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God Brings the Joy of Salvation for All—Let Us Be Converted!

**Third Sunday of Advent
16 December 1979**

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18

Dear brothers and sisters, this Sunday of the liturgical year has a name that signifies joy. The entrance antiphon begins with a word taken from Saint Paul: *Gaudete!* Therefore this Sunday is called «Gaudete Sunday», which means «Sunday of rejoicing», and the liturgy today is full of joy and hope. In the prayer that was sung at the beginning of Mass we ask God to help us reach the delights of his great salvation and to celebrate it with joyful fervor. We could say that during this season when people are sending cards with Christmas greetings the church also gives us her special greeting. But she does so not in the superficial, conventional way of society. Instead she sends us a message that prods us to find the deeper reasons for this joy. Even people who don't believe in Christ, when they see Christmas coming, sense that something joyful is advancing on the world.

What fills our celebrations with joy is God's entering history. We feel joy at being made confidants of the Lord, who has revealed to us his saving project for all humankind. He makes us human beings both the objects and the subjects of this project which is for our benefit. He calls us human beings to collaborate with him in the salvation of the world.

That's why last Sunday I gave you a preview of this Sunday's theme in the figure of John the Baptist, whom we presented as the precursor and the model of the kind of people God needs to make the Good News of his salvation present in the world. As church and as Christian community, all of us continue the mission of being precursors of the Lord's coming to save the world. Besides being precursor, John the Baptist is also presented today as educator, moralist, and preacher; he is going to explain the moral demands that acceptance of God's salvation makes of us. John's is a message of austerity, but at the same time it produces profound joy.

Therefore, on this Third Sunday of Advent I'm going to give this title my homily: «God Brings the Joy of Salvation for All People—Let Us Be Converted»! The three reflections with which I'll develop this theme are these: first, the coming of God into our history; second, liberation under the sign of joy; and third, conversion to God as the only path to genuine, joyful liberation.

The coming of God into our history

Let us first of all endorse this central idea that we celebrate during the whole of Advent as we prepare for Christmas: the presence of God in history. The name of this season, Advent, means precisely that: «coming», God's coming to humankind. It was what the prophets announced,

and it culminated with that special name Isaiah gave to the God who comes to save us: «Emmanuel» or «God-with-us» (Isa 7:14).

Today's gospel presents John at a particular historical moment, «when Tiberius was emperor and Pontius Pilate was governor of Palestine»; it also mentions the four tetrarchs and the high priests at that time (Luke 3:1). In that historical and religious context the Holy Spirit raised up the voice of John, the son of Zechariah, who grew up in the desert and went forth from there announcing God's coming throughout the region around the Jordan: «The kingdom of God has arrived. In your midst is someone whom you do not know! He is great!» This is the Good News that today's gospel places in the mouth of John the Baptist. He proclaims the great news that God has come! And this continues to be the great news for Christians. Any Christian who doesn't rejoice at God's nearness in history has not understood the essence of our faith.

This is what the first reading also wants to convince us of: a prophet is announcing the God who is coming. He is not some static, metaphysical being; he is not some catechetical concept. He is a living God! And in today's first reading he is announced as the king of Israel: «He is in your midst. Fear no longer. Be not afraid, Zion, don't let your hands be paralyzed. The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who saves» (Zeph 3:15b-17).

This is the idea of God we find in the Old Testament. It is good that in our own days—thank God it's happening—we are being freed of the idea of a static God. We are being offered instead a dynamic God, a God who walks with his people, a God who takes action, a God who inspires people in their struggle to be free, a God who is not indifferent to the cries of those who suffer. As he did in Egypt, he sees the beatings, the humiliation, and the marginalization of those enslaved, and he is ready to send a guide and a redeemer at the right moment. And that Redeemer is now among us—that is the great news that John the Baptist proclaims to us.

