

167

THE THREE CONDITIONS FOR ENTERING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

14 October 1979

Wisdom 7:7-11

Hebrews 4:12-13

Mark 10:17-30

Dear sisters and brothers, the second reading you heard today describes the true attitude of Christians who go to Mass on Sunday. It is a letter that was written to Christians who had converted from Judaism but who, during a time of persecution, experienced nostalgia for their former Jewish religion and were in danger of falling into apostasy and losing their faith. These are the persons being addressed by this letter, whose third and fourth chapters make wonderful reading for this time in the life of Salvadoran Christians.

The author of this letter goes back to the origins of the Hebrew people, to the time when Moses led the people out of Egypt. For forty years they had to walk through the desert in hopes of reaching the Promised Land. This Exodus event helped in later Old Testament times to keep the people motivated and hopeful. When the Israelites were deported to Babylon in another period of exile, the prophets recalled for them the wonders God had worked to free them from Egypt; they told them to have confidence that there would be a new Exodus, from Babylon back to the Holy Land. Saint Paul used this same comparison in these two chapters, applying it now not to the whole Jewish people but to the Jews who became Christians. He told them that everything that happened in earlier times only prefigured what was happening to Christians now: the liberation from Egypt, the journey through the desert, the entry into the Lord's rest—that's what the Promised Land was called, «the Lord's rest» (Heb 3:11). All this was prefiguring the liberation from sin that the Christian people were now struggling to attain. The long pilgrimage through the desert was the life of Christians, with its many temptations against fidelity, against trust, against God's power. «Do you remember», Paul asked them, «how amid the rocks of the desert the people grew thirsty and revolted against Moses because he had taken them away from Egypt?» That was a trying moment in the journey, and that's why that place was called «the place of temptation» (Exod 17:7). Nevertheless, God worked wonders, making water spring from the rock, so they journeyed on.

Our rest is not to be found in the Promised Land. Our rest is in heaven, in the sanctuary into which the new Moses, Jesus, has penetrated with his redemption, thus opening the door to all who want to be saved. Not all the pilgrims in the desert reached the land of rest. Because of their sins God sentenced to death many of the Israelites who left Egypt so they did not have the good fortune of reaching the goal of their journey. Those who entered into the rest of God were the ones who had faith, the ones who were born in the desert during those forty years and also those who joined up with that people who had faith and hope in God's promise.

The letter to the Hebrews then reminds us of a psalm that commemorates this event: «So if today you hear the voice of the Lord, harden not your hearts!» (Ps 95:7 -8). This passage that was read today fits well with another one, which says that the word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword: «The word of God is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing even between soul and spirit, between joints and marrow; it is able to discern desires and thoughts of the heart. Nothing is hidden; everything is naked and exposed for the eyes of him to whom we must render an account» (Heb 4:12-13). In this way Saint Paul seeks to motivate Christians to remain strong in their faith, for the word of God is a word that nourishes us Sunday after Sunday. Whenever we reflect on the Sacred Scriptures, in our family or in our community, the word nourishes us and judges us; it is like a sword that penetrates into the inmost heart, to the dividing point between soul and spirit. This is a distinction that is much discussed in the Bible; it seems to mean that human beings are not only body and soul but something more. The soul, the spiritual part of humans, has the capacity to open wider in order to receive a new spirit, the divine life of God. It is to that point that the word penetrates, and it does so for the precise purpose of filling the human potentiality that only God can fill. The letter to the Hebrews therefore invites Christians—not only Jewish Christians but us as well, and all who are converts to this faith—to make our Sunday Mass truly a time when we nourish our spiritual life.

This exhortation is quite appropriate right now. Sunday is the Lord's day and a day of rest; it is a way of anticipating, in the course of our toilsome human history, the great rest that awaits us. Every Sunday when we come to Mass, we truly feel that we pause for a while in our pilgrimage through the desert beside the fountain of the word, and there we are nourished. On Sundays we get the food we need so that during the week that follows we can be optimistic and full of life. Let none of us fail during this journey in the desert; let no one give up on trusting in the Lord. During the liturgy we can reach the God who engages us in the dialogue of the divine word, until the day comes when his living Word, penetrating into our deepest intentions, judges us, and gives us a place in his eternal rest. Let us not be among those who are excluded from this rest. Let us not be among those who die in the desert and never reach the Promised Land.

This is my great concern as pastor, and you encourage me in this with your attention, your perseverance, and your own desire that all of us—you and I together—be nourished with these divine words. Having thus paid homage to the second reading, let us now study a very current problem that is the focus of the gospel and the first reading, and let us do so with faith in God's word and with confidence that we'll always be faithful to him despite the temptations and the persecutions, the flatteries and difficulties of the world.

The current problem that I believe is the cause of our country's crisis is one that I have pointed out many times; it is the problem of the hierarchy of values. There are some people who place an absolute value on wealth, property, political power, and other earthly things. In contrast, Christ today teaches us that the only absolute value is God and the following of Christ. That's why I say in my pastoral letter that, of all the services the church is currently offering to help resolve the crisis in El Salvador, the greatest is the denunciation of our society's idolatries and the relativizing of what many adore as idols and absolute values¹. That is the substance of Christ's word today: the need to remove these great obstacles in order to implant the kingdom of God.

