the more since the occupation of the cathedral is already a «joke», as the people say—it has lost its force.

⁶ «Declaration of Frank Devine, Ambassador of the United States of America in El Salvador» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (8 August 1979).

⁷ *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 August 1979).

⁸ «Statement of the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador», 7 August 1979, in *El Mundo* (9 August 1979).

What is being aired there today are the labor conflicts at several companies: IMES, Pan Lido, and Fabril de Aceites of San Miguel. Regarding IMES, this is an industry whose management offices are located in the United States; they respond only with solutions transmitted by lawyers with very limited powers. It would be good if the IMES management made themselves present here and not remain so isolated there in the United States. They should come to see what is happening in their factory, where 360 workers were fired and there's no attempt to find a solution. The problem at Fabril de Aceites and Pan Lido is that no collective contract has been negotiated. Consequently, it is wrong to occupy the cathedral, as if the church authorities were responsible for this. The parties that must resolve the problem are the Ministry of Labor and the factories—Pan Lido, IMES, and Fabril de Aceites—so that our church can be freed up. The church has always supported whatever is just.

We also want to mention with affection the visit we paid yesterday to San Antonio Los Ranchos. Those humble folk tell us they understand well the message being preached in our homilies. What is absurd is the lack of understanding on the part of those who refuse to listen out of pride and arrogance! As Christ said, «I thank you Father, because you have revealed these things to the simple and humble folk but do not reveal them to the proud and the arrogant» (Luke 10:21). The proud and the arrogant are the ones who go so far as to say that the cathedral homilies are directly causing all the evils in the country! Meanwhile, our humble people understand that what the church is preaching is precisely a Gospel message that consoles and encourages. From the most humble priest to the pope, the church always preaches the same message of human rights and of respect for God's law of peace and love. It is always the same. So I was consoled to find a generous echo of the word of the Lord in the community of San Antonio Los Ranchos, where other communities were also present. I want to congratulate the pastors and the Sisters of the Assumption who work in that sector, as well as all the catechists who collaborate with them.

A Good Shepherd Sister died, and we extend our condolences to that congregation.

Next week Wednesday is the feast of the Assumption. Among us there are many beautiful celebrations of this passage of Mary, body and soul, into heaven. Noteworthy are the parishes of Mejicanos and Flor Blanca, where she is the patroness. Several religious institutes also have her as their patroness. I want to thank the seminarians who have organized the celebration of the Assumption for next Wednesday the fifteenth at seven o'clock at night in the church of San José de la Montaña—they want to unite this feast with a personal celebration for me.

On Friday the seventeenth the parish of San Jacinto will be celebrating, but we'll have a Mass there on Wednesday at seven at night.

This is our community, and these are our celebrations. I wanted to mention them at the beginning of the homily so that you'll see that the object of the bishop's preaching is to give an account of the realities of his diocese, his parishes, his religious, and his priests—and also of his relationship with other dioceses. I want it to be clear that everything that forms part of the life of our diocese is illuminated with the light of faith and not with other lights. Our aims are not political or sociological or economic. We have not been sent into those fields except to enlighten them with our own mission, which is the Gospel. We are therefore seeking, especially on Sundays, to find in the word of God what the Lord wants to tell us.

As I've been happily announcing to you these last three Sundays, the church's liturgy has taken a break from the gospel of the year, which is Saint Mark, in order to present to us during four Sundays the marvelous sixth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. It is here that John expresses his reflections on Christ and his presence in the Eucharist. By analyzing this chapter, we get a better understanding of the meaning of our patronal feast of El Salvador, the Divine Savior of the World. As I was saying, this feast was the main event of the week, and I want to thank the communities that attended the Mass in front of the cathedral. It was an unforgettable event because of your fervent prayers and your participation in the singing; the whole country was united in prayer through the radio. Why do we place our trust in the Divine Savior? In the sixth chapter of Saint John, Christ reveals to us the nature of his reality, what he truly is for humanity. We have preached the last two Sundays on this sixth chapter, and today we reach the climax of the revelation, which is when Christ tells his critics, «The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world» (John 6:51b). From that verse I take the title of this Sunday's homily: «The Divine Savior, Flesh for the Life of the World». And as usual, I'm going to present three reflections: first, human flesh without Christ; second, flesh in Christ, that is, God's life wrapped in human flesh; and third, human flesh incorporated into Christ.