In our own time the Second Vatican Council has told us how God, after revealing himself in his creation by means of a natural world that speaks eloquently of his presence among us, sent us his own Son to give us a more intimate, supernatural revelation. God revealed himself in Christ, who did not come in a static form, suitable only for contemplation. No, Christ came to immerse himself in history and to save history. He came to plant the seed of salvation in the history of every people and to sow his hope and his faith in the heart of every race. Christ is the fullness of revelation; he is the sign that God is in our midst loving us and understanding us. Christ takes on himself the experience of all men and women in every way except sin, for it precisely from sin that he wants to free us so that we can be all that we must be. «God is with us», says the Council, «to free us from the darkness of sin and death and to raise us up to eternal life» (DV 4).

John the Baptist preached so much about the presence of Christ that, as the gospel tells us, many people wondered whether he was not himself the Messiah who was to come. But John the Baptist made clear his identity: «No, I am not the Messiah. I am only the voice announcing him. I am not even worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. I am simply announcing the need for repentance so that you will be ready to receive him. That is why I am baptizing, but just with water, to arouse a moral readiness in your hearts. But someone is coming who will baptize not only with water. He will baptize with fire and in the Holy Spirit, thus planting the seed of eternal life—and he is already in our midst!» (Luke 3:15-16).

The name for this Sunday comes from the second reading, which exhorts us to rejoice because «the Lord is near» (Phil 4:5b). Do you see, dear sisters and brothers, how the Bible, which is God's revelation, places great stress on the presence of God in history? No Christian should feel all alone on the journey. No family should feel abandoned. No nation should feel pessimistic even in the midst of what seem to be insoluble crises, such as those of our country. God is in our midst! Let us have faith in this central truth of the sacred revelation. God is present; he is not asleep. He is actively observing and helping us, and in his own time he will act favorably. So let the presence of God awaken true joy in our hearts: «Rejoice in the Lord! Again I tell you, rejoice because God is near» (Phil 4:4,5b). That is Paul's great message this Sunday, not only for the community of Philippians but for Christians of every age: God, the source of joy, is near at hand!

Liberation under the sign of joy

My second reflection concerns that liberation which God offers under the sign of joy, which is the keynote of this Sunday. Dear sisters and brothers, and all of you who are reflecting with us on the word of God by means of the radio, how much I desire that we embrace the optimistic sentiment of true joy that we heard this Sunday: «Rejoice in the Lord always» (Phil 4:4)! Why be joyful? Because God is near, and God is joy and optimism! God does not want sadness. God is all-powerful in his loving and his doing good. Who can be sad in the presence of a God who fills all the world?

«Have no anxiety», says Saint Paul. «Let us make known our joy in prayer, in thanksgiving, in asking for what we need, in recognizing our limitations, always knowing that someone can fill us with what we lack» (Phil 4:6). Even when the nations are in crisis, God holds the key to history in his hand. He will know how to salvage the tremendous wreckage of our country.

This joy is the same as «the peace of God that surpasses all understanding and will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus» (Phil 4:7). It is not a worldly joy that delights in material pleasures. It is not the false joy that people call «happiness» but that is really bitterness, anxiety, and nastiness. It is the joy produced by the peace of God in our hearts. This joy can exist even in the midst of tribulations because it is a joy that yields redemption, a redemption wrought by the cross. Human suffering is a cross, and as such it brings redemption and should grant us peace. Easter joy means the hope of resurrection.

It's not the same as conformity because conformity does not bring joy. Conformists are pessimistic and deterministic; they think everything is imposed from above and they can do nothing about it. I would say that is a false concept; it is blasphemy against the will of God. Those who do not want to escape from their situation of oppression and exclusion because they think it's the will of God are committing an offense against God! God does not want social injustice! (Applause)

Joy should give us energy. It should impel us into action. The more needy and excluded and oppressed the people are, the more they must respond, not with hatred or resentment, but with the holy joy of those who trust in the Almighty. Consider how Mary, who belonged to an oppressed people under Roman rule, spoke out with holy optimism and blessed joy, «He fills the humble and the poor with good things, and he sends the self-sufficient away empty. And if necessary, he will bring the mighty down from their thrones and will lift up the lowly» (Luke

1:52-53). This is the holy joy of Mary the Virgin. This is the joy of those who are truly happy, even when standing by the cross. So let us know how to recognize this great strength that God gives us through joy.

