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WHAT GOD GIVES IS FOR ALL OF US

Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

30 September 1979

Numbers 11:25-29

James 5:1-6

Mark 9:37-42,44,46-47

Dear sisters and brothers, I announced at the start of the liturgy that we'd be celebrating this Mass in memory of the great pontiff, John Paul I, whose reign was the shortest in this century. Yesterday, September 29, was the first anniversary of his sudden death. Also during this Mass, which projects our pilgrim church into the larger world, let us accompany that great pilgrim who left yesterday for Ireland and who will later travel to the United States, carrying the church's message to all the peoples of the world.

Considering our first intention, John Paul I, I want to highlight the role he played as catechist. Although he held the church's highest dignity, he enjoyed being the humble, story-telling catechist so that his pontificate was marked by simplicity and smiles. Certainly his brief reign was sufficient to impart a new countenance and a new style to the service rendered by the supreme pontiff. This catechist wrote a book—before he became pope, naturally—which was later published under the title *Illustrious Friends*. When he was a bishop, he wrote a monthly letter to famous historical characters: philosophers, literary figures, and the like. In fact, one of today's readings from the Holy Bible seems to me to resemble a letter he wrote to Gilbert Chesterton, an English convert to Catholicism, about a work of his titled *The Ball and the Cross*. John Paul I develops the theme with his delightful catechetical style.

The two main characters in Chesterton's novel are a professor named Lucifer and a monk named Michael. At one point the two men were flying over London when Lucifer mocked the cross atop the dome of a cathedral. Michael reproached him with the words: «What do you mean by such ridicule? Let me tell you a story». The monk told Lucifer about a renegade atheist who climbed to the top of a church, grabbed the cross, and threw it down. After the atheist climbed back down, he began to see crosses on the tall trees of the forest, so he had the forest cut down, convinced that all crosses needed to be removed from the world. He returned to his house, but now he was so obsessed with the cross that he saw cruciform figures even in his furniture, and so he destroyed his furniture, his house, everything. The next day they found him dead by the river, driven crazy by the cross.

Lucifer then told Michael, «You made that story up». «Of course I did», said Michael, «but it represents perfectly what you just did by blaspheming against the cross. When you anti-Christians fight against the cross, you are actually destroying the world. What progress can there be without the cross?». «Ah», said Lucifer, «we struggle for progress without God. God is unnecessary; human effort is enough. You have this idea of a paradise where God rewards people after death, but that God is an invention—Invented either by the

oppressed who hope to escape their unjust situation or by the oppressors who want to control the people they have under their power. Struggle is what is needed because struggle saves the world. We don't need faith in God, which is alienating; we need revolutionary struggle. There is no alienating paradise beyond history; our paradise will be built here by human effort».

Smiling at Lucifer, Michael answered, «I'm going to quote to you from an atheist». He then cited the atheist Ivan Karamazov, who said that he was renouncing any struggle which would benefit only future generations; it was not right, he claimed, that those working for a better world received no just reward. Michael then asked Lucifer, «Where can those who struggle for a better world find their reward, and who will give it to them? What progress can there be without God? What kind of struggle strives only for a paradise on earth? That would be pure illusion!» In reality, what Michael was saying was that people have an innate sense of life, and this leads them precisely to struggle for justice now, not thinking only of future generations. «I refuse to take part in a struggle», Michael was saying, «in which I'll have no participation and no reward even if I work in it until I die». This innate sense of life and of the beyond is the response of Christianity. There can be no struggle for a better world unless it is based on divine justice, on a God who remunerates the efforts of human beings. A struggle without God makes no sense. At the end Michael tells Lucifer, «What has happened to you and perhaps also to me is that we have formed a false idea of God».

What many people are fighting against is not the true God but a false idea of God that they have created for themselves. That's what Pope Luciani, or John Paul I, is telling us. It's the idea of a God who protects the rich, a God who only makes demands, a God who feels resentful of our progress, a God who from on high spies on our sins and takes pleasure in punishing them. Dear Chesterton, you know so well that God is not like that. God is just but also good. He is the loving father of prodigal children, whom he doesn't want to see in a miserly and miserable state; he wants them to be grand creatures who are free in their own destiny. Our God is so far from being our rival that he desires to make us his friends, calling us to share in his own divine nature and his own eternal happiness. Nor is it true that God asks too much of us; he is happy with just a little because he knows how little we have.

This is the catechism lesson of this great catechist of the world, who had hardly emerged into universal history when God took him from us one year ago. He had only a few months to inspire us, with his simple words, to place our hope in the true God and to confront a world that has falsified its idea of God.

What is wonderful is that this idea of God is not an invention of Pope Luciani. In fact, I find in today's reading a title for my homily which coincides neatly with the pope's thoughts. We are therefore going to make this Mass a homage to the teaching of this catechist, this man with a wide smile who knew how to confront the most absurd kinds of atheism with the simplicity of a catechist: «No! Just keep it simple», he would say. «A revolution without God, a God without people, a people without God—that is not the panorama that history shows us!»