I hope that my message will be clear, dear sisters and brothers. You realize that what I seek above all in my preaching is to put the great message of the Gospel within the reach of everybody, even the simplest souls, for I serve the Gospel with all my heart and would never want to distort it. I hope that what you take away from my preaching is not just the chronicle of the week, not just the criticism of the government, not just the condemnation of sin—all that is secondary, a way of shedding the light of the Gospel on our hard realities. But the main thing that I would like you to take away from my preaching is the light of the Gospel itself, so that every one of you will be able to bring light to the issues I mention and to the concrete situations affecting your families, your lives, your friendship, and your work. That is the real reason for preaching: so all Christians will reflect on the Gospel in order to shed light in and through their lives, illuminating the realities around them according to the criteria of Christ. And the great criterion that Christ gives us today is called «flesh». How important this is!

Human flesh without Christ

My first reflection, then, is on human flesh without Christ, and I want to ask, what is flesh? If I were to ask you, I'm sure you could give many opinions about what you believe, and certainly you would be very correct. But what I want to present to you is how the Bible answers this question: what is flesh?

In the Bible the word «flesh» appears as an expression of life. «All flesh will see the salvation of God», says the Bible (Luke 3:6), meaning every living person. «Flesh» also signifies the body as opposed to what is spiritual. Human beings are composed of soul and body. In the Bible the body is called «flesh», but often the Bible considers both soul and body as «flesh». The philosophical distinction between body and soul came long after these biblical concepts. In reading the Bible we shouldn't be too strict in separating the body from the soul according to the later criteria of Greek philosophy. Rather, we should simply see things the way the Bible does: flesh is the person, the body enlivened by the spirit.

So the Bible calls the human person «flesh». The «flesh of so-and-so» means the particular person, but there are two aspects to the human person and human life. The human

person was created as a child of God in original holiness, in the grace of God, in friendship with God. The flesh of Adam was human flesh, the flesh of humanity without sin, but once he sinned by disobedience, human flesh became prone to sin, inclined to evil. In the Bible, flesh is then considered as what inclines humans to evil; it is the carnal, selfish, hypocritical, deceitful, ruthless side of human beings. We call «carnal» all the wickedness we carry within ourselves. Flesh then takes on a pejorative sense, indicating evil inclinations and concupiscence.

Opposed to that evil aspect which is inclined to wickedness is the spiritual aspect of human beings, the flesh according to the spirit. It is what Saint Paul calls «flesh in Christ». Christ is the second Adam, who came to redeem the flesh of sin; he paid for the sins of the flesh and also cured the evil inclinations of human beings. That's why those who are redeemed are still flesh, but now they are inserted into Christ. They still feel temptations and inclinations toward evil, but they also feel the force of God which saves them. Flesh, then, has two meanings: unredeemed flesh as the tendency toward evil and redeemed flesh as weak but with tendencies toward what is good.

Keeping these concepts in mind, today's readings present us human flesh without Christ, that is, the flesh we inherited from Adam and Eve, the flesh that is born of man and woman. What is born of flesh is flesh. A newborn boy or girl has been born of flesh, and flesh has its concupiscences. Christ tells us, «The flesh is of no avail» (John 6:63), for flesh is sin or tendency to sin. That's what I'm referring to when I talk about human flesh without Christ in today's readings. Already in the first reading we hear about the conflict between Elijah and Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab. When this evil woman saw Elijah fighting for the rights of God against the false prophets, she sent him a message like the ones the UGB send out today: «At this time tomorrow you also will be dead, along with the false prophets». Elijah was frightened. Who doesn't feel fear when threatened with death? So Elijah took flight because the UGB had threatened him in the form of Jezebel, the perverse wife of King Ahab (1 Kgs 19:2-3). (Applause) Both in Jezebel and in Elijah I find flesh without Christ. For a moment Elijah forgot about God's protection and fled: that is fearful flesh. The cowardly person who hides, who flees—that is flesh without Christ.