This joy should be our testimony to all humankind. Saint Paul says, «Let your kindness be known throughout the world» (Phil 4:5a). Dear fellow Christians, we should not let our Christian response to the situations and crises of our people be confused with the revolutionary reactions of those who don't believe in God. Those of us who rejoice in our hope must work in union with those who have neither faith nor hope, but we must offer them something new. Without letting ourselves become subordinate, we should infuse earthly struggles with fresh motivation, for such struggles will never succeed without the transcendent vision of those who can impart optimism and joy. Only the joyful can instill ferment and force into all the struggles of earth.

What is sad is that, while Christians should be causing ferment and injecting Christian impulses of supernatural joy into the people's political organizations, they instead are being so cowardly as to let themselves be manipulated. They end up losing their faith when they should be examples of faith for the liberating forces of the world. What I hope this Sunday message achieves, sisters and brothers, is that we truly regain our holy pride in being Christians and in trusting in the Lord with optimism and faith. Let our faith show us how to incorporate the great liberation of Christ into the struggle of our people. We are not against prolonged struggle. We have seen it prolonged already for twenty centuries. We have struggled against all forms of tyranny and slavery, and we have done so in the name of the One who is not content with any concrete earthly project. He is always ready to offer broader horizons to those who truly love humanity and want a better world, a world that can always be discovered through that joyous and optimistic faith that Christianity professes.

Today's first reading is a classic hymn about the true joy of those who believe in God. I recommend that you read the whole of the third chapter of Zephaniah, not just the passage we read today. The prophet is describing the sadness of a people who have fallen into sin. They have been humiliated and sent into exile, but they have not lost their optimism. They understand that what they're suffering is a punishment from God, and so they ask God for forgiveness. They are converted, and their conversion brings with it a promise of salvation. Announcing the great day of the Lord, the prophet proclaims, «On that day you will not need to be ashamed of all the times you betrayed me, for I will remove from your midst the proud braggarts, and you shall no longer exalt yourselves on my holy mountain. I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly who will find their consolation and their strength only in God. The remnant of Israel shall do no wrong, they shall speak no lies, and a deceitful tongue shall not be found in their mouths» (Zeph 3:11-13).

In this passage from the prophet Zephaniah, the Bible tells us for the first time that the spirit of poverty finds its meaning in a humble and lowly people who have placed all their hope in God. This is a people no longer tainted with the proud and the arrogant or with those who bring disrepute upon the nation. This is a people who are chosen for their sorrow and suffering, a people who have been converted to God. These are the ones who constitute the remnant of hope in the midst of the people of Israel.

Dear Christian communities, here we have a portrayal of what we ourselves must be: communities in which all our trust is placed in God. Those who out of false pride devote their

strength to earthly things have no part in our communities. True poverty means being preferentially concerned for the poor as if their cause were our own. That is why we must feel that we also are poor and depend for our strength on God in every situation.

The readings today make this clear for us, but this is a theme we can find also in the psalms, in the gospels, everywhere in the Bible: «Rejoice because your reward will be great in heaven. On this earth you will experience much sadness, but rejoice because no one can take away your joy». Sisters and brothers, this is my greatest desire in giving you this message of joy and hope this morning. How I wish that all pessimism and depression would fall away from your hearts so that, in a paradoxical way, the darker the situation, the more confidence we feel in the One who can do all things.

Conversion to God as the only path to genuine, joyful liberation

Finally, I point out the path by which we'll find the joyful liberation that all Christians should enjoy. What I mean to say is this: those who possess this joy and are interiorly free from depression have made good progress and are more disposed than anybody to help others make progress. The hearts that are depressed with hatred, vengeance, and violence cannot be genuine instruments of the liberation God wants. Beloved Christians, you are the ones offering true salvation to the country and the world, for you are cleansed of your sin, filled with optimism and hope, self-assured in your poverty, and strengthened by the cross. You are free, and you already enjoy salvation. No one is as free as those who are not bound to passions and sinfulness. As serious and unjust as the situation is, and as reinforced as the situation may be by the unjust structures imposed on our people and by all those shackled by circumstance, this is the supreme hour when the liberating force of the Lord will come from among ourselves.