¹ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 42.

If what is being preached clearly here, dear sisters and brothers, causes pain to those who worship the things of earth, as it surely does, our purpose is not to do harm or practice demagogic. We say what we say because Christ commands us who are his preachers to announce the true kingdom of God among his people and to denounce all sin that opposes the kingdom of God. (Applause) To this we are called by this Sunday's Mass, in whose readings we find this theme for our reflection: «The Three Conditions for Entering the Kingdom of God». The first condition is to keep the commandments; the second condition is the spirit of poverty and detachment; and the third, most important, condition is following Jesus. This provides a synthesis, then, of the divine word. Let us hope that we all are converted in truth to the kingdom of God—myself first and you along with me. In the midst of all the trifles that make us lose sight of the divine perspective, let us hold on to that perspective. Let us know how to put in its proper place everything the world considers of great and absolute value, everything the world places at the summit of its hierarchy of interests. The things of earth are not idols to be worshiped but are servants to help men and women reach the kingdom of God.

Keeping the commandments

First, then, keeping the commandments. Today's gospel narration is striking. Imagine a young man—Saint Mark doesn't say «young» but the parallel in Saint Matthew does (Matt 19:22)—imagine a young man running and kneeling before Christ and asking him the most interesting question that someone could ask God: «Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?» Jesus responded, «Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother"» (Mark 10:17-19). What a fine catechism lesson Christ gave that young man who was anxious to find the path of salvation! Would that all of us came to Sunday Mass with that same spirit: «Good teacher, what must we do to escape from the crisis in our country? Good teacher, you who calmed the storms, why is this wave of crime and violence in our country not calmed? What must I do to be happy in the midst of so much misfortune? What can restore tranquility to my conscience, to my family, to my society?» If we ask, we will find no other answer than the one first given by Christ: «No one is good but God alone» (Mark 10:18). What a magnificent profession of goodness!

God is the source of goodness, and if there is anything good on earth, it is because it reflects God. If my mother was good, it is because God gave her that capacity for goodness. If my friend is good or if there are good people on earth—and there truly are—Christ explains why: «All that goodness derives from a single source. Only God is supremely good». All other things are good by participation, but they can also cease to participate in goodness because they do not have goodness as the essence of their being. Goodness can be converted into badness, so that we have that saying: *corruptio optimi pessima*, the worst corruption is the corruption of what is best. When a man who has been good loses the essence of goodness, he becomes extremely cruel. They say that Nero at first was so good that he wouldn't kill an animal; later on he did not even shudder as he watched Christians being burned alive as human torches. It is dangerous to lose goodness! When people forget God and do not recognize goodness of heart as coming only from God, then their hearts become darkened. Only God is good, don't forget it! If you want to be good, then the first thing you must do is believe in God! But don't believe in God just theoretically. The God who created you and gave you intelligence,

life, and family has a law: keep the commandments. This is the path of eternal life: keep the commandments. That was why Jesus began to list the commandments.

It would be good for us this morning, as we reflect on the ways of goodness and right, to recall what we said in our pastoral letter. With the help of all of you who gave me your suggestions in the survey, we drew this important conclusion: «Our moral deterioration is evident. On all sides we find the dominion of what the Lord called the “mystery of iniquity”. The church’s pastoral duty cannot fail to denounce that reign of sin. She must urgently appeal to the sense of responsibility of each person, each family, and each social group. She especially calls on the powerful individuals and groups who directly or indirectly benefit from this situation and who have in their hands the most effective means for remedying this great deterioration»². In the letter we then enumerate the major defects of our society, both on the level of public administration and on the personal level. I don’t think we have to stir up that quagmire again because we are all witnesses of what’s happening, and we recount here every week events that are truly part of the reign of sin.

It’s entertaining to watch the sinners fighting among themselves and bringing out all their dirty laundry! Today they published a denunciation complaining about the taxes being imposed on the coffee and cotton growers, and they brought up an issue that perhaps surprised many people³. In January 1977 the renovation of the Hotel Presidente began with an initial budget of twelve million *colones*. One month later the budget had to be increased to eighteen million *colones*. When it was finally inaugurated, the renovation had cost thirty million *colones*. When it was necessary to make an annex, another nine million *colones* was spent. The end result is a hotel that cost thirty-nine million *colones*. The private sector has denounced this wasteful spending, saying that another hotel could have been renovated for twenty-six million *colones* less. Doesn’t this dance of millions seem outrageous to you, sisters and brothers, considering the poverty of our country? (Applause)

As we have said, this is a time when everyone must speak out—if not announcing the kingdom of God, then at least denouncing the offenses against God’s law. So it was with delight that we read the statement of the Dental Society of El Salvador concerning the national reality. Among other things the statement seems to be a commentary about «keeping the commandments». They begin, «Considering the present state of affairs in which injustice prevails over justice; considering the long series of ever less popular governments; considering the lack of social sensitivity on the part of big capital, with few exceptions; considering the laws that apply only to some and not to others; and considering that some social classes have everything while other classes lack everything...»⁴. The statement then declares, «Intransigent capital should recognize that it is no longer a feudal lord. It must be humane and treat its employees, as humble as they may be, with the dignity and respect that all human beings deserve. We are not mistaken when we say that money—and the power and influence that money produce—exalt many persons to such an extent that they become insensitive to the pain and needs of those who labor for them»⁵.