Let us continue examining today's readings. Saint Paul says: «Do not oppose the Spirit» (Eph 4:30). Those who oppose the Spirit are flesh without Christ. All opposition to the church is flesh without Christ. All crime that destroys life is cruel; it is the crime of human flesh without Christ. In the second reading Saint Paul also tells us that we should not let ourselves be driven by bitterness, by anger, by vexations, or by insults (Eph 4:31). All those things are also flesh without Christ. Let us analyze our own poor flesh. When we let ourselves be carried away by bitterness, by anger, by hatred, by rancor, we are paying honor to the flesh of sin, flesh without Christ.

What most interests me in this first reflection of mine is what Christ himself says about flesh without Christ. When Christ told the people about the bread that came down from heaven and said that he was the one who brought eternal life, the Jews criticized him. When Saint John uses this term, «Jews», he generally means us to understand the enemies of Christ, the authorities who rejected Christ at that time. While it is true that all authority comes from God, human beings seek to divinize themselves with authority and to believe they are greater than God. They wanted to judge Christ, and they criticized him because he said, «I am the bread come down from heaven». They asked, «Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his

father and his mother? How can he say now that he has come down from heaven?» (John 6:41-42).

This episode is very interesting, sisters and brothers, because it helps us understand the criticism against the church. Criticism of God can happen only when there is a loss of faith. When the people of Israel were traveling with Moses through the desert, everything went well for them as long as they had faith. But when they began to doubt God and to murmur and criticize, then God's punishments were bound to come upon them to make them believe once again. Christ also experienced this temptation when they criticized his mission: «How can this fellow come from heaven when he was born of Joseph and Mary? How can he bring us wisdom about eternal life if he has lived here among us?» You see? This is carnal humanity.

Take even the flesh of Christ, the son of Mary immaculate and of the eternal Father, God and man—if we see that flesh only as flesh without Christ, then we discover nothing more than a human nature like ours. We criticize it, and we place it on the defendant's stand. All the more can we criticize Christ's poor church, whose bishops and priests we readily call Marxists, subversives, and criminals. They are told, «You are to blame for all the evil that is happening». This is the voice of humanity without Christ. For even Christ himself, when people have lost the perspective of divine faith, appears as merely a common man and even a criminal who must be sentenced to death. Even Christ perishes when faith has been lost! That is why Christ, seeing the crudeness of this view, pays it no mind; he is far above all that and so reaffirms his declaration: «I am the bread that has come down from heaven. If you refuse to believe this, it is because you have no faith. You have become flesh without Christ, for I am offering you the bread of eternal life and you refuse it». This is flesh without transcendence.

In my fourth pastoral letter, which is about to come out⁹, I denounce three absolutizations in our society. By «absolutization» I mean the human attitude that makes an absolute of what one person thinks and so disregards the opinions of others. When our absolute is not Christ or God, then we create for ourselves many other absolutes, just as the Jews did. It is true that today in El Salvador there is a great deal of what is called «polarization», which we can also call «absolutization». I denounce above all the absolutization of wealth. This is the great evil of El Salvador: wealth and private property as untouchable absolutes. Woe to those ones who touch that high-tension wire—they'll get burned! (Applause) This flesh without Christ forgets that wealth is not Christ nor is it God. The absolutization of wealth and private property is a great error. «Private property must be respected», says the pope, «but it must not be forgotten that there is a social mortgage on all private property»¹⁰. What does the pope mean? He is following the long tradition which holds that private property is not an absolute but has conditions; these conditions are recognized by the political constitution of El Salvador when it states, «Private property has a social function»¹¹. What people possess is not just for themselves. What people possess is a gift from God to be administered for the common good. It is not right for a few people to possess everything and to absolutize it so that no one else can touch it while the marginalized masses are dying of hunger. (Applause)

⁹ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis: The Fourth Pastoral Letter of Óscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador (6 August 1979) 42-49.*

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Opening of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

¹¹ *Political Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador (1962)* art. 137.