That is why there is no other way than conversion, conversion to God. Remember what I was saying last week about how, there in the historical setting of Palestine, the Spirit of the Lord inspired John the Baptist to go out to the desert to preach. John declared that he was the voice of a prophet crying out in the desert, «Prepare the paths. Every hill shall be laid low, every valley filled, and every twisted road made straight» (Luke 3:4-5). These are Eastern images used to describe moral situations. That's why today's gospel continues to say, «John told the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Show the fruits of a sincere conversion instead of thinking, 'We are children of Abraham'. For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire"» (Luke 3:7-9).

There follows the passage that was read in today's gospel: «Then the people asked him, "What should we do?" He said in reply, "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do likewise". Some publicans also came to him—these were tax collectors who committed many injustices— «and John told them, "Collect no more than what is prescribed. Eliminate government corruption and devious ways". Some soldiers asked John, "What should we do?" And he answered them, "Don't practice extortion, don't accuse people falsely, and be satisfied with your wages"» (Luke 3:10-14).

In this way John indicated to each group of persons what their duties were and how they could be converted. After people were truly converted, John would lead them, and only them, to the rivers of the Jordan, and there he would baptize them. Baptism was a sign of

purification, but it also expressed an interior attitude. If people didn't want to leave their evil ways, they couldn't be baptized. By his preaching and baptizing, then, John the Baptist showed people the meaning of conversion.

Notice what we've done with this reading. Every sector of society was seeking redemption, for redemption is universal. God enters history offering salvation to one and all, as is stated in the beautiful words of the fourth eucharistic prayer that we use at Mass: «God extends his hand to all who seek him with a sincere heart». Sometimes it is not even necessary for people to know about Christianity. Those who practice pagan religions may have no such knowledge, but if they seek to serve God as they understand him and do so with a sincere and honest heart, then God is saving them. It could be that even within our church there is not the same faithful search for God that exists outside the limits of our church! Thank God, though, we have some very holy people in our church. When I pray in the Eucharist, «Look not on my sins but on the faith of your church, I think of the anonymous hearts of all the poor and simple folk who are the strength of our church.

This morning we are trying to understand how John is a model for how the church should preach. People of all sorts were coming from many places to hear him preach. We've already mentioned two sectors of society that were especially difficult, considering Israel's history: the publicans and the soldiers. The publicans were despised by the people, just as prostitutes were. They were moral outcasts, and honest people stayed away from them. But John told them that the way of salvation was open also to them, and Christ himself once said, «It may be that publicans and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven before you hypocritical Pharisees, who make religion consist of appearances. Because you believe that you are good, you despise others, whom you see as evil» (Matt 21:31). Who can really know who is better and who is worse in the presence of God?

The soldiers also came to John. Nowadays a great many people say, «Nothing good can be expected from soldiers». I believe that today's gospel presents us with a challenge, for it teaches us that no person is condemned in this life. As bad as people have been, as much deadweight as they're carrying, God is always calling them to conversion. There is hope when a tiny sprout of goodwill springs up from the quagmire. When there's even a small spark of salvation in the midst of the country's darkest crises, it is a sign that people are not totally lost.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, John was not supporting any political faction. He was simply inviting the soldiers to approach him so that he could tell them what they had to do if they truly wanted to enter the kingdom of God. John didn't sell himself to anyone. Likewise, the church doesn't sell herself to anybody. The church is committed solely to God's kingdom, and she demands of all who approach her no more than what God's kingdom demands. She should not reject anyone who seeks her with a sincere heart.

John summoned one and all, and he required of them a personal commitment to justice. Conversion is something personal, just as sin is something personal. A person will be purified only through repenting and seeking the ways of justice. Promises and proclamations of good will are not enough. John baptized only those who had truly broken with the past. Among those who converted and broke from their past, as John the Baptist required, were many of those who became the Lord's apostles. The church was born of sinners—let us not forget that, beloved Christians. The church is holy because she possesses the Spirit of God who gives her life, but she is also sinful and in need of conversion because she is made up of all of us, men and

women with evil inclinations and sometimes with a past that may makes us ashamed. But once we have converted, we try—we try!—to follow the Lord. It's not that we can now follow him perfectly, but we make the effort to follow him, and that makes us true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote to the Romans, «The one who spoke falsehood should now speak the truth. The one who stole must now work hard». We could add to these counsels of Saint Paul by saying that those who were evil can now begin to be good, and in this way they'll find happiness—the happiness they could not find by robbing or extorting or torturing or doing evil. All those past deeds could do nothing to bring happiness or to help solve the country's problems. Be converted, and you'll find that happiness is found in collaborating with love for the good of all.