² Ibid., 21.

³ «History of Public Investment in El Salvador», a paid advertisement of the United Contributors Front in *El Diario de Hoy* (13 October 1979).

⁴ «Declaration of the Dental Society of El Salvador Concerning the National Reality» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 October 1979).

⁵ Ibid.

Later I will quote other statements that seem to me perfectly valid since they reaffirm the truth of what Christ said about keeping the commandments, about not stealing, not committing adultery, not divinizing creatures or persons. We should all acknowledge that God alone is good and that those who keep his law are also good. All those who kill and torture and betray the law of God are bad. If they want to be saved and enter the kingdom, then they must repent and, once converted, obey God's law. This is the first path: the commandments of God's law.

How good it would be if, instead of preaching, we all just took some time to reflect in silence about the ways in which we disobey God's law! How many causes of evil we would remove from our society if all of us here turned away from disobeying God's law and determined from now on to practice truth, justice, love, and everything that God's law asks of us! This is indispensable, dear sisters and brothers. The law of God is not a matter of supererogation. It pertains to the very essence of human beings. It is not God who is hurt when we disobey his law; by disobeying the law of God, we destroy ourselves. When a society no longer lives according to the law of God—the Decalogue, the Commandments—we end up with the society we have today, a society where selfishness, greed, and atrocity prevail. Let there be no doubt about it: El Salvador has drawn apart from God, and only by heeding Christ's reply to the young man will it be able to find its way back to salvation: «Keep the law of the Lord!»

This moving gospel narrative continues with the young man's response: «All this I have done since I was a child!» And it becomes even more moving when it describes Jesus as «looking on him with great affection» (Mark 10:20-21a). A dialogue of kindness! How I wish that, if the Lord were to see me today, he would look on me with affection and not with the reproachful look that he must have directed at the hypocrites, the Pharisees, the adulterers, the sinners. When Christ took on a severe look with his enemies, it must have been as terrible as a scourging, but the look of love that Christ had for this young person who fulfilled the law of God was a caress. There is no caress like that of the face of Christ smiling at me, satisfied that I am doing what I ought to do.

Nevertheless, Christ had more to say to the young man: «You're lacking one thing» (Mark 10:21b). Now Christ was challenging the natural goodness that people have. It is not enough to be good; it is not enough to refrain from doing evil. Christianity is something very positive and not simply negation. There are many people who say, «I don't kill. I don't steal. I don't hurt anybody». That's not enough. You're still lacking much! The young man's goodness was still deficient, and it became clear when Christ told him what he was lacking: «Go, sell what you have, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow me». Sadly, the gospel says that the young man's «face fell and he went away sad because he was very rich» (Mark 10:21c-22).

Spirit of poverty and detachment

It is not that Christ had a grudge against the rich, nor is it true that the church or the church's preaching rails against them. That is not the case. We have just said that Christ «looked on the young man with love» (Mark 10:21a), and because he loved him, he taught him the true way. Similarly, if the church utters a message that is taught, as Christ did here, it is not because of ill will; it is to point out the path to happiness.

«Then Jesus looked around and spoke to his disciples». He wanted to comment on this sad episode of a rich man who was frightened of going without things: «How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!» And the gospel tells us, «The disciples were surprised by these words» (Mark 10:23-24a). Their surprise was natural because they had been trained in the spirituality of the Old Testament, for which God's blessing consisted in being prosperous and having a long life and happiness on this earth. Christ, however, came to put things in their place and to tell us that, while it is true that riches are good and happiness also exists in this world, we must not idolize them. That's why Christ immediately reacted to the disciples' surprise by saying, «Children, how difficult it is for those who place their trust in money to enter the kingdom of God!» (Mark 10:24b). That's what's wrong. Having money isn't wrong, but placing one's confidence in money means making money into a god. We must trust only in God. Money is easily lost, and it gives security to no one. The experience of life teaches us that those who place their confidence in earthly things are never happy.

«How difficult it is for those who place their trust in money to enter the kingdom of God!» Christ then used this far-fetched comparison: «“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”. The disciples were even more surprised and said, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. God can do anything”» (Mark 10:25-27) What Jesus is saying here is that occasionally people use their wealth in the service of love, justice, and benefaction, but that is miraculous. Only God can bring that about. If instead of placing their trust in money the rich truly trusted in God and used their money as God's word demands, then they would be holy and they would create happiness on earth. (Applause)

There is then a moving dialogue with Peter, who was not rich. Even though he was just a poor fisherman working on the shores of the lake, he felt the freedom of a person who has left all behind. This freedom is not a question of having much or having little. Even those who possess little can be so attached to their things that they don't have the freedom of truly poor people. So this poor man, who had left the little he had, said to Jesus, «You see that we have given up everything and followed you». And Jesus told him, «I assure you that whoever has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will receive a hundred times more now in this life, and in the future age they will receive eternal life» (Mark 10:28-30). In other words, the spirit of detachment is the only way to have true freedom.

