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THE SON OF MAN, LIGHT OF THE PILGRIM PEOPLE ON EARTH

Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

6 August 1978

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

2 Peter 1:16-19

Matthew 17:1-9

Dear sisters and brothers; esteemed auxiliary bishop, vicar-general and representative of the diocese of Santa Ana; esteemed canons, priests, and faithful of this community who have come today beneath the shadow of the Divine Savior to celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration.

It seems to me that the nation is never so beautiful as it is under the light of this sun of the transfigured One. In the face of Christ shining like the sun we recognize the very origins our country's glorious natural beauty. And when human sin subjects us to slavery, selfishness, and unruly passion, it is in Christ that we find hope for the restoration of the primordial beauty of our land. Our hope for restoration is what allows us to see the marvels of our volcanoes, our lakes, our plains, our rivers, and our seas—and trust that they will be made more beautiful than ever. It is true that nature groans under the weight of sin and selfishness, but in Christ nature also longs and hopes for the salvation of all men and women, for to them inanimate nature itself is intimately bound. Thus we can understand the vision of faith of our people, of the great multitude that has flooded into our capital since yesterday afternoon. With prayer and a sigh of faith they lift their eyes on high to the Divine Savior. In you, Lord, we find the true meaning of our lives. You are the key to our history. You are the Word by whom God created all things. You are the One in whom God will redeem our enslaved world.

There is a phrase in today's Liturgy of the Word that offers us the key for understanding this mystery of Christ. It is the key to history, to nature, to all our hopes. The key is in the words, «the Son of Man». When the vision on Mount Tabor ended, Christ tells the apostles, «Don't tell anyone what you've seen until the Son of Man rises from the dead» (Matt 17:9). The first reading explains for us this mysterious phrase. In commenting on God's word as we celebrate our country's most glorious feast today, sisters and brothers, I find in the Son of Man and in the splendor of his glory the light that illuminates this pilgrim people on earth. That's why we hear—with all the logic of a God who knows better than we who this transfigured One is—the command that each one of us should take away as the message of this mystery: «Listen to him» (Matt 17:5).

The Son of Man in the fullness of his glory

The first thing I want to explain to you is the meaning of the words, «Son of Man in the fullness of his glory». It is found precisely in the reading from Daniel that was proclaimed today (Dan

7:13). We are told that Christ took the title «Son of Man» from that scripture and applied it to himself in the Gospels.

This title has, first of all, an individual meaning. There is nothing strange about the Hebrew term *ben ha'adam*, which means son of humanity, son of Adam, son of human nature. In that sense every man can call himself a son of humanity, a son of man. But the Bible gives the title another, more eminent sense. God calls the prophet who is speaking here a «Son of Man». The Son of Man is someone preeminent, a mysteriously singular personage. The phrase therefore also has a collective meaning, and this is marvelously explained by the prophet Daniel in today's reading: it refers to the «holy ones of the Most High» (Dan 7:18). The scripture describes the eschatological panorama of a judgment in process; there are countless seats for the holy children of the Most High. And the Son of Man who comes among the clouds is united with the people of the elect; the Son of God is surrounded by all those who have been faithful in following him; their holiness will be crowned with glory, and God will pass judgment on history. Christ announced that those who follow him will be seated on the thrones of the tribes of Israel to judge the people of those tribes and all the inhabitants of the world (Matt 19:28). So the phrase «Son of Man» takes on a collective meaning. It is Christ as head, model, and exemplar of a whole race of redeemed people. It is Christ with his people who have been saved.

Accordingly, this phrase «Son of Man», whether in its individual or its collective sense, has a profound messianic significance. Christ uses this phrase when he speaks of his glory. Before the tribunal of priests in Jerusalem he announces that they will see the Son of Man descending among the clouds with all the majesty of God (Mark 14:62). At other times he declares, «You will see the Son of Man humiliated like the Servant of Yahweh, on whom God placed the sins of humankind to redeem this people» (Mark 8:31). It will be a humbled and a glorified people who will be identified with their head, Christ, and who will proclaim, «The Son of Man is Christ and all of Christianity, with him at the head».