Conversion leads to sharing: «Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none, and those who have food should share it, even if they have only a little» (Luke 3:11). This is the fraternal society that the church promotes, for she is concerned that everyone be given what is necessary for life, and she refuses to accept blindly the differences born of money and power. John the Baptist said, «Do not maltreat people» (Luke 3:13), and the church repeats, «Do not maltreat». There are not two categories of human beings. No class of people is born to possess everything, leaving nothing for the great majority who are destitute and so cannot enjoy the benefits that God has created for one and all. The Christian society that God wants is one in which we share the goods that God has given us for the happiness of all people.

Tell me what you think, sisters and brothers, of this telegram I received when I was coming to Mass today. Does it show a Christian attitude? It reads, «I beg you as a defender of justice to attack in your Sunday homily the sin of usury according to the Gospel. Because of a debt of 300 *colones*, a lawyer has for four years placed an embargo on a married couple who are public employees. He has already been paid 2,564 *colones*, but he refuses to hear their pleas to lift the embargo». This is an infernal situation. What great conversion is needed in all this! (Applause)

Conversion will be lasting and profound if we are capable of criticizing our false way of viewing the world and its people. I want to insist on this, sisters and brothers, because I believe that what mature Salvadorans need most today is a critical sense. Don't wait to see which way the bishop will lean. Don't wait to hear what others say or what your organization says. Every man and woman should be a critic. A tree is known by its fruits. Examine what government produces, and then criticize it according to its works. And do the same with the political parties, the people's political organizations, any group at all. Don't let yourselves be managed! Don't let yourselves be manipulated! It is you, the people, who must pass judgment with regard to what the people need! (Applause) That is why all of you have to examine the world with your own eyes. You must be free of society's norms. I often think of all those poor domestics who have to think the way their employers think! That is not the way it should be! They must think freely! But that is the way the masses are managed, and that is why so many people are kept on the edge of starvation.

You have to learn to examine the world and the people in it and to judge them by your own criteria. Christians must learn to fine-tune their Christian criteria. The wealthy must be able to criticize their own world of affluence: why are they so rich, and why are there so many poor people all around them? If the wealthy are Christians, they will find the source of

conversion in self-criticism: «Why am I rich, and why are there so many people starving around me?» (Applause) The unfaithful husband will be converted, and he'll become a model husband when he becomes conscious of his machismo and when he understands the reasons why he's unable to relate to his wife as a mature Christian adult. (Applause)

What I mean to say with all this is that we must not live our lives according to what others say or according to society's norms. John the Baptist required conversion of every individual: «Where do you come from? The army? Well, if you want to enter the kingdom of God, reflect on this and be converted to the Lord. And what group are you from? The publicans? The prostitutes? It doesn't matter. Just begin to view the world with your own eyes, the eyes of a child of God, and stop doing what you're doing».

Sisters and brothers, so many people are being doomed by the sin all around us, which is depriving them of good norms for judgment! And so many people are made to be suspicious of others—even of the bishop, because they want him to think as they do! Instead, what I offer you here are some reflections on God's word so that each one of you will assimilate them. Then, if you truly want to pay honor to the faith you profess, you should act as Christians on your own personal initiative and not let yourselves be manipulated by society's norms.