The title that I'm going to put on my homily today seems to me to be a logical consequence of the three readings: «What God Gives is For All of Us». I will break my thought down into three parts: first, as regards spiritual goods, the magnanimity of God and the meanness of people; second, as regards material goods, the justice of God and the selfishness of human beings; and third—forgive my insistence on this point—transcendence as the key for

understanding the mind of God and as the force for making it a reality with joy and effectiveness. Without transcendence there can be no true struggle for liberation in the world.

Spiritual goods: the magnanimity of God and the meanness of people

First, then, are the spiritual goods. The gospel passage presents a picturesque scene of the things that were no doubt happening in the primitive church in Rome or Jerusalem, where Mark was writing this gospel under the direction of Saint Peter. In this passage the disciples report to Christ: «We saw someone who was performing miracles and casting out demons in your name. Forbid him to do that!» The magnanimous response of Jesus is a lesson for us: «Do not prevent him because anyone who does miracles in my name cannot speak ill of me. Whoever is not against us is for us» (Mark 9:38-40).

The charisms and the marvelous gifts that God gives for the good of the whole church should not be monopolized by anyone. No one should feel resentful because someone else preaches better or has received special gifts from the Lord. It would be absurdly spiteful to try to limit or mutilate what God is giving to others, perhaps even to very unimportant folk. Jesus' response is truly magnificent: «If he's doing miracles in my name, then he is with us even if it doesn't look that way to you» (Mark 9:4).

Clearer still is the first reading, which tells of the time when Moses received from God the gift of prophecy and shared it with the seventy elders. But someone remarked, «Two elders are missing. Eldad and Medad didn't come to the meeting, but they are prophesying there in the camp». When a lad reported this to Moses, his collaborator Joshua told him to prohibit them from prophesying, but Moses responded, «Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets and received the spirit of the Lord!» (Num 11:25-29). This is the way of magnanimous hearts, hearts that realize that God does not give his charisms and his gifts to be used according to the wishes of those who receive them; they are given for the building of the kingdom of God. As Saint Paul says, «To some he gave a talent for teaching, to others the gift of counsel, to others the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation, but all these gifts come together for building up the body of Christ which is the church» (1 Cor 12:4-12). This is the doctrine that provides the first aspect of our reflection today.

Here we learn something about human institutions and the Spirit. It's very fashionable these days to speak about the antagonism between the church as institution and the church as charism of the Spirit. Some people want to see an opposition between them, and as a result they want nothing to do with the hierarchy and the institution; they just want to be carried along by the Spirit, as they conceive it. Other people, in contrast, want to make the hierarchical element prevail to such an extent that the gifts of the Spirit have no validity without it. But what constitutes the church as church is precisely the harmony between these two gifts, the charisms and the institution.

So much is this the case that the Second Vatican Council makes statements that would no doubt surprise many people. It says, for example, that Christ and his gifts are not confined to the Catholic Church and that outside the limits of the Catholic Church—that is, among Protestants, Muslims, Jews, the whole world—there are many elements of truth and grace that come from the one and only Redeemer of humanity, Christ Jesus (LG 8). So let us not assert, «Only in the Catholic Church is to be found the whole of Christ». That would be diminishing Christ. We have to say that Christ has come to save all human beings, even the

persons who know nothing of Christian baptism but who are faithfully and generously observing their own religion as they understand it.

To be sure, the same Council has stated that Christ placed all the means of salvation in the church that he established on the foundation of the apostles (LG 14). Thus, if a person suspects that the fullness of salvation is to be found in the Catholic church but makes no effort to learn about the church and become a member, then that person would be walking in sin because there is still a doubt, which should be resolved by discovering the truth. However, as long as people have good will and worship God as they know best, then the elements of truth and grace are there; without grace nobody can be saved. And who knows, dear fellow Catholics: perhaps there are more holy people outside the limits of the Catholic Church than inside the church! And who knows whether we who boast of being in the institutional, hierarchical church, including us hierarchs, are not less holy than those who perhaps live outside the church but have simpler hearts, greater respect for others, and a profound appreciation of God and his Spirit!

This is the great lesson for us about spiritual goods. Let us appreciate this marvelous harmony of God! Think of all those apparitions and revelations that God has made in the course of history. Generally they are not made to the institutional church but to the humble people of God. There in Lourdes it was a young girl, Bernadette Soubirous, whom the Virgin sent to the bishop so that he would build a church. And in Tepeyac in Mexico, it was the humble Indian, Juan Diego, who received the inspiration from the Virgin. Of course, the hierarchy still had to analyze and validate that inspiration and orient it toward the building of God's kingdom. The marvelous thing, though, is this: to prevent the hierarchy from getting bigheaded, the message of the Spirit arrives through some humble member of the people of God. And to make sure that that member of God's people is not mistaken in his inspiration, he has to test it with the hierarchy. The two things together, institution and Spirit, make up the true church.

So now, dear sisters and brothers, coming down to the reality of our archdiocese, I want to give thanks and praise to the Lord because of all the many gifts that are to be found in you, the people of God, the religious communities, the ecclesial base communities, the humble folk, the *campesinos*! If I were as jealous as the characters in the gospel or the first reading, I would say, «Prohibit them! Don't let them speak! Let them keep quiet! Only I, the bishop, can speak». But no, I have to listen to what the Spirit is saying by means of his people, and then, after receiving the people's inspiration and analyzing it, I have to join with the people in building up the church.