Those who have lost their faith in Christ also absolutize power, and they go so far as to develop the philosophy of national security, according to which everything is permitted by the god of power. As I say in my pastoral letter: «It is ridiculous that in the name of national security they have created tremendous insecurity in the people»¹². This absolutization of power is evil because the power is not from God nor is it from Christ. When everything is subordinated to power, then every opinion, every expression of criticism, and every effort to improve things will be repressed. And that is the repression we are seeing in our country: the absolutization of power.

But there is a third absolutization that relates to our meditation on this gospel; it is the absolutization of politics. When I decide to make my political option or my party or my organization or what I think is the political solution into something absolute, and when I believe that I have no need to dialogue with anyone else because I have the key to the solution—«let them come to me, I go to no one»—then we are dealing with ridiculous fanaticism and sectarianism. At this time when the country is in agony, the absolutization of political organizations is also a crime. (Applause)

And so today, here in El Salvador, the absolutizations of those on the right are wealth, private property, and political power. Those serving that coalition of the far right are the organizations, both phantom and real, that issue death threats, that gun people down, and that kidnap people. All that is in the service of a false, Moloch-type god. It is horrible idolatry of gods that are harvesting human lives. Also, the armed organizations of the far left are involved in crimes of absolutization and in sinful idolatries. Both sides, in their polarizations, are sinning against the commandments of God's law. It is God who must be obeyed. (Applause)

Events of the week

It is here that I want to speak about another aspect of the past week. The first aspect was our community. Let us now consider how we as a Christian community shine Gospel light on the reality that surrounds us: our social reality, our political reality, our economic reality. We have an obligation to do so, sisters and brothers. We are not meddling in politics by doing this; we are carrying the lamp of faith and fulfilling the mission that God has given us in the world: to organize the world according to God. If we as the people of God come to church to enlighten our brains and our hearts with the word of God, then we must be able to judge what is evil and what is good in our society.

How can the church fail to criticize the arrest this week of the worker Kelvin Archila at the IMES factory? He was apprehended by twelve treasury police and is being held in the prisons of the National Police. Also, José Adolfo Cartagena, Simón Brizuela, and Fidel Arias, all of them *campesinos* from the district of Las Minas in Chalatenango, were arrested on August 5 by a contingent of the National Guard. The soldiers led these men to an unknown destination and then invaded all the surrounding villages. I'm very interested in this case because there in Las Minas some people have been asking a lot about Father Fabián Amaya—about where was he going and when he was arriving. I want to make this known in time because, if something happens to him, this detail should be taken into account.

¹² *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 48.

Rafael Humberto Alarcón, 18 years old, was arrested in his own house by agents dressed in civilian clothing, one of them wearing a hood. And we just heard that Juan María de León Guevara, a *campesino* from El Paisnal, was also taken away by the National Guard. Oscar Vicente Araujo Mata was arrested on August 10 by the National Guard. Fidel Ángel Ortiz was arrested on July 26, and nothing is known of him though a writ of habeas corpus was filed and his family has gone to all the prisons in the country.

Another crime we must denounce is the murder of the secretary of the local court in San Esteban Catarina. Those responsible seem to have been the FPL, judging from reports and some literature found beside the body. I want to say now, before some malicious talk states the contrary, that this murder has no relation to the death of Father Alirio even though it took place in the same town. On the other hand, it is related to the arrests and the threats that have already begun in San Esteban Catarina. Let us hope that the crime against Father Alirio doesn't become compounded with more tortures and threats and with violations of the human rights of those unassuming people.

We must also denounce the many threats and arrests and the atmosphere of psychosis the threats are creating. What we have now, besides the threats, are the counter-threats of those who think they know who the authors of the threats are, and they want to take vengeance on them without being sure. Something like this happened in the cases of Bishop Rivera and another good Christian of San Sebastián. And I know of other cases where the persons threatened suspected that it was a certain enemy who was threatening them, and they decided to take vengeance on that enemy without being certain. This situation lends itself to personal retaliation and many abuses. I want to beg you in the name of our Lord, the Prince of Peace: let us not give way to tragic rumors of this kind, which can put an end to many innocent lives.

How can the church not denounce all this? On August 9 a Spaniard, Don Jaime Conde, was kidnapped. No one has claimed responsibility, but whoever they are, if they are listening, they should understand that such an assault on a man's freedom is also a crime.