Another characteristic of the conversion preached by John is that it isn't only personal; it also seeks the renewal of society. It is not enough that a publican, a soldier, or a drunkard be personally converted. It is necessary to lay bare the network of complicity that allows something like prostitution to be widespread. The fact is that it has become systematic. Yet when the owners of certain motels or certain bordellos are named, people are horrified. (Applause) Sometimes the very same puritans who are condemning the people's immorality form part of the system that is corrupting the people by promoting drunkenness and prostitution. (Applause) Translated into modern terms, the conversion that John demands requires all of us to expose the economic circuitry that is born of alcoholism. What a disgrace it is that the government itself has to become a liquor dealer and bartender in order to sustain itself! (Applause) At this time when changes are in order, the persons in charge of the country's economy should clean up the business. They shouldn't shore up the national economy by allowing the poor to poison themselves by purchasing liquor, while they leave untaxed other things that could help avoid dependency on these disgusting sources of revenue for the country. (Applause)

True Christian conversion today must expose the social mechanisms that cause workers and *campesinos* to be marginalized. Why are the poor *campesinos* able to earn cash only during the season for harvesting coffee, sugarcane, and cotton? Why does our society need to have *campesinos* unemployed, workers underpaid, and people deprived of a just wage? These mechanisms must be exposed, not in the manner of sociologists or economists, but in a Christian way so that we don't become accomplices of the machinery that is making people ever more impoverished, destitute, and marginalized. (Applause)

Only by this path of conversion can we find true peace in justice. That is why John the Baptist during this Advent season is a model for the church. He is a model for the Christian community which, far from trying to find solutions by vengeance and violence, zeroes in on sin as the root cause of the real evil of our society. The church wants conversion that involves the whole people, not just each individual.

When John the Baptist was preaching these things, people asked, «Could this be the Messiah?» John told them, «No, I am only a simple precursor. I am baptizing with water» (Luke 3:15-16). His baptism was a rite that expressed people's inner disposition, but just as water runs off and leaves things dry, so also people don't always persevere in their moral attitudes but mold them to convenience or advantage. Today politics may lean in the direction of conversion, as leaders try to be moral, but will they later change as the situation changes? Already you have seen the mass media lending themselves to manipulation and to support for sins of social injustice that cannot in any way be defended. (Applause)

That's why the church supports everything that promotes structural change. She doesn't rest content with that, of course, for the church has stated, in the words of Paul VI, that «changing structures without changing human hearts is simply setting up new structures at the service of new sins». What is needed, says Medellín, is the new man and the new woman (M 1,3). To create a new continent we need not only a change of structures but also a change of hearts. This is my great desire as pastor, dear sisters and brothers. I am not defending here one situation or another in order to agree or disagree with the government or with anyone else. What I am trying to do is illuminate every situation with the Lord's words of justice. What I am demanding of all systems, all parties, all organizations, and all persons who truly want what is good for the country, is that they be converted so that, from the perspective of evangelical conversion, they will give the people the medicine the people need. (Applause).

Life of the church

I have developed my three reflections on today's Gospel message in light of this situation, and I hope you've all been able to understand them. Let us now look at the life of our church to see whether she is truly following the path of the precursor. If she is in fact announcing the kingdom of God, let us rejoice. But if we have strayed from our sense of community, then perhaps our Christian reflections are mixed in with earthly ideas so that these ideas, instead of being illuminated, have influenced our way of thinking. In that case, it is time for conversion, it is time for purification, it is time for us to be, like John the Baptist, a clear voice that announces the one who is coming to save the world.

In this circumstance, then, I offer you news about our church and let you judge for yourselves how our church is progressing.

I received a telegram from Bishop Rivera and Monsignor Urioste, who are now in Belgium. As you know, they were invited to travel to Holland as representatives of the archdiocese in order to promote a collection that is being taken up there for the benefit of third world peoples. Our archdiocese feels honored to be invited to help with this collection. (Applause) Briefly, the telegram says, «Very strong solidarity on trip. Today we lunched at meeting of all Dutch bishops». So they had the honor of sharing their journey of solidarity with all the bishops of Holland.

I want to thank the newspaper *El Independiente*, which on December 8 dedicated the issue to the six priests who have been murdered. The headline was very suggestive: «They Preached the Truth, and That's Why They Killed Them». (Applause) A whole page was filled with photographs of the priests, and the editorial was dedicated to them. I want to express my thanks for this gesture of solidarity, which gives us much encouragement. I also regret that