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THE CHURCH, THE CONTINUATION OF CHRIST'S INCARNATION

**Our Lady of Mercy
Chalatenango
24 September 1977**

My dear priests and sisters and faithful.

Who could have told us that on this her feast day, September 24, our Lady of Mercy would be giving us her support on this historical occasion in Chalatenango? Yes, Mary, the Virgin Mother of Christ, is also the mother of this church whose faithful with great emotion fill this local parish which today will become an episcopal vicariate. This great gathering of people proclaims that Mary always accompanies us as loving mother and powerful queen on our journey through history. Just as centuries ago, during the Middle Ages, she inspired that order of Mercedarian priests, so at this time she inspires us to create this vicariate. In those days the Virgin—who always suffers with those who suffer, wipes away tears, and eases the pains of humanity—awakened in certain men the vocation of freeing the Christians who were imprisoned in the dungeons of the Moors and the Saracens. History gloriously recounts how the church was always concerned for those who suffer, whether in prison or in any other situation. The church has always defended the freedom, dignity, and rights of men and women who are created in the image and likeness of God.

The church, the continuation of Christ's incarnation

In accord with what we just heard in the gospel reading, the church today looks with special concern on this marvelous department of Chalatenango which has been a mine of fervent vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Many men and women have been inspired to consecrate themselves to God, and this is God's response by means of his church. The Second Vatican Council states that God who became man desires to transmit his truth and his life to all. It goes on to explain that this church is both a visible society and a channel of invisible goods (LG 8). The church is a hierarchical society composed of specific men who govern her, rule her, instruct her, and serve her, but that hierarchy is only the human wrapping for transmitting the truth and eternal life that Christ brought to the world. Therefore, using a richly theological comparison, we can say that the church is the continuation of Christ's incarnation. What do we mean by Christ's incarnation? It is the mystery by which God in his infinite life became man in order to make manifest through his human gestures the transmission of his life, his truth, his power, and his consolation. Thus, when the hand of Christ touches the eyes of a blind man, it is the power of God that restores his sight, and when the human voice of Christ cries out before the tomb of Lazarus, «Lazarus, come forth!» (John 11:43), it is the power of God acting through that human voice that calls a dead man back to life.

The church, then, is embodied in a human element which is all of us, both the hierarchy placed at the service of this people of God and you who are God's people, you baptized men and women who by your baptism and confirmation participate in the eternal priesthood of Christ. Thus, the people and the hierarchy, the people and the priests—together we form that visible assembly of women and men. But it is not so much this visible assembly that interests us. Rather, it is the fact that through this visible organization all of us—pope, bishops, priests, religious, and laity committed to the mission of the church—are doing nothing else but lending our hands, our mouths, and our feet to the eternal Christ who is God so as to bring truth and eternal life to the world.

Hierarchical organization of the church

When the hierarchy delegates its authority to Father Fabián Amaya as episcopal vicar of the whole department of Chalatenango, a hierarchical action is being performed. The visible government of the church wants to make use of this new office that is called «episcopal vicariate». This is necessary because without human hierarchy we would not see in observable form the hand of Christ who keeps forgiving, nor would we hear the voice of Christ who keeps speaking this eternal, divine message that concerns all people.

I can sense your agreement, dear Catholics, in the way you accept with enthusiasm this hierarchical decision to create a new vicariate, which we might even call a new bishopric in the archdiocese. The new vicar, a priest united with the bishop, will dedicate himself with episcopal powers to organizing the life and improving the ministry of the church of Chalatenango and the whole department. As we heard in today's gospel, Christ has compassion on the crowds who are hungry for God but who are without priests or religious even though so many priestly and religious vocations have arisen here. Christ feels the need to reward you because you have given the church so many wonderful vocations for the priesthood and religious life, such as those who are in formation at the present time or those who are discerning a vocation in their workplace or in their communities. These vocations give great honor to this fertile land of Chalatenango.

We want the church's care to reach this zone more vigorously. This historic morning therefore marks the moment when the church extends her hierarchical organization in order to be more present in the midst of the people of Chalatenango. This will enable the people to feel more intensely the action of Christ who shares the truth in his revelation, who gives eternal life in his sacraments and priestly ministry, and who encourages the holiness of the Christian families that abound in this region. In this way the flame of Christian fervor, instead of being extinguished, will burn more brightly, there will be more holiness in the homes, there will be more devotion in our villages, and there will be more vocations for the priesthood. Such vocations will serve the whole archdiocese and the universal church, for the priest is ordained for the whole church extended throughout the world. Let there also arise among the youth of Chalatenango and its villages vocations of young men and women who want to consecrate themselves to God and thus give a divine meaning to their lives of service on behalf of humanity.

This is what motivated us, dear sisters and brothers: our realization that this department was capable of producing so many vocations. It was unjust for us to leave things as they were; perhaps we were a bit careless regarding your needs. Forgive us, for as a human institution we always have our defects. Forgive the human aspect of the church, but recognize also that this human dimension of the church is the instrument that God has chosen. If there are not concrete persons—whether they are called bishops, pope, priests, vicars—then the life that God has entrusted to these human channels cannot circulate. In this human church God continues his incarnation, and he keeps transmitting his voice, his miracles, his forgiveness, and his grace through the human gestures of the priests. That is why the priest must be holy: because he represents the person of Christ in the midst of humanity.