In its concern for the situation in El Salvador, the government of the United States has had some very interesting things to say in the press recently. You'll remember, for example, the headline in *El Mundo*: «Dangerous Situation in El Salvador Pointed Out in United States»¹³. Since they view our situation as similar to that of Nicaragua, they sent no one less than Undersecretary of State Viron Vaky for a secret visit. But now that it has been made public, we can read in the paper: «It is understood that Mr. Vaky came to the conclusion that the situation in El Salvador is a faithful copy of what occurred in Nicaragua. The polarization between the ultra-right government of President Carlos Romero and the opposition is becoming so intense that a moderate outcome acceptable to both sides seems improbable». The paper also quotes from what was later published there in the United States: «Vaky returned from his visit to El Salvador with the impression that the regime of Romero suffers from a persecution complex and is not willing to make any concession to facilitate the process of liberation».

Where do we stand then? While free elections and other things are announced here in El Salvador (Applause), there in the United States high-ranking observers of the State

¹³ *El Mundo* (3 August 1979).

Department are stating that our government is not willing to make any concession to facilitate the process of liberation. This is sad, but if it is true, then they are closing the escape valve for this explosive situation. This cannot be! (Applause) The newspaper reports, «The president promises news of great moment for next week»¹⁴. We hope that he'll give us news that makes us capable of believing in his authority, which ought to be a moral force for solving the country's problems. As the Council says, authority should be exercised «as a moral force which appeals to each person's freedom» (GS 74). Let *that* be the moral force of our government—not the force of rifles and machine guns, not the force of the raids and repression. (Applause)

Dear sisters and brothers, as a community we are shedding light on these realities, and they *are* realities and not phantasms. We are citing the impartial judgments of political observers. We are not meddling politically in these things, but on the basis of the Gospel we are saying, «That cannot be the right way. *This is the way*». And I tell you as good Christians that the surest way is prayer—and also participation, but legitimate participation, the kind God wants. As you see, therefore, we are sitting on a powder keg that can explode—if it's not already exploding. In my opinion, what is happening is almost a civil war, an unacknowledged civil war in which the far right and far left are claiming victims. Is that not a war?

May God grant that it not escalate any further. Rather, may we find in time the solutions which only «a moral force which appeals to each person's freedom» can discover for our country. I do not believe it is necessary (Applause)—I do not believe it is necessary for us to pay the same high price that Nicaragua paid for its liberation, which is even now in question. For we are quite able to find here a solution which is uniquely Salvadoran. I believe in the ability of Salvadorans, and I believe that, if their freedom is respected, and if the authorities make their moral force loved and not hated, then Salvadorans will be able to find a solution, not by imitating Nicaragua but by seeking their own particularly Salvadoran outcome. (Applause)

This is flesh without Christ. Do you see where all these polarizations lead? There are so many false absolutes while the one true Absolute is forgotten!

Flesh in Christ: God's life in human flesh

For my second reflection, then, which will be very brief—as the third will be also—I want to tell you about flesh in Christ as God's life in human flesh.

Many people did not recognize Christ and mistook him for the son of Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth—flesh without Christ—because they failed to take the incarnation into account. Consider what this beautiful mystery of our religion, the incarnation, tells us about the sublime dimension of human flesh. There was the most pure Virgin—and blessed be God that we are reflecting on this in a church dedicated to the Virgin, our Lady of the Rosary. Let us greet her always with «Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you» (Luke 1:28). Since there was this specimen of humanity as pure and as holy as Mary was, God asked her consent to become incarnate, to become a fetus in her womb, to be born as a baby in Bethlehem, and to grow as he nursed at her breast. As true man he could say, «I have a mother». He is the God-man, he is the Absolute, and he brought to us the whole life of God when the angel said to Mary,

¹⁴ *El Mundo* (10 August 1979).

«The power of the Most High will cover you with his mantle, and the child who is born of you will be called the Son of God» (Luke 1:35). No other woman has heard these words because no other woman has been able to unite the two great crowns of womanhood: virginity and maternity. Mary unites them because she is the type of woman whose pure, virginal womb makes fecund the life of God as he becomes incarnate as God-in-flesh. «The Word was made flesh» (John 1:14).