Yesterday I was reading with great delight the first encyclical of Pope Paul VI. When speaking of renewal of the world, Paul points out two critical virtues: first, a spirit of poverty and second, charity or love. Both of these are terribly lacking in our own time.

When he speaks about the spirit of poverty the pope says, «Why do I mention it? Because it is so clearly proclaimed in Christ's holy Gospel. It is a fundamental element of that divine plan by which we are destined to win the kingdom of God, and yet it is greatly jeopardized by the modern trend to set so much store by wealth. Zeal for the spirit of poverty is vitally necessary if we are to realize the many failures and mistakes we have made in the past and learn the principle on which we must now base our way of life and the best way to proclaim the religion of Christ» (ES 28).

This detachment gives us true freedom. In the same letter the pope explains why the spirit of poverty means true liberation for the human person: «The inner freedom which

results from zeal for evangelical poverty makes us more sensitive to the human aspects of economic questions and better fitted to understand them» (ES 28). No one can understand the relation that exists between the present miseries of El Salvador and the greed of the powerful class as well as someone who has the spirit of poverty. Those who do not have the spirit of poverty cannot see clearly that detachment is what grants us great freedom and great sensitivity to the social and economic problems of El Salvador. «Where necessary, we can pass a calm and often severe judgment on wealth and on progress» (ES 28). Progress and wealth must be judged with Christian criteria; they should not themselves be absolute criteria, as if everything depended on progress, especially progress that is enjoyed by only a few and leaves so many people living in misery. «We should come promptly and generously to the aid of those in need and do our utmost to ensure that wealth—far from being a source of conflict, selfishness, and pride among human beings—be distributed more fairly and used justly and equitably for the good of all» (ES 28). If the major cause of our ills is social injustice, then only the spirit of poverty and detachment can make us happy again. That is why Christ insists so much today on that spirit of detachment and poverty.

That last great church event in our America, the meeting in Puebla, also points out the path on which our peoples can find happiness. The word it uses is «preference»: the «preferential option for the poor». That doesn't mean despising the rich; it only means being concerned for the poor. I have often repeated this formula of Puebla, which seems to me something marvelous⁶. It is an invitation to all social classes, rich and poor, to make their own the cause of the poor, who are closely identified with Christ: «Whatever you do for them, you do for me» (Matt 25:40). Will the day ever come, sisters and brothers, when we are truly converted in the way Christ asked of that young man? «It is not enough for you to keep the commandments. You also need a spirit of poverty and detachment». So I urge you all: if the word of God penetrates today like a sword into the depths of our hearts, let us analyze our attachment to the things of earth—whether we have few or many doesn't matter. Such attachment to things is a personal attitude that causes grief to those who are attached even if it's just to some earthly trifle.

Following Jesus

My third and final reflection is the third condition for entering the kingdom. Christ told the young man, «Then, come, follow me» (Mark 10:21c). This is what is most important. When Christ spoke to Peter about «those who leave lands and family for my sake and the sake of the Gospel» (Mark 10:29), he was stressing the positive aspect of liberation.

The liberation that Christianity preaches is liberation from what enslaves us and freedom for what ennobles us. That's why those who talk only about enslavement and the negative aspect of liberation are deficient in the great force that the church gives human beings. Yes, we must struggle against earthly enslavement, against oppression, against misery, against hunger. All that is true, but to what end? Saint Paul tells us to what end in his beautiful phrase: «To be free for love» (Gal 5:13). Christ tells us, «Follow me», to make us free for something positive, and indeed for what is most positive of all.

The true liberators are those who understand that the struggle against enslavement is for the sake of something positive. The Exodus event we have commented on

⁶ *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, 3.

entailed escaping from slavery in Egypt, but it was for something positive; it was for the Promised Land, it was for a resting place, it was for the restoration of human dignity. If we were content with simply ridding ourselves stoically of our possessions but didn't do it out of love and for the sake of God and his Gospel, then we'd have a very anomalous situation. That's why we claim that all those liberators and all those revolutionaries who make their struggle consist only in negative and violent things—vengeance, hatred, eradication of the enemy—are mutilating the meaning of freedom. What a shame that such generosity is being wasted by such negativity!

There was once a communist who converted to Christianity because someone gave him the gospels to read. After he was converted, he expressed his feelings in a sublime prayer: «Lord, now that I know, I ask of you two graces: that you enhance the generosity of my old comrades with knowledge of you, and that you enhance my present Christian companions with the generosity of my old comrades». (Applause) It's a shame that we Christians remain so apathetic even though we have such positive values and make such blunt condemnations of earthly slavery and evil. And it's a shame that our atheists and godless revolutionaries are more willing to sacrifice themselves for their own causes than we are for the great and glorious cause of Christ. So I'm issuing a call: if we are truly Christian and come to Sunday Mass to ratify our faith, then let this word of God be like a sharp sword that pierces into the division between spirit and soul and into the most intimate junctures of our being (Heb 4:12). Let this word question us and prevent us from sleeping peacefully as long as we are not doing something for the kingdom of Christ and for his Gospel.