That is how we have to build our church: the people respecting the hierarchical charism which discerns and unifies all the diverse charisms, and the priests and hierarchs respecting the great revelation that the Spirit grants to the people of God. For the wish of Moses often becomes reality: «Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets and received the Spirit of the Lord!» (Num 11:29). I believe that this is happening in our archdiocese: it is the people who are receiving the Spirit of God. Whenever I visit the communities, I admire and try to guide the great spiritual wealth I find there, even in the humblest and simplest folk. This building together in harmony, then, is what the Lord is asking of us.

I would like to apply this consideration to the situation of our nation. Dear sisters and brothers, no single person has the key for resolving the present situation of the country. If

one political organization of the people refuses to enter into dialogue with other liberating forces of the country, then they are committing a sin of spitefulness. They are telling Moses, «Prohibit them! Those others are wrong, and we alone are right!» But at this dire moment in our history, no one has all the truth! This is an effort that requires something of all of us. We must ask God for help, and whatever inspiration we receive as individuals, as groups, or as organizations should contribute to the common good for the benefit of everybody. This is the great lesson we must learn from the prophets and from their criticism of those who begrimed God's gifts to others. The purpose of all those gifts given by the Lord is the building of the kingdom.

In the fourth part of my pastoral letter, the explicitly pastoral part, I make a distinction between apostolic spirit and pastoral organization¹. I think it is important for us to understand this clearly. There are many movements in our church, such as the Charismatics, Cursillos of Christianity, and Marriage Encounters. They result from a series of divine inspirations for which I thank God, and we should feel no resentment that God is granting these marvelous gifts to our people. But still I want to tell you, as I do there in the pastoral letter, that the apostolic spirit that arises where the Spirit is working is one thing, and pastoral organization is another. An apostolic, evangelical spirit without pastoral organization is like those unchanneled torrents of water which, instead of doing good, often disturb other flows of water. The pastor is the one responsible for organizing all the spiritual energy God gives us; it is the pastor who must organize all the pastoral agents to work together as a team so that no one feels more important than anyone else. We should all feel that we have received a small part of God, and that we must fit that tiny part of God into God's greater good, which is this concrete church. The local church is not the whole of the church. The particular nature of our archdiocese is very much our own. There are other unique churches here in El Salvador, and in the whole of Central America; each one has its own special nature. The Council tells us, «The beauty of the great universal church arises from the variety of local churches which are united under the teaching and the authority of the pope since he is the one who coordinates and gives a pastoral orientation to all the spiritual wealth of the charismatic gifts of the Lord» (LG 23).

In other words, dear sisters and brothers, in this first point of our meditation, we should try to see what our particular charisms are. What are my personal charisms? What are the charisms of my group? When I look around me and see other charisms, perhaps more beautiful and more remarkable than those God has given me, I should not feel envious. I should not be like the disciples of Jesus or those of Moses who said, «Forbid them to do that!» By no means! Rather, let us listen to Jesus: «If they prophesy in my name, they cannot be against us. Let them be» (Mark 9:40). Or as Moses said, «Would that the whole people felt engulfed by the Spirit!» (Num 11:29). Indeed, this is the very prophecy that was fulfilled when we were baptized! By baptism all of us who have been born were incorporated into the great charism of the church. What tremendous differences there are in vocations and charisms and lifestyles! Some are called to priesthood, others to religious life, others to matrimony, others to the single life, others to a profession, others to be laborers. The problem is not in the particular calling we respond to but in knowing how to make it contribute to the good of the community.

If God gives you a political vocation and you work for the good of the people, then make good use of that gift of the Lord, for it is also a vocation. Politics is a vocation though not everyone has it. That's why it can't be forced on people, just as I cannot pressure people

¹ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 87.

and tell them, «Become a priest». Nor can a married person pressure others and tell them, «Get married». Rather, everyone has to seek out his or her own vocation. Let us respect what God says to each man and to each woman, but let us always make our contribution to the magnificent, many-splendored unity of God's kingdom and the church.

Life of the church

We can pause here a bit before passing on to my second point in order to see whether our local church is being built up according to these principles of generosity. Let's take a look at the realities of our church this week and give thanks for the great variety of gifts God is giving us.

Today, September 30, is the feast of Saint Jerome, the patron of the parish of Nejapa. While greeting them as they celebrate their patronal feast, I want to let them know that their patron gives the parish a special quality. Saint Jerome was a man of the Bible, and he is also the patron of our beloved brother, Bishop Rivera Damas, to whom we send our warm congratulations as he celebrates his birthday today. (Applause) May that applause give our beloved Bishop Rivera a sense of the great sympathy and communion that our archdiocese feels toward his diocese of Santiago de María and his wise guidance of the people there.

Regarding our priests I want to report that this week the priests of the vicariate of La Asunción have been making their spiritual exercises in Flor Blanca and that from the eighth to the twelfth the vicariate of Cuscatlán will be doing the same.