This what I want to say in my second reflection, but it is not I who say it but Christ. In today's gospel he speaks to us about the principle of life that becomes incarnate. When he says, «No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God» (John 6:46), he is talking about himself. Then he compares his own food with the manna which the Jews knew about: «Those who ate the manna died, but those who eat the bread I give them will live forever and never die» (John 6:49-51a). What is this bread? «The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world» (John 6:51b). The great revelation is the God-in-flesh who has become incarnate.

Christ's flesh is not like our flesh. If they kill us, our bodies decay and our spirit flies disincarnate to God. Christ is flesh and spirit, soul and body, all under one divine person, the Word. «The Word became flesh» (John 1:14), and everything about that Word-flesh is God and has infinite value. That is why, when they crucified that God-in-flesh, the pains of the flesh were endowed with the merits of God so that our redemption is infinite. When Christ grieved because they persecuted him and refused to understand what he was saying, his tears and his protests were protests of God. No one can understand the mystery of Christ except with great faith, and that is what we are trying to preach every Sunday.

That God whom Christ made incarnate is the one being sought by people who live without God and without Christ. Recall again the first reading: Elijah was discouraged, deceived, persecuted, and threatened, but he found strength when a sign in the desert made him realize that God was very close. He found some mysterious bread beside him and heard the words: «Eat this as food for your journey» (1 Kings 19:7). We are told that he recovered his strength and walked forty days to Mount Sinai, where he had that amazing theophany: «You are going to see God». The Bible tells us, «He felt a hurricane, and God was not in the hurricane. He felt a great fire, but God was not in the fire. He felt a strong earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Finally, there was a gentle breeze, such as those that caress us in our mornings or afternoons, and God was there» (1 Kings 19:11-13). It seems that the Lord wanted to teach Elijah a lesson: «The solutions to your problems are not going to come through the violent force of the elements. Rather, I am going to inspire you with the gentleness of my thought, with the breeze of peace». With this gentle breeze God gave Elijah the signs of sure victory over his enemy, Jezebel. The king would be replaced, as the prophet said he had to be, and other signs of victory would show that problems are solved not with hurricanes or earthquakes or great fires, but by the gentle breeze of God's thought.

So we see that the One who becomes incarnate in our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God of the breeze. Where I would like to see Christ our Lord most especially, sisters and brothers, is in that «Spirit by which we are sealed» which Saint Paul mentions in today's second reading (Eph 4:30). Those who believe in Christ are sealed by the Spirit of God, or as Christ tells us, «God has sent me to forgive sin and to make all men and women children of God by grace». And Paul tells us in today's second reading, «Let us love as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us» (Eph 5:2). That's the way to love. The only violence the Gospel

allows is the violence one does to oneself. When Christ lets himself be killed, that's violence: he let himself be killed. Violence against oneself is more effective than violence against others. It's very easy to kill, especially when you have weapons, but how difficult it is to let oneself to be killed for love of the people!

Our human flesh freed and made to flourish by Christ

So I come finally to my third reflection: our own human flesh, freed and made to flourish by Christ. When Christ in today's gospel assures us that we will be given the means to become members of his godly flesh, he is offering us the greatest treasure of our faith. Here I'd like my words to be as eloquent and effective as possible so that each one of you, like myself, might understand that our life and our flesh have no meaning and even become absurd when we try to turn them into absolute, earthly things. When we struggle here for this-worldly liberation, yes, there is value in that, but it is not worth nearly as much as the absolute value that God has given our human nature. Truly we are great creatures, even the littlest one in the community, but it's because we are incorporated into life in Christ. It is Christ who gives meaning to our lives, and that's why, in the sixth chapter of Saint John, he is so anxious to present himself in the form of bread. We eat bread, and it becomes the substance of our own lives. So should Christ be: we eat Christ so that we become him. We are assimilated to Christ, so that every Christian can proclaim with Saint Paul, «I live, but it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me» (Gal 2:20).