That young man was right to be fearful about following Christ. He thought it was enough simply to avoid evil and to observe the commandments in a relaxed, indolent manner. So also today many Christians who judge others think that they are good themselves because they avoid evil. That's not what Christ wants. Christ died for something more positive than that, and he taught us that he suffered for us even though he himself had no need to suffer. This he did, says Saint Paul, «so that we would no longer live for ourselves but for the one who died for us» (Rom 14:8-9).

Today's first reading helps us to understand one of the advantages of following Christ. The book of Wisdom belongs to the Old Testament, but it captures something of Christian wisdom. The author was no doubt imbued with the Greek mentality that prevailed in Alexandria, and he could see some of the negative attitudes I just mentioned in the cowardice of his fellow Jews. Since he was also aware that Greek philosophy was arousing more enthusiasm among them than the Bible itself, he determined to collect from the Bible things that would motivate and encourage his coreligionists. That was how the book of Wisdom came about.

He imagined Solomon praying to God and asking for wisdom: «I prayed and it was given to me. I pleaded and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepter and throne and deemed riches nothing in comparison to her» (Wis 7:7-8). Blessed are those who come to understand the wisdom, the riches, and the infinite beauty of God for they will no longer be captivated by the idols of earth!

«I did not liken any priceless gem to her because all gold compared to her is a little sand, and silver beside her is worth the same as clay» (Wis 7:9). Ah, if only we would

discover the vanity of gold, the worthlessness of silver, the wretchedness of earthly goods when they are not illumined by the wisdom of God!

The sage continues his praise: «I loved her more than health and beauty» (Wis 7:10a). Some people don't idolize gold or power, but they do idolize beauty, the pleasures of the flesh, and the vanities of life. This didn't seem right to the author either: «All beauty and health cannot compete with wisdom. I chose her rather than light because her radiance never ceases» (Wis 7:10b). The Bible asks, «What is human beauty?» It is a flower that blooms in the morning but by evening is withered. How many people there are who are losing the riches of heaven for the sake of such weeds!

At the very end, this reading says something magnificent: «All good things came to me along with wisdom; there were countless riches in her hands» (Wis 7:11). A curious thing happens when greedy people refuse to give up material things because they think that they are the true treasures of their lives. There is nothing more ridiculous than a miser. That's why the pope says in his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, «Avarice is the most obvious form of stultified moral development» (PP 19). People with great wealth are underdeveloped if they are greedy and envious, if they want only the things of earth. The avaricious are myopic; they don't realize that if they surrender those things out of love for the kingdom of God, they will find their hands filled with even greater wealth, riches that will shine with the brightest beauty of earth. Therefore let us put the Absolute first in our hierarchy of values: God our Lord!

Dear sisters and brothers, these are the three conditions for entering the kingdom of God. Now I would like us to ask how our own society is doing in this regard, and also how our church community is doing. This is important because the word of God is directed first of all to the church. My great dream as I preach the word of God here is precisely to create our church. (And I'm profoundly grateful for the attention you pay my words.) This is the very first thing I desire: that among all of us we build a church according to the heart of Christ. Let us build a church in which all of us, from the bishop to the child who was baptized just today, become members of God's kingdom. Let us become ever more skilled at spreading this kingdom of God by the testimony of our words, by our community, by our example. We are servants of God's kingdom—let's not forget it! Christ has told us that we can help sow the kingdom of God by fulfilling in ourselves these three conditions: keeping the commandments, having a spirit of poverty and detachment, and above all following Jesus, the eternal wisdom of God who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

The Second Vatican Council says something very beautiful about wisdom and the following of Christ: «Human beings judge correctly that by their intellect they surpass the material universe, for they share in the light of the divine mind. ... Our era needs such wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by human beings are to be further humanized. For the future of the world stands in peril unless wiser men and women are forthcoming. It should also be pointed out that many nations, poorer in economic goods, are quite rich in wisdom and can offer noteworthy advantages to others» (GS 15). Notice what wonderful praise is offered for our people: wisdom is our wealth! I say this with pride because our humble folk, whether in the city or the countryside, give us this priceless contribution of their wisdom. Just talk with a *campesino*, with an elderly woman on the street, or with young people like the young man who was running today to seek out Christ. There you'll find communities super-rich in wisdom; if you reflect with them, you'll discover treasures of wisdom, detachment, and dedication to our Lord Jesus Christ. So this is the true greatness and wealth of our people. We

are poor economically, but we have true riches we can offer the world of today. Let us be true Christians with divine wisdom who lovingly seek the truth and goodness of God. Let our lives not be marked by conformity. As Christians we should know how to fight and resist the injustice in which we now live, but we should also know how to add to our suffering the value of liberation, thus avoiding all greed, which is the sign of a weak spirit.

Life of the church

In light of this, I would like to review some of the events of the past week. Regarding our church, I want to make mention here of the pope's commentary on his trip to the United States. I'm happy to tell you that his statements coincide neatly with what we've been reflecting on just now and what we're doing in our diocese. The pope stated, «We made a journey of faith with the sole aim of proclaiming the Gospel and comforting the afflicted. ... Our journey was also one of peace and love and fraternity, and so I was led to the United Nations. In the many encounters I had with the people, I served as an interpreter of their desire for justice and peace, and so I spoke in the name of the poor, the suffering, the oppressed, the humble, and the children»⁷.