I congratulate you, dear sisters and brothers of Chalatenango, which has now become an episcopal vicariate. I congratulate you and thank you for the warm and fervent way in which you have accepted this decision. Know that, in return for this service that this humble servant of the church has provided for this department, I am grateful for the powerful encouragement of your loving presence, for the prayers of so many families, and for the devotion that so many people give to the bishop of the diocese. Before a response such as yours, sisters and brothers, one does not know which is greater: the favor that God grants through someone like me or the people's response to God, which also passes through the human heart of the bishop. I want you to know that this morning you leave an indelible mark in my heart as pastor. I have always felt great admiration, great affection, and immense gratitude for the families and the people of Chalatenango because of their fervent responsiveness to God. From now on they will be under the direct care of Father Fabián and Father Efraín and all the priests who minister in the parishes of the department. My episcopal presence will be felt more strongly since I am assured of the cooperation and loyalty of so many good priests who are building this church of Chalatenango in communion with the bishop.

I want to pay special tribute to the religious sisters who have been able to discover a new dimension to their consecrated vocation. We already have some religious congregations working in the department, and two others have offered to help and will soon arrive. We hope that others also will come to work with the priests and to cover the spiritual needs of the people.

A pastoral appeal to the laity

But I appeal not only to the priests and religious, dear sisters and brothers. Now I direct my pastoral call also to you, the laity. Lay people are all you who are baptized Christians, you who are marked with the sign of Christ, members of the people of God, and as such responsible for the church's history because the pastoral responsibility rests also upon your shoulders. I call upon you as parents in your homes and as young people in the world. As you experience the beauty of this hour so filled with hope, may you be protagonists of the church's history. Lend her all your ability, all your strength, all your heart. Follow the example of those Catholics who have understood their commitment and are teaching catechism, celebrating the word, or attracting people to the service of the church and of God. Let all baptized persons respond to this moment when the church challenges them from the hierarchy. We are doing all that we can from our side. It is now time for the people to respond generously to this church that is an instrument

of God. It is now time for the people to bring holiness, life, grace, and all that derives from these great eternal values and is so necessary for our great temporal commitments.

The church today is also concerned that Catholics learn how to derive from their spirituality the great social, economic, and political consequences of their faith, not because the church meddles in politics but because she is responsible for pointing out to people the true paths of God and also for denouncing the twisted paths, the assaults on human dignity, and the violations of freedom and of all that is sacred in humanity. Let it not be thought that the church has strayed from her mission because she now preaches these other social dimensions. Try to understand the new attitude of the church, and show your loyalty to Christ from your position as fearless lay persons who have a great love for the truth, for Christ, and for the church that loves you dearly. Do not be fearful, and above all do not betray this church. In this department we have to struggle to establish the authentic kingdom of God, and in this struggle, sadly, we have to confront those who, as Saint Paul said, were Christians at one time but now for political, social, or economic gain, perhaps even for a small amount of money, betray their baptism and become spies and persecutors of their own sisters and brothers.

Let our church move forward, and do not mistrust her. The church preaches love, and if she preaches against the sins of the world and calls attention to the sinner, she does not do so to offend them but to convert them so that they will be saved along with those who seek the truth of God's kingdom. May all of us understand this clear message of love, and let it not be distorted by the vile calumnies that today are circulating among the people. Let no one be deceived, for the church's sincere intention is to establish the kingdom of God in people's hearts and in families. This is what she seeks, and to this task she calls priests, religious, laity, and young people. All sectors of human society by virtue of baptism have this commitment to work for the establishment of the kingdom by God.

My sisters and brothers, in this context of great risks and many dangers but also of great hopes and great spiritual and pastoral consolations, Father Fabián brings to this work all his apostolic enthusiasm. I want to recognize him as a tireless worker for the kingdom of God and as a passionate follower of a church that he wants to see become ever more authentic in the spirit of the Gospel. Father Fabián has the full support of the archbishop's office, as do Father Efraín as pastor in Chalatenango and all the other pastors of the department who are here, as well as all the pastors of the archdiocese, because the bishop relies on them and places his confidence in them. I ask the people also to have the same trust in them since they are in close union with the hierarchy.

The priest is the bishop of his people, and the episcopal vicar is like the bishop of the department. In our newspaper *Orientación*¹ you can read about the faculties and the authority of the episcopal vicar. His authority is comparable to that of the bishop so that if the episcopal vicar denies permission to someone and that person then asks the same permission from the bishop but does not mention Father Fabián, then the permission is invalid. Likewise, if the bishop denies permission to some people and they go to ask the

¹ «A Word from the Archbishop: Chalatenango Becomes an Episcopal Vicariate», *Orientación* (25 September 1977).

episcopal vicar, hoping to get around the bishop, they must mention that the bishop denied the permission; otherwise the permission is invalid. This indicates the intimate communion that exists between the episcopal vicar and the bishop. They live in perpetual communion. Together with their priests they are the hierarchy; they are the pastors who, as in today's gospel, call upon the religious and the laity and ask the Lord of the harvest to send collaborators because the harvest is great (Luke 10:2).

Truly the harvest in Chalatenango is immense. It is so great that many arms are needed to gather in the harvest left to us by the pastors who have worked here. One of these is Monsignor Araujo who is here with us today. He worked here for twenty years, and there are many other pastors like him whom we admire and to whom we express our gratitude. As Christ said, «You gather what others have planted» (John 4:37-38); others will gather what you sow. We must work from the perspective of eternity. Let us never say, dear sisters and brothers, «We will work only for father so-and-so, and if it is not for him then we refuse to work». Let there be none of this personal preference that ultimately removes all merit from the church's work. When we work just for an individual, we are not working for Christ. If we work for Christ, then we will see the individual as an instrument, as the incarnation of Christ who is the only one who interests us.

My sisters and brothers, this is the message that our circumstances communicate to us today. Finally, to give everything our official stamp of approval, we are now going to read the letter that designates Father Fabián as episcopal vicar of the department of Chalatenango and Father Efraín as pastor of this city.