I also inform you with great satisfaction, as I'd already promised, that a missionary from India has arrived. He says that he has come from such a great distance because he has heard much talk about our archdiocese, and he feels that it is an inspiration for the universal church. He wants to live among us for a few days because, he says, «I really feel that something miraculous is happening here». I told him, «Perhaps we don't notice it since we've grown accustomed to this life of persecution and adventure, but I thank you for your words. I'll communicate what you say to my archdiocese so that we'll understand what others expect from us and hold on to the hopes and ideals that inspire our pastoral ministry».

There was also a meeting of the priests of the vicariate of Mejicanos to congratulate Father Nicolás González, the pastor of Paleca, who obtained his licentiate degree in philosophy. That same vicariate of Mejicanos is preparing a course for this week in biblical christology; it will be from tomorrow Monday until Saturday, from six-thirty to nine in the evenings in the Externado San José. An invitation goes out, therefore, to anyone who wishes to take advantage of this effort of the vicariate's commission for evangelization and growth in the faith. They are organizing things well.

We also send greetings to the parish of La Merced, which on September 24 celebrated its patronal feast of our Lady of Mercy, who is also patroness of prisons. I also want to greet our dear Good Shepherd Sisters and to express my admiration for the promotional work they're carrying out with motherly affection in the women's prison, where I went to celebrate.

This week the Somascan priests, sisters, and seminarians celebrated their patroness, Mary, Mother of Orphans, the title left to them by Saint Jerome Emiliani. We also celebrated with the priests who were making their spiritual exercises, and also with the

Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity, who this week celebrated their patron and founder, Saint Vincent de Paul.

I was also happy to see that in the parish community of San Pedro Perulapán the priest has organized a kind of parish congress of catechists, with the aim of promoting that great task of catechesis. This work was especially esteemed by Pope John Paul I, to whom we're paying homage today, and it is also much appreciated by the present pope, John Paul II.

This afternoon in Divina Providencia Parish we will celebrate the anniversary of the Legion of Mary. Also, there will be a Holy Hour at five o'clock tomorrow afternoon in Divina Providencia Hospital. I want to express my admiration for the divine providence that is truly felt in that place; the sisters have promised to buy some land to build a house for the orphans of the sick patients who die there. Yesterday, in fact, was the date set for them to finalize the contract even though they still need more financing. Now at least it can be said that the land is theirs, and our charitable commitment as Christians is extending its hand. Let's be generous in helping them!

Last Monday, at nine-thirty at night, the seminarians and the rector of the minor seminary in Chalatenango were surprised by an incursion of the army, which had been informed that they were holding a subversive meeting. The fact is that the poor boys were sound asleep, but they were roused and told to put their hands up. I think we've already said a lot about Chalatenango. What is it about Chalatenango that causes the authorities to distrust our church, our seminary, and our episcopal vicar? Why, the soldiers and the officers live right beside the church! Can't they see that we're not trying to hide anything but are doing the work of God's kingdom in broad daylight? I would therefore ask them to examine more carefully the information they receive and to stop committing travesties such as they did with these poor young men. (Applause)

I have good news concerning our communications media. They tell us that the latest edition of our paper *Orientación* was sold out by yesterday, so I would like to thank the press and the radio for all their great propaganda on our behalf. Let's hope that we keep increasing the circulation of our paper, which is now reaching more homes. (Applause) At the same time, I'd like to protest against certain anomalies regarding the mail. It's been reported that the *Excelsior* correspondent in Guatemala is not receiving *Orientación* even though we send him a copy by mail. Father John Deplancke of Belgium is not receiving it either. Doctor Segovia, who is well known in San Miguel, also complains that he's not receiving it even though we send it to him. Isn't it clear that we're still in a state of siege and that they're violating our correspondence? (Applause)

Besides that, our radio station YSAX has lost several advertisers because of threats from the UGB. I'd like to propose something to you, my dear Catholics. Let us hope that one day we'll have a station that doesn't have to depend on commercials but is a Catholic cultural medium that we support on our own. If we make up our minds, I think that we can achieve that and not be beholden to the UGB, which allows only those stations to operate which don't speak against the abuses the UGB defends. (Applause)

Another very gratifying news item is that the pastoral letter is selling quite briskly. This week the supply ran out twice in the Librería San Pablo. The Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* has published a summary of it. I would like to thank the

correspondent of that important newspaper. We've also sent the document to various offices around the continent and around the world.

I'm also grateful for the invitation I received from the National Council of Churches in the United States, and I feel that it will result in an agreeable communion of pastoral efforts. The program for my visit there also involves contacts with the bishops conference of that great country. I commend the trip to your prayers so that it will turn out for the best. (Applause)

I'm grateful also for the kind words of the FAPU regarding the archdiocese's pastoral work. Similarly, the API news service continues to circulate the homilies in their entirety. With great loyalty it reports what nobody else wants to report, such as the expressions of solidarity that arrive at our offices from various places. Recently the bishop of Cuernavaca sent such a message, as did the newspaper *El Visitador* of Puerto Rico.

I want to make another plea, sisters and brothers, for our cathedral, which is at a very difficult moment. Over there is the office where you can help us with your cash donations or with materials—they can tell you what we need.

Regarding the universal church, we already said that we're celebrating this Mass in honor of the pope, who right now is traveling on pilgrimage, hoping that his visit to Ireland will serve to promote the great cause of peace and reconciliation. A newspaper commented on the great contrast between the events in Boston two hundred years ago and the great homage that awaits the pope today². Two hundred years ago the pope was burned in effigy together with a grotesque image of the devil. Today the successor of Peter is receiving great homage for the Catholic faith. The Council tells us that such is the way of the church «as she presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God» (LG 8). So let us not be frightened since here in San Salvador we still haven't reached the point of burning effigies. However, there is something even worse since all kinds of calumny against the church are being published with impunity. They're even publishing advertisements with people's signatures, but we know that the ads are not being paid for by the persons whose names appear there, but by ANEP or some other institution³. (Applause)

The pope also stated that abortion is as serious an offense as the use of physical force and oppression. This consideration is extremely useful for helping us to understand the laxity with which legislators and governments treat matters that degrade morality. The supreme pontiff affirmed that the premature ending of human life is as serious as the use of physical force and oppression. This is what he said: «The whole history of law demonstrates that laws lose their stability and moral authority when they are used to restrict people with

² *El Diario de Hoy* (26 September 1979).

³ On 25 September 1979, *La Prensa Gráfica* published a paid advertisement titled «The Resignation of the Archbishop» and signed by Martha Julia Guerrero. After accusing Archbishop Romero of «spreading hatred» and «class warfare», the ad stated that «the most appropriate thing would be for Archbishop Romero to be replaced by someone who could restore the faith and the confidence in the church which have been lost through his undeniably Marxist preaching, which is leading us towards chaos». Also, on 25, 26, and 27 September 1979, *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* published several paid advertisements signed by the «Christian Patriots Front», the «Authentic Catholics Front», the «Salvadoran Patriotic Association», and the «Salvadoran Feminine Front», in which various slanderous accusations were made against the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, the Jesuits, YSAX, and Archbishop Romero.

physical force or when they renounce that which is incumbent upon them with regard to unborn children or the sanctity of marriage. On the international level we must pass legislation that favors the oppressed and our own search for truth, for if we abandon that search we will allow for the development of dangerous forms of relativism. The search for truth is difficult but necessary, and no jurist can avoid it⁴.

Let me tell you that this is a very profound statement. Many people believe that when the Assembly approves something like abortion or divorce, the legislation makes an act moral. What the pope is saying here is that the church has her own criteria, and even if a thousand laws were passed contradicting Christian principles, those acts would still be sins against morality. The church cannot waiver. The whole world may accept a law, but if that law is against the sources of life and the sanctity of the child that is to be born, then it is not a law that can ever be respected. It depends not on human beings but on God.

Let us examine, then, sisters and brothers, how the church works by receiving manifold inspirations of the Spirit through the pope, the bishops, and the communities. She takes into account what Christ says: «If they are driving out demons and performing miracles, then they are with us» (Mark 9:39-40). There are so many things that we'll never see, but they're part of our lives! It is marvelous to think of the universality, the morality, and the dogma of the church. Wherever there are people who confess this faith, they belong to us; even though we never know them on this earth, we still form one church with them. Often I imagine a gigantic tree with a little branch on one side and another little branch way on the opposite side; the two branches never «meet» one another, but they are receiving sap from the same trunk and share the same life. So also, the pope may not know many of the people who are here right now, but we are aware that between the pope and us there is a communion of life, and to the extent that we enrich ourselves with the Spirit that is given to us, we are creating church together with the pope. The important thing is not being pope or bishop or priest but in letting ourselves be carried by the Spirit of God, because this is what makes us great: the Spirit of God who takes possession of us in order to carry out his mission. And if we don't let this happen, then we're doing more harm than good.

Material goods: the justice of God and the selfishness of human beings

My second point is more serious or, better said, more visible: it has to do with material goods. Someone once said to me, «Instead of giving incendiary discourses, why don't you simply read the Gospel?» It occurred to me today that I should give no homily at all but just read the text of Saint James. Tell me whether there's anything more incendiary than what James tells us today: «Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire» (James 5:1-3a). (Applause) Be aware that you're applauding the apostle James! (Applause) And the apostle continues, «You have stored up treasure precisely now, for the last days, but the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields cry out against you, and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived in this world luxuriously and indulgently; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter. You have condemned and

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Audience of 24 September 1979 with Representatives of the World Conference on Law» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 November 1979). Archbishop Romero quotes parts of this discourse as published in *La Prensa Gráfica* (25 September 1979).

murdered the righteous though they offered you no resistance» (James 5:3b-6). All I have to do, I find, is organize the thoughts of James in order to discover the three great evils that arise from the abuse of wealth. It is not wealth that is being condemned but the abuse of wealth.

The first evil is placing an absolute value on a limited good. The unjust prosperity of those who possess much bears witness against them. When James talks about gold that's corroded and about excess clothing being eaten by moths instead of being given to the poor, what he's saying is this: all that abundance shows that the goods we have should not be absolutized but shared. The second evil is perverting the purpose of wealth, for wealth is meant to be shared with the workers who help you to harvest your crops. (Applause) The third evil is what I mention in my pastoral letter, the harm it does to the unjust owners themselves⁵. The idolatry of wealth not only offends God but also destroys those who possess it, and that's what Saint James says in his letter today, «You have lived in this world luxuriously and indulgently; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter» (James 5:5). Last Sunday I couldn't remember the author of the saying I quoted to you in Italian, but as we were leaving, the Italian television reporter, who was there with us, told me that it was something Cardinal Montini had said when he was bishop of Milan. So that famous saying was spoken by Pope Paul VI; one time he called all the business people of Milan together and told them: *Spogliatevi, se non, vi spoglieranno*, which means, «Divest yourselves. Otherwise, they'll divest you!» So before they come and take what we have by bloodshed and violence, I think we should give it away out of love! (Applause)

Since we are now also rendering homage to John Paul II, I would like to propose something to all of you and to those listening on the radio. Let us fully accept everything the pope says in the United Nations and not allow our newspapers to manipulate even a single aspect of the news. (Applause) I want to tell you right now that I seek to be faithful to the pope until death. Whatever John Paul II says in the United Nations will be my guide, and I will try to adapt my own thinking, as I always do, to the pope's way of thinking, for he speaks in God's name. (Applause)

Take note of what the pope told the bishops in Puebla: «You are the defenders and promoters of dignity». He recalled how the history of the church provides examples of bishops who earnestly and courageously dedicated themselves to defending the human dignity of those whom the Lord had confided to their care. «From this arises»—these are words of John Paul II at Puebla—«from this arises the church's constant concern for the delicate question of property, and the proof of this are the writings of the church fathers during the first millennium of Christianity»⁶. Whoever reads the fathers of the first centuries might frankly call them communists, but they are doing no more than interpreting the traditional doctrine of the church. Citing Saint Ambrose and other popes, John Paul stated, «This is clearly shown by the vigorous teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas that has been repeated so often». Thomas was the great theologian of the Middle Ages who talked about private property as a relative not an absolute right⁷. «And in our times»—the pope's words again—«the church has appealed to the same principles in such far-reaching documents as the social encyclicals of the recent popes. Pope Paul VI spoke out on this theme with particular force and profundity in his encyclical

⁵ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 42.

⁶ 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).

⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, 2-2, q. 32, art. 5 ad 2.

Populorum Progressio. The voice of the church is an echo of the human conscience, which has not ceased to resound through the centuries amid the most varied social systems and cultural conditions. It is a voice that deserves and needs to be heard also in our own time, when the growing wealth of a small minority is paralleled by the increased misery of the masses». (Applause) John Paul II continued by saying, «At this time there is even more urgency in the church's teaching, according to which all private property carries a serious social mortgage»⁸.

The other day someone told me that they didn't understand this phrase, and perhaps there are others who need an explanation. The pope is talking about a situation where you have a mortgage on your house, which means that the house does not belong completely to you but can be taken away if you don't pay what you owe on it. The pope says it's the same with private property: even though you have your titles registered and in order, the property is not an absolute right; it is mortgaged to the social good. Thus, the common good is the standard for private property. The reason we say that our economic and social system needs to be restructured is this: the way in which we now absolutize and idolize private property is frankly speaking a form of paganism. Christianity cannot allow private property to become an absolute. (Applause)

«With regard to this teaching», the pope said, «the church has a mission to accomplish. She must preach, educate persons and groups, shape public opinion, and give orientation to those responsible for governing. In doing so, she will be working for the good of society, and this Christian evangelical principle will eventually produce a more just and equitable distribution of goods, not only within each nation but at the global level as well, thus preventing the stronger countries from using their power to the detriment of weaker ones»⁹. This is the letter of Saint James brought up to date for Latin America by John Paul II.

So when we're criticized for uttering incendiary statements here, we reply that we're doing no more than recalling a principle that has been forgotten and that now needs to be made the foundation for transforming our society. If we want to see an end to violence and all the current malaise, then we have to go to the root of it, and the root is social injustice. (Applause)

We need to educate ourselves, as the pope says. Now, assisted by God's word, I make this appeal to my dear fellow Salvadorans, especially to those of you who have perverted the true Christian doctrine concerning private property because your minds and hearts are so attached to what you have. Take a good look and you'll see that you are happiest when for love of your sisters and brothers you are detached from your wealth and when you share with others what you can never be happy enjoying alone.

Events of the week

Finally, before concluding, I want to review in this context of social justice what has happened this week in our society.

⁸ «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).

⁹ *Ibid.*

In the first place, we must denounce the new violence. As we've said, the root of the problem has been left untouched and is still virulent. Social injustice will continue to produce malaise because of our aberrant notion of property. Such absolute value is placed on wealth that people feel it must be defended with repression. Right there is the cause of everything: social injustice and repression. (Applause) These are in total contradiction to the teaching we have read today in the Bible itself, which says that God has not given us gold, clothing, and riches so that they'll become corroded and moth-eaten (James 5:1-3). When that happens, it demonstrates the selfishness of those who possess them. What they should do instead is share their possessions and bring happiness to all those who are growing weaker day by day because of the cult of wealth and property that prevails among us.

We must therefore condemn the violence that is appearing in ever more appalling forms. This week there have been many acts of violence, but rather than enumerate the different concrete cases, I would like to call your attention, sisters and brothers, to the deceitful ways in which they attempt to cover up these awful crimes. For example, I have analyzed the different reports concerning the three people who died near the presidential residence. What contradictions there are among the various reports! One report even concluded that they had been fighting against one another. The case is presented as if their vehicle got trapped in a crossfire, after already saying that they had been fired upon¹⁰. There is such a series of contradictions that the best thing to do is what we've said: investigate these cases and not let them go unpunished. It's useless attracting new investors to the country while trying to disguise our besmirched image with a thin coating of paint. It is these deeds that are never clarified or punished that are driving away tourism and investment, and they're revealing the true image of repression that our nation is witnessing.

Another case in which the reporting has been unethical is that of María Gladis Molina de Jarquín, who died near the National Guard post¹¹. Countless versions of what happened have been given, but the eyewitnesses claim that she was killed by a bullet proceeding from the National Guard. (Applause)

An attempt was also made to portray the four people killed in Panchimalco as victims of an armed confrontation¹², but several people who identified the bodies observed that their fingers were completely bound with cords.

Several of those shot dead at the disturbances downtown last Tuesday were passersby, peaceful people. They've invented a whole bunch of versions about this event as well!¹³

I want us to pray for all these who have been killed, victims of tremendous injustice. Let us pray that the families of all these persons will feel that the church is with them. Our church cannot agree with this dishonest reporting; she must demand justice and the prosecution of those responsible. In the end, even if there is no justice on earth, for the church there is still transcendence, which is the final thought we'll analyze today

¹⁰ *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* (24 and 25 September 1979).

¹¹ *El Diario de Hoy* (24 and 26 September 1979).

¹² *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* (24 September 1979).

¹³ *La Prensa Gráfica* (27 September 1979), and *El Diario de Hoy* (26 and 27 September 1979).

There are also reports of violence on the part of the guerrilla groups. The Ministry of Labor is no longer being occupied, but the minister is complaining that the LP-28 have stolen some documents. We hope that the Leagues will offer an explanation, as they did when they said that the route 41 bus was not burnt by them—I liked the way they did that. And I find quite exemplary this statement of theirs: «We know that the workers in the transportation industry are part of the people, and instead of doing damage to their means for earning a living, we are trying to get them to take part in the just defense of the people. We respect the people, their beliefs, and their national symbols in the same way that we respect the need to vindicate each and every Salvadoran». (Applause)

The Legal Aid Office has issued a report—and I want to stress the great good that this institution of our church is doing—denouncing the disappearance since August 5 of the *campesino* Mariano Escobar Rivera, leaving five children without a father. His family has presented a petition of habeas corpus without any response. Legal Aid also denounces the arrests of Carlos Alberto Aldana on September 10, of Doctor María Teresa Hernández Saballos on September 15, and of José Adrián Minero on September 17. Others arrests include Ricardo Cisneros Castro, José Humberto Sorto, Raúl Mercado Amaya, Víctor Manuel Rivera Valencia, German Flores Zañas, Jacinto Huezo, Ovidio López Mejía, and José Oscar López Mejía. Petitions of habeas corpus have been presented for all of these, but still nothing is known of them.

Other denunciations have arrived but have still not been confirmed. I should tell you that on principle we report only those things that are fully verified. We don't invent false denunciations.

The relatives of Félix Antonio Ábrego have denounced his murder. That makes three members of that family who have been killed: Pedro Abilio Abrego, José Osmín Abrego, and now Félix. How sad is the fate of certain families that are doomed to die for lack of justice in our society!

In the field of labor, the strike at Cartotécnica was settled, but this week there are new conflicts in Lido and Santa Mercedes. Meanwhile the conflicts continue at IMES, COFEFAR, DURAMAS, and ARCO. APEX has come to our offices to denounce that their strike has continued for forty-four days and there is no end in sight. There are about 300 workers demanding a solution, and there's also a hostage there, Mr. Escobar Ezeta. We ask that everything possible be done to initiate a dialogue that will resolve these inhuman situations. Another 125 employees were given severance after the closure of the Grand Hotel San Salvador, and so we have more unemployed workers in our midst.

The National Laborers Union has published a platform of demands based on what a typical laborer's family of six persons would spend daily: ten *colones* and forty-one *centavos*. The Assembly legislated that estate owners should pay each of their workers 1.50 *colones* if they do not provide food and 0.50 *colones* if they give them uncooked food. Approval was also given to increase the monthly salary of nurses to 725 *colones*.

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, as a note of hope I want to make reference to the appeal made by ANEP¹⁴. They have listed several factors contributing to the situation of anarchy in our country, but we are surprised that they make no mention of what we've been

¹⁴ *El Diario de Hoy* (29 September 1979).

saying is the root and the source of all our malaise, namely, the absolute value being placed on wealth and private property. ANEP has invited all business owners to consider what they can contribute, and that gives us hope. We insist, however, that it's not enough just to envision the path we need to travel; we have to take steps along the path. When people sincerely ask what they can contribute, I think that they are indeed taking steps illuminated by God, who wants everyone to have this world's goods. ANEP urges us to unite our efforts so as to ensure that all the inhabitants of El Salvador enjoy freedom, health, economic well-being, and social justice. This statement fills us with hope. When I stop looking out just for *my* health and *my* economic well-being and look out instead for the well-being of all the inhabitants of the country, then blessed be God! Let us hope that these reflections of ours help us to see these new horizons. ANEP recognizes that there is still much to be done both individually and collectively and that there must be more concern for the fair distribution of wealth. I hope that this positive proposal is carried forward. Let us all hope that we won't have to buy with pain and bloodshed what we still have time to achieve by love and wisdom.

Transcendence as the key for understanding the mind of God and as the force for making it a reality

I want to end, therefore, with this final reflection, which is about transcendence. I've repeated this word «transcendence» many times, and I believe it becomes ever more necessary to do so because only transcendence allows us to find a rational explanation of what we're saying. As I've said over and over, the perspective of transcendence takes in not only the horizons of this world but also those of the Lord and Creator. That is the perspective we are invited to adopt by today's readings, especially the second reading or even better the gospel.

The gospel points out a goal, and it speaks about particular goods and the greater good. When the gospel speaks about two hands or two feet or two eyes, it is talking about particular goods. But then it says that it may be necessary to cut off a foot or a hand for the greater good of the kingdom because it is better to enter into the kingdom of heaven with one eye or one hand or one foot rather than to sink into wretchedness with two eyes and two hands and two feet (Mark 9:43-47). Particular goods must be subordinated to the greater good. People must not lose sight of the greater good, the only one that is absolute and transcendent: God. So our goal is to enter into life, to enter into the kingdom, and Christ has said that we will move toward that goal by doing things in his name and by seeing Christ represented in the least significant of people.

Here we return to the preferential option for the poor. It is not demagogic but pure Gospel. We must be concerned for what happens to the poor and the insignificant, but not in just any way. They represent Jesus to the eyes of our faith, which open us up to the poor, the humble, the sick, and the marginalized. When we see Jesus in them, that is transcendence. If we see the poor only as foolish rivals who are going to spoil my party, then naturally they bother us. But when we embrace them, as Christ embraced the leper (Mark 1:40-41), and when we lift them up as the Good Samaritan lifted up the wounded man on the highway (Luke 10:33-35), this is transcendence because what is done for them is done for Christ (Matt 25:40). Only transcendence can give us the perspective for social justice: Christ among the little ones.

The second reading also offers us a reflection on things that are transitory: «You have stored up treasures», it says, «for when the final judgment comes» (James 5:3). The apostles believed that time and history were passing quickly and judgment was near at hand; it

seemed therefore ridiculous for people to be storing up things that would be left behind in this life. Ah, if only now we realized how transitory the things of earth are! That isn't alienation; rather, it means giving earthly goods their proper relative value so that we can use them, as the gospel says, to buy the friendship of heaven and not sink with them into the abysmal dungeons (Luke 16:9). That's why Christ speaks today so clearly about the scandalous behavior of those who don't want to understand and who try to draw others away from Christian criteria. He warns his disciples about those «who cause scandal to one of these little ones» (Mark 9:42). Dear sisters and brothers, here I'd like to reflect on the many political ideologies that have poisoned the minds of so many Christians. I want to tell all of you who feel called to a political vocation that you should incorporate this calling into the transcendence of Christ. Don't try to kill the supernatural, transcendent spirit of those young people who feel the need to engage in the struggle. For as John Paul I said in his famous letter to Chesterton, the God we profess is not an alienating God. Rather, he wants to give an eternal reward also to those of us who work for earthly liberation, as long as we incorporate our struggles into his transcendence.

When temptation rages strongly within us, sisters and brothers, we must heed that paradoxical, oriental saying of the gospel: «If your foot scandalizes you, cut it off; if your hand causes you problems, cut it off; if your eye is an occasion of scandal....» (Mark 9:43-47). That is to say, if you desire earthly goods as much as you desire a hand, a foot, or an eye, then don't hesitate to cut those goods off to obtain the greater good. If you want to preserve your eyes, your hands, and your possessions without sharing them or submitting them to justice according to the mind of God, then you will lose everything. Let us give lovingly now so that later we won't be forced to give and thus enter into eternity without particular goods and without the truly good.

The present-day signs, then, prompt us to become a society according to the mind of God. Let us make ours that saying of Moses: «Would that all the people were prophets!» (Num 11:29). Let us not be stingy with the gifts of God; rather, let us desire that they be given abundantly to God's people, for as Christ said, «Those who are not against us are for us» (Mark 9:40).

I'm going to conclude by reading the last part of the lovely letter of Pope Luciani—don't forget that we've been making this reflection in his name. He writes, «Dear Chesterton, I am as convinced as you are that God will make himself ever more known and loved by everyone, and this includes those who reject him today, not because they're wicked—they may be better persons than either of us—but because they see him from a mistaken perspective». Dear fellow Christians, let us see God in full profile, and let us not reject him before seeing him truly. The pope ends his letter by saying, «And if they continue in their unbelief, God will tell him, "But I still believe in you!"» Let it be so! (Applause)