This week a much loved priest in our diocese died, Father Vicente García Artola. He was the brother of two other deceased priests, Father Salvador and Father Juanito. We extend our condolences to his family and to his congregation, the Vicentian Fathers.

The priests from the vicariates of Cuscatlán made their spiritual retreat with much fruit. In the vicariate of Mejicanos there was a meeting of pastoral agents; they are organizing themselves very well in that zone of our capital.

In the parish of Nejapa in the vicariate of Quezaltepeque we had a confirmation ceremony for some young people who were quite well prepared—I congratulate them. Also this evening at six o'clock, in the church of María Auxiliadora, the young people of that vicariate will be confirmed—that includes the parishes of La Rábida, San Francisco, Miramonte, Concepción, and María Auxiliadora.

In Plan del Pino the Carmelite Missionary Sisters have been celebrating this month of October in honor of their patroness, the Virgin Mary. They have been kind enough to dedicate this day to my intentions. I thank you profoundly, but I regret that I can't be with you because of other commitments.

I also congratulate the parish of La Palma for organizing an excellent program of community prayer; the faithful there are at prayer at all hours of the day and night. They set a wonderful example, motivating us to do everything possible so that our whole diocese becomes a community at prayer.

We were also offered the fine example of thirty sisters receiving their teaching degrees from the Colegio del Espíritu Santo. Among them were Franciscans, Passionists, Carmelites of Saint Joseph, Carmelites of Saint Teresa, Good Shepherd Sisters, Josephites, and Sister Servants of Jesus in the Eucharist. I told them that they project a fine image of the church

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, «General Audience», 10 October 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (14 October 1979).

working on behalf of the people's culture, and I urged them to work toward the hope-filled synthesis between faith and culture and between faith and life that our people so badly needs.

We send greetings to the superior general of the Guadalupana Sisters who is visiting El Salvador.

I am profoundly grateful to all who have sent contributions in support of YSAX. As of October 12 we had received 2,100 *colones*. A study is being carried out to put into practice what we said before about having a station fully supported by Catholics, without any need to depend on commercials. It would be a purely cultural, Christian radio station. The response so far has been very good. (Applause)

Events of the week

Considering now this church community, I urge all of us to grow in the three conditions for entering the kingdom of God since they will empower us to shed more light on the reality that surrounds us. Let us then look at that reality. With true sadness we must confess that the mystery of iniquity continues to reign among us. But we also affirm that the powerful example of Christians is capable of transforming this kingdom of sin in our country into a kingdom of God. May this happen quickly.

In the light of today's readings, what is your opinion about the impasse created by the coffee and cotton growers who are rejecting the government's taxes?⁸ The interests that should prevail are those that benefit the majority of the people. The common good should prevail over any individual good. While it is true that the authorities have misused tax money by spending millions uselessly, it is also true that the large producer classes should exercise largesse since they enjoy a greater quantity of goods—goods that God has given for the benefit of everybody. Let us correct the sins on both sides, but let us also break this impasse that is causing great hardship for the many people who should be benefiting from the coffee and cotton crops that the Lord has given for all Salvadorans.

In the name of God's justice and human rights, we are not in full accord with the statements that were made in the name of our country at the United Nations and also at the OAS⁹. An attempt was made to justify the repression in El Salvador by asserting the existence of subversive movements. The visit of the Human Rights Commission has demonstrated clearly that, sadly, there exists among us true violation of rights¹⁰. There is a need to accept the sin and to correct it by adopting the necessary means.

During 1978 there were at least 1,063 arrests. From January to August of this year there were 444 arrests. Last year on average there were eighty political prisoners in the prisons; now there are about fifteen. The government has emptied the jails of political prisoners, but regrettably the cemeteries have been filled with dead bodies. (Applause) Consider this: in 1978 there were 147 people killed for political motives; this year, just from January to September, 580 persons have been killed, four times as many as last year. There has also been an alarming increase in the number of disappeared persons: in 1977 thirty-nine were

⁸ *El Diario de Hoy* (11 and 12 December 1979).

⁹ *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* (9 October 1979).

¹⁰ Reference to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States.

disappeared for political motives; in 1978 we counted twenty-three disappeared; so far this year, there are already sixty-five disappeared.

When one reflects on the great pain that every single case causes, this multiplication of numbers is not a trivial issue. How sad it was to receive a letter such this one: «I am the mother of Yolanda Menjívar, who disappeared on August 15 at a military checkpoint at the Amayo turnoff in Chalatenango. Since that day nothing is known of her. She is twenty-five years old and has left behind three children, the oldest being five years of age. I fear that she won't reappear and that she is dead, but I resist believing that they have taken her life». She then writes something very inspiring: «We are celebrating the International Year of the Child. If my daughter does not reappear, what message and memory of this Year of the Child will these three little ones have?» (Applause)

We continue to insist that, as long as no effort is made to bring about profound changes in the economic, political, and social structures of our country, the root cause of all these situations will remain in force. (Applause)

Another unfortunate item in the political order is an attempt to defend ORDEN and to demand that the human rights of the members of ORDEN be respected¹¹. Those waging this campaign seem to have forgotten that the OAS reached the conclusion (and I quote): «The security forces and the official para-military organization called ORDEN have committed torture and physical and psychological abuses in many cases»¹². The OAS therefore recommended that ORDEN be disbanded since it has acted and continues to act against human rights¹³. (Applause)