When Paul VI was explaining how the church embraces the just causes of the present time, he stated that the church also offers her own liberators for these historical times. And who are these liberators? The pope explained that they are the men and women who are armed by the church «with the inspiration of faith, the motivation of fraternal love, and a prudent and effective social teaching» (EN 38). When there are Christians in El Salvador who are truly enlightened by faith, inspired by love for Christ, and well trained in the church's social doctrine, then the political organizations will truly experience the presence of the church through all of you lay folk. For it is you who must enter into the fields of politics, sociology, economy, and technology. It is you lay people who must be the saints of the world, holy politicians, holy merchants, holy professionals, and you will be that only to the degree that your profession and your political action are illuminated by Christ, who is the life of God incarnate in every person. How do we attain this life? In today's gospel Christ offers us three means that we need to use: first, faith; second, grace; and third, the sacraments.

So that you understand that my preaching is purely ecclesial, I state that no one can be Christian except by faith, as Christ said today, «No one can come to me unless the Father draws him» (John 6:44). Faith is a grace of God; it is not the product of human reflection. Only God can give faith. When the Father inspires us to know who Christ is, we should thank God because, as Christ said to Peter, «Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven» (Matt 16:17). It is faith that illuminates this human, earthly flesh with the lights of heaven. Let us not lose faith, dear sisters and brothers! Let us try to follow Christ ever more closely!

«Come to me», Christ says (Matt 11:28) What a magnificent expression that is! «No one can come to me unless the Father draws him» (John 6:44). I really enjoy it when in the humble villages the people and the children crowd around me. When you arrive in a town, the people come out to meet you, and they approach with confidence because they know that

you're bringing them God's message. This is the faith that Christ wants: he wants us to flock to him and to seek him with the same confidence that afflicted persons have when they go to someone who can protect them. Believing in Christ means having confidence in him and placing our whole life in his hands. Such faith comes only from the Father for faith is a gift of God. El Salvador has much faith, the faith taught us by our grandparents and parents. Please, let us not lose that faith!

The second means is grace. What is grace? Grace is when a person is converted from living in sin to living in friendship with God. Grace is similar to faith but even more intensely experienced. It means making mine the life of God. Being in the grace of God means being in the life of God so that when we die our destiny is already determined. If we die in God's grace, our destiny is heaven, and we will enjoy God's company forever, living the life of God that we already have on earth. On the other hand, if we are not in the grace of God; if we are in sin, the victim of our passions; if we are only flesh without Christ, as beautiful or intelligent as we may be, then sin is our destiny, and we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Let us do all we can to live in the grace of God!

Third, the sacraments. The commentators say that Saint John wrote this sixth chapter because he didn't want to narrate the Last Supper in the simple, realistic language of the earlier gospels: «Jesus took bread in his hands», as I'm going to do now in the Mass, «and he said, "This is my Body. This is my Blood"» (Luke 22:19-20). Saint John does not recount this, but he does tell us something more profound: the meaning of the sacrament. We could say that Saint John gives the pre-sacramental talk and the other gospels administer the sacrament. That's what the church is doing today, making sure that people are not baptized without knowing what baptism is and that people are not confirmed without knowing what confirmation is. Likewise, people should not receive Communion without knowing what Communion is, and the priest should not celebrate mass without knowing what he is doing when he takes the bread in his hands and says, «This is my Body», to convert it into the Body of the Lord.

But when we read chapter six of Saint John, then we certainly know why we receive Communion. When our faith converts the taste of wheat in the host into eternal life, we understand the great statement that we have tried to explain today: «This is the bread I will give, my flesh for the life of the world» (John 6:51b). Christ speaks of «my flesh», but it is not like the flesh of those without Christ. The flesh of Christ is where God became incarnate with all his might, with all his love, with all the merit of the cross, with all the holiness of God. In that insignificant mouthful that is communion, the bread that is the flesh of God Christifies and spiritualizes all my flesh without Christ.

We ought to say in conclusion, «Lord, don't let us be persons without Christ any longer. Having known the beauty of your incarnation, we want to be incorporated into you». Let us hope that all the communities that have followed this reflection will not turn a blind eye to the reality of the country and the church. Rather, let them do good and be light and life for all the world, for they are agents of a church in which Christ administers his sacraments to give us his flesh which is the life of the world. This is our calling as the people of God. In all that we do, let us be missionaries of peace and love in the midst of the people. Let it be so. (Applause)