Hopes of redemption and crowning with glory—that's what our divine transfigured One means to us this morning. When the Son of Man appears on the heights of Tabor, he shines like a lightning flash in that night of prayer and hope, in the longing for joy, happiness, and salvation that the people carry in their hearts. This morning and yesterday afternoon we beheld the figure of the transfigured Christ on the beautiful throne of the Bajada (descent), but the gospel reminds us that this image is not just for August 6, 1978. The gospel tells us the story of a night of prayer when Christ was surrounded by prophets and leaders of God's people and by the future hierarchy, beginning with Peter, James, and John. Today it is his whole church that is transfigured. All the people who love him and want to follow him are filled with light, and they behold already on earth the bright light that will flash for all eternity.

The Son of Man, light of the pilgrim people on earth

The second reading then, sisters and brothers, corresponds to my second thought: the Son of Man is light for the people who are on pilgrimage on earth. That's why I'm delighted to see all these people who have come from every community of the archdiocese and from far beyond. You have come to immerse your hope and your faith in the light of Christ. It would seem that this superb second letter of Saint Peter, from which today's word of exhortation has been taken, was written especially for us Salvadorans. We are encouraged by it to remain faithful to the teaching that has been given to us, a teaching founded on the power and the glory of Christ and on the living witness of the apostles who saw with their own eyes the Redeemer's glory

and so confirmed the testimony of the prophets. There on Tabor we see the Old Testament in Moses and Elijah and all the New Testament in Peter, James, and John. They are the ones who confront the «cleverly concocted fables», the human doctrines, and the false redemptions that deceitful people promise, and they are the ones who trust in Christ alone (2 Pet 1:16). This faith, says Saint Peter almost poetically, is «like a lamp burning in the night that will light up the darkness until the morning star rises» (2 Pet 1:19). This is the nighttime of our history; it is the dark journey of our time. These difficult hours that our land is passing through seem like an endless night—until the sun of the transfiguration becomes daylight, inspiring hope in the Christian people and lighting up our path. Let us follow it faithfully.

Dear sisters and brothers, that is why the church feels that she is God's lamp; she is light taken from the glowing face of Christ to illumine the lives of men and women, the lives of the nations, the complicated problems that people create in their history. The church feels the need to speak and shed light, just as a lamp in the night feels the need to light up the darkness. That's why I want to announce to you in this glorious setting of August 6 that, just as we did last year on August 6, we're going to publish a pastoral letter which will cast light on two problems which now trouble our nation: the people's organizations and what we might call the temptation of violence.

This letter will soon be published, and I'd like to make it immediately available in the communities, in the families, in the villages, in the nation, and everywhere so that people will grasp the idea of this lamp which is the light of faith and the light of the church, the light that illuminates all those caught up in the true realities of our people. This pastoral letter presents those two problems, and we also provide annexes containing much doctrine from Sacred Scripture and from the teachings of the popes to provide material for instruction and consideration so that we can continue to reflect on these realities.

The main point of this pastoral letter is to present the church's identity and finality: evangelization. That's precisely what we are saying: the church is a lamp that must shed light, and therefore it must involve itself in concrete realities in order to enlighten those who are pilgrims on this earth. This is the church's job; without leaving her proper sphere, she undertakes the difficult task of shedding light on our realities. The church defends the right of association, and she promotes the dynamic activity of raising consciousness and organizing the common people to bring about peace and justice. From her vision of the Gospel, the church supports the same just objectives that the people's organizations seek, but she also denounces the injustices and the acts of violence committed by the organizations. That's why the church cannot be identified with any organization, not even with those that call themselves and feel themselves to be Christian. The church is not the organization, and the organization is not the church.

If Christians have grown in the dimensions of their faith and their political vocation, then they can't simply identify the tasks of faith with a specific political task, and still less can they identify the church and the organization. No one can say that only within a certain organization can the requirements of Christian faith be met. Not all Christians have a political vocation, nor is political work the only work that leads to justice. There are also other ways to translate faith into work for justice and the common good.

No one can require that the church or her ecclesial symbols become instruments of political activity. To be a good politician, it is not necessary to be a Christian, but Christians

involved in political activity are obliged to profess their faith in Christ and to use methods that are in accord with their faith. If a conflict should arise between loyalty to their faith and loyalty to the organization, then true Christians must choose their faith and demonstrate that they are struggling for the justice of God's kingdom and no other.

Priests and lay people are called to collaborate with the hierarchy and to work for evangelization that is incarnated in our country's reality. They may naturally feel more sympathy for one party or organization than for another, but they realize that the efficacy of the church's mission depends on their being faithful to their Christian identity. The first goal of their pastoral work will be to encourage and orient people in faith and in justice, and they will leave the concrete tasks that arise from ordinary political action to those who are more expert in analyzing and managing them.

Furthermore, sisters and brothers, as regards the problem of violence, the spectacle we offer today to the Divine Savior of the world is a sad one: it is a picture of bloodshed, of desolation, of anguish. That is why with the full force of our faith we reaffirm before the Divine Savior of the world and before the whole country that we believe in the fruitfulness of peace as our Christian ideal: No to violence! Yes to peace!

But at the same time let us make use of the church's traditional morality to understand that the problem of violence is not at all simple. There are nuances that distinguish between different types of violence. Institutionalized violence is that which has created an oppressive way of life for the majority of people. We can also speak of the repressive violence of the state: it is the violence that maintains by force of arms a peace that is not true peace. We speak also about revolutionary violence, which the pope calls the «temptation of subversion» (PP 30); it comes about when oppressed people try to achieve the freedom to which they are called. There is also a spontaneous violence, such as occurs when there's a breach of justice in an institution or a factory; people's aggressive nature spontaneously turns into violence that is not organized but simply responds to the instincts of human nature. Finally, there is a violence that is best called legitimate defense; it occurs when innocent persons are attacked and they defend their lives or their possessions.

We make moral judgments about these distinct forms of violence, and we offer analyses of the situation in the nation. As we investigate the causes of such awful violence and the reasons for these situations of desolation and death, we find that they are the same as the causes of the present misery. This conflict is aggravated by repressive violence and by the intransigence of certain parties. This conflict can be used to justify further violence, and that is dangerous. The roots of what is producing violence must be removed. Even if the violence is unjust, the roots that cause it may also be unjust, and it is our obligation to work to put down roots from which peace can proceed. Peace must be a work of justice (Isa 32:17).

We repudiate the organized violence that takes on a certain mystique of guerrilla warfare or terrorism and that glorifies violence as the only source of justice. That only continues the spiral of violence; it cannot be the solution to our problems.

I exhort people to use the aggressive capabilities God has given them to work for justice and peace. On this morning of the transfiguration, sisters and brothers, it's interesting to observe the persons who surround Christ (Matt 17:1,3). They are all violent persons: Moses killed an Egyptian when he saw his people oppressed in Egypt (Exod 2:11-12). Elijah slaughtered the

false prophets who impugned the dignity of the true God (1 Kgs 18:40). Peter drew his sword when they assaulted Christ in the darkness of Gethsemane (John 18:10). James and John were called by Christ himself boanerges, «the sons of thunder», because they were impetuous men; one day they wanted to rain fire down on a town that didn't want to receive Jesus and his disciples (Mark 3:17; Luke 9:54). We see these men there with all their potential for violence and all their aggressive force, but they are docile before Christ. Aggressiveness is an instinct that God has given us, but some people don't know how to use it rightly. Christ told the boanerges, «You do not know of what spirit you are. The Son of Man has not come to kill but to save» (Luke 9:55-56). Christ does not mutilate our human powers but orients them by Christian power. The church also calls upon people and tells them, «Christians are peaceful and are not embarrassed by this fact. They are not simply pacifists; they are able to fight, but they prefer peace to war. They know that sudden and violent changes in structures are ineffective by themselves and certainly not in keeping with the people's dignity». (M 2,15)

That's why in our pastoral letter we encourage the organized forces to struggle with honor and to use legitimate means of pressure. Never place your trust in violence. Never allow your just demands to be poisoned with ideologies of violence. The church, sisters and brothers, is a lamp in the night; not only does she shed light on these present social problems, but she also illuminates the moral intimacy of matrimony, the moral intimacy of the source of life. The church is also against abortion and against all immorality. She is against vice and everything that is darkness, everything that leads people along paths of perdition. The lamp of the transfigured Christ desires to transfigure our people!

Listen to him

And so, my sisters and brothers, I conclude by reminding you of God's command this morning: «Ipsum audite! Listen to him!» (Matt 17:5). Christ also taught violence, but the violence of redemption, the violence that made his body the victim of violence in order to pay for all the crimes and sin of human beings. This Christ is the one who speaks to us this morning, and I would like to put on your lips (now closed as you pay attention) a prayer that rises up to the transfigured Christ: «Lord, behold the sad picture our nation is offering you. Turn toward us, mysterious Savior. May this hope we place in you restore to us the peace that has been lost because there is no justice in sight».

And so Christ turns to us, and I make bold to interpret his words this morning. In the first place he turns to the people, to those who suffer, to those who bear the cross of tribulation, and he tells them, «Become worthy of God's love». The church is with the poor not just because they're poor. The poor also must be called to account when they claim only their rights and aren't mindful of their duties; the poor must try to develop themselves, get an education, and work to succeed. Poverty is not just a matter of lacking things; it means having a spirit open to receiving everything from God.

I also want to tell those who have abundant goods to learn to share. On this morning that anticipates the morning of the final judgment, our Divine Redeemer still holds out to us the opportunity: «Whatever you've done for them, you've done for me» (Matt 25:40). This is not a request for alms; it's a demand for social justice.

I address all those who have achieved any degree of leadership among the people, those who by their professions or their organizational skills hold important posts, and all those who

are called leaders even if only within a modest domain. Sisters and brothers, in the name of Christ, help to clarify the reality; search for solutions; don't shirk your vocation as leaders. Realize that what you've received from God is not to be hidden away in the comfort and welfare of a family. Today more than ever the nation needs your intelligence.

As for the political parties, the professional organizations, the cooperatives, the people's movements—this morning the Lord wants to inspire in you the mystique of his divine transfiguration in order to transfigure you as well, not by organized force and not by futile methods or mystiques of violence, but with a truly authentic liberation. Keep in mind the spectacle we behold this morning: people who believe, people who hope in God. Let us not despise this religious sense of our people. Let us not import forces from outside, where they know nothing of the marvels of El Salvador. Let us know how to find in the soul of our own people the power that Christ is giving them for their own redemption.

To those who bear on their hands or in their consciences the burden of bloodshed, of assaults, of victims (whether innocent or guilty, they are victims with human dignity), I say this: be converted! You cannot find God on those paths of torture and brutality. God is found on the paths of justice, conversion, and truth.

To those who have received the tremendous charge of governing, I remind you in the name of Jesus Christ how urgent it is to find solutions and pass just laws for the sake of that vast majority of people who have pressing problems of livelihood, of land, of wages. For Christians the good of everyone, the common good, has to be an impulse like charity. Keep in mind that all the people desire the right to participate because everyone can contribute something to the common good of the nation. Now more than ever a strong authority is needed; it should not be authority that unifies mechanically or despotically but a moral force based on the freedom and responsibility of all. Strength is needed to bring all the diverse forces together for the welfare of the country despite their differences of opinion and even hostility toward one another. Give people the opportunity to organize. Repeal the unjust laws. Grant amnesty to those who have broken laws that do not serve the common good. Stop intimidating the people, especially those in the countryside. Either set free or prosecute in the courts those who have been disappeared or unjustly jailed. Allow the return to the country of those who have been expelled or kept from returning for political reasons.

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, the voice of Christ becomes more intimate for those of us who form his church. I've made it clear that the people of God, those who will one day be the holy people of the Most High, are not the same as the non-religious groups that the church sometimes helps. They are a people close to Christ; we could almost say they are Christ's clothing. We are his bishops, his priests, his religious, his catechists, and his communities; we are nourished by the word of God and try to follow the Lord closely. For us more than anyone else the word of Christ becomes a command so that we truly become a church that shines like a lamp in the night, a church that is not confused with other lights but always gives forth the pure light of Christ. The church, sisters and brothers, reveals the transfigured Christ. In a word, dear sisters and brothers, Salvadorans and foreigners, we are all God's people. Let us create in the midst of the Salvadoran nation a people of God that is truly the church of the Divine Savior.

Let it be so.