The many pronouncements being made give us hope that, as I say in my pastoral letter, more and more people are seeing the need for profound and urgent changes in our country¹⁴. I am pleased with the two interventions made on the television program, «The Popular Forum». They demonstrate the way to achieve the unity that will give us hope for political changes in our country. (Applause) The political parties have also issued statements about the situation. One of them, the UDN, acknowledges that the political crisis consists in a confrontation between the people and the government¹⁵. It's what we ourselves have said many times. (Applause) When we've been asked about the church's conflicts with the government, we said repeatedly, «It's not about the church and the government; it's about the government and the people. And since the church wants to be with the people, then ...». (Applause) Another courageous statement is the one issued by the political commission of the MNR, which speaks of the two tactics that characterize repression: votes and bullets¹⁶.

¹¹ A reference to declarations of President Carlos Humberto Romero in an interview granted to three foreign journalists. See «Romero Challenges Political Leaders» in *El Diario de Hoy* (11 October 1979).

¹² Report of the Special Commission of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, ECA 369-370 (1979) 501.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 505.

¹⁴ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 58.

¹⁵ «Confrontation Between People and Government: the Center of the Political Crisis—Statement of the Nationalist Democratic Union» in *El Diario de Hoy* (11 October 1979).

¹⁶ «Free Elections and Massacre—Statement of the Political Commission of the National Revolutionary Movement», *El Diario de Hoy* (12 October 1979).

I want to refer also to the declaration of the National Association of Advertisers, which put forward several good suggestions. It stated, for example, «Citizens have an obligation to encourage all thoughtful persons to participate and to speak in the public arena. Newspapers could begin by dedicating a page to an open forum in which people would be invited to express their opinions. Radio stations could begin with a half-hour for open microphones. Television could offer space for interviews with persons who represent different sectors of the productive community». This initiative of the National Association of Advertisers, ANAES, is excellent, but we have seen that it is impossible in the practical order. When we have tried to publish something that touches on economic structures, we have found that the advertisers themselves were opposed. I was banished myself from a newspaper because the advertisers didn't want me to write for it¹⁷. With this type of «freedom», how are we going to open up the pages of the newspapers or the microphones or the television? Certainly, that is something the communications media ought to do: provide a space where all opinions can be heard. But YSAX has posed this question, «When have you ever seen an editorial in one of our papers that touches these open sores of our society?» They publish only the things that the advertisers allow to be published. That's the way our publications are controlled. Still, let's hope that this initiative of ANAES finds an echo, beginning with themselves.

The new scale of wages for workers has been published. Coffee harvesters will be paid eleven *colones* per day; cotton harvesters, seven; sugar cane harvesters, six fifty. Eleven *colones* is declared to be the minimum wage, so why do the others earn only seven and six fifty? With such wages many workers are left with a serious economic deficit. It will be argued that the products don't pay enough, but that's where a well administered government comes in: if taxes are imposed, they can serve to balance these deficits instead of spending millions on useless things. (Applause)

So that the *campesinos* will be aware of it, I'll explain about the law governing meals. These can be provided in two ways. One way is by giving each worker a pound and a half of prepared corn and four ounces of beans, distributed over three daily rations. The alternative is to give the worker the sum total of the raw products at the end of the week or the fortnight, plus fifty cents per day payable on payday.

Since knowledge about these matters frequently doesn't reach the *campesinos*, I want to advise them that, if they notice any abuse or neglect regarding what is stipulated for their wages and their meals, they can register their complaints at the Department of Farm Inspection, located on the third floor of the Ministry of Labor. If you don't receive any attention there, remember that our Legal Aid Office is on the *campesinos'* side and will help you with your claims. (Applause)

Dennis McDonald and Fausto Buchelli were kidnapped on September 21, reportedly by the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers. We hope that they will be freed soon since the conditions the kidnappers set are being met. We're sorry that no organization has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of Jaime Batlle, which occurred on September 12, or for the kidnapping of Luis Escalante Arce, which occurred on October 6. You've also heard that an attempt was made to kidnap Pedro Menéndez Castro; it was not successful but one guard was killed and another was wounded. I always express my heartfelt sympathy with the families

¹⁷ Starting in 1977, Archbishop Romero wrote a weekly column in the opinion pages of *La Prensa Gráfica*. The last one appeared on 8 June 1979.

that suffer loss, and I make an appeal for the kidnappers to respect people's freedom. If there is any way my intervention can help in this case, I will gladly offer my services.

There have been problems in the university, which has been called a «sanctuary of terrorism and subversion», but now there are two statements responding to that accusation. We want to express our solidarity regarding several issues at the university, especially since we believe that the university must reflect the situation of our country. The university, by drawing on the intellectual capacity that should distinguish it, must help to find reasonable solutions that are worthy of our culture and our people.

The pronouncement reads thus: «It is unfounded and malicious to assert that the University of El Salvador is generating the violence that is disrupting the nation's tranquility. To say this is to imply that the principal problem in our country is violence and that eliminating violence will also eliminate the social tensions that El Salvador is experiencing. Under this assumption, intervening in the affairs of the university would resolve the problem. Contrary to this position, it is necessary to reaffirm that the origin of our problems is to be found in the grave socio-economic crisis affecting our people, in the strangulation of the people's participation in political power, and in the permanent violation of fundamental human rights, as has already been established by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the OAS. ... It should be remembered that, according to the existing political constitution, the University of El Salvador is autonomous in administrative and educational matters. Intervention cannot be justified by adducing the argument of "national security" since that implies a violation of the constitution», and so on.¹⁸ As the church has always done, therefore, we stress that the root cause of violence is not to be sought in secondary causes, which certainly exist; rather, the principal cause is the structure of injustice that prevails in our nation.

Bodies continue to appear in different parts of the country. I strongly urge you to read the account in *Orientacion* that tells how several bodies appeared with marks of very cruel torture¹⁹. This week eleven bodies were found.

Dalia Arbizú Peña²⁰, a social promoter for ISTA, was captured and then shot to death. She was reportedly six months pregnant. Dalia was dedicated to the promotion of women in the rural areas. Such cruel and inhumane murders must be investigated and punished.

I also want to denounce the death threats that are still being made against Doctor Roberto Lara Velado, the president of the Human Rights Commission, and also against the commission's vice-president.

We also denounce new actions taken by the political-military movements. The ERP claimed responsibility for a bomb that exploded near the house of the prosecutor. The FARN took over several radio stations in order to broadcast their message. The FPL set fire to

¹⁸ «Statement of the Executive Board of the General Assembly of the University of El Salvador» in *El Diario de Hoy* (13 October 1979).

¹⁹ «Denunciations and Threats» in *Orientación* (14 October 1979).

²⁰ In the papers her name appeared as Dalila Arbizú Peña. *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* (11 October 1979).

about twenty government vehicles and planted bombs in several city halls and in the offices of the Administration of Revenue. And so on.

The following individuals have been arrested without being brought before the courts: Marcos Calles in Upatoro, Chalatenango; Mercedes Vitelio García, secretary general of Minerva; and Jorge Villalobos, secretary of youth affairs. All of them have been detained since October 12. We continue to deplore the disappearance of Doctor María Teresa Hernández Saballos, who has been missing since September 15. Her nine-year-old son, Vladimir, wrote in *Orientación*, «Please, free her!»²¹ In this country of such great suffering we have to beg even for freedom.

We must also lament the disorder in the field of labor. Several labor conflicts continue; some of them have been going on for two months now, and others are headed in the same direction. The situation is disturbing in many places, such as Lido, APEX, DURAMAS, Arco Ingenieros, and the construction firm COGEFAR. In several factories they have taken hostages, but those are not the people who can resolve the problem. In several cases the management has not shown support for the hostages. I urge all of you, both strikers and management, to move beyond these painful impasses quickly. Many next of kin, especially those of the hostages, have come to the archdiocesan offices lamenting the situation of their poor relatives: some have heart problems while others have psychological or physical problems. Those of you who have taken the hostages captive, remember that humanity is what is most important; it surpasses all other interests. And you managers, do everything possible to seek the intervention of the Ministry of Labor. Attend the meetings! Many of them have been scheduled, but they are treated with great indifference despite the great suffering of so many people.

We could go on, sisters and brothers, but this is never-ending. What we've said already gives us enough background to hear this word of God that must penetrate into the soul of our people. Let us strive to bring the light of our faith to the world. Let us experience intensely the call that Christ addresses to us today through that young man who asks the important question that should be on the lips of all of us: «Will our society be the kingdom of God or the kingdom of sin? What must we do to be free of the present situation?» With great succinctness Christ explains the path that all of us can now begin to follow both as individuals and as families: «Keep the commandments; live the spirit of poverty and detachment; and above all: Come, follow me!»

Let us follow Christ. Let us believe in him. Let us feel certain that God and Jesus Christ have more than enough power to save our people as long as we don't turn our back on Christ as the young man did who lacked the courage to follow him. Instead we must tell Christ, as Peter did, «Lord, we have left everything. What can we do for this people?» Surely the Lord will inspire us to do what must be done. All the social classes of El Salvador can do much to help. Puebla called out to technical experts to put their wisdom and faith to work amid the scientific advances being made. It called out also to people in government, to those in universities and the intellectual world, to technicians and scientists who are forging our technological society, to managers of the mass media. It called out as well as to artists, jurists, laborers, *campesinos*, businessmen, economists, and the military. I want to read this passage from Medellín, which speaks of the military: «They have the mission of guaranteeing the political freedoms of citizens rather than hindering them. Let them be conscious of their

²¹ «Letter from a Boy Asking for His Mother's Freedom» in *Orientación* (30 September 1979).

mission, which is to guarantee the peace and security of all. Let them never abuse their might. Let them rather defend the force of law. Let them contribute to a society that is free, participatory, and pluralist» (P1247). (Applause)

I conclude with these words from Puebla: «Let all those who contribute to the normal functioning of society, especially professional and business people, undertake their mission in a spirit of service to the people, for the people look to them to defend their lives, their rights, and the advancement of their well-being» (P 1249). Let it be so. (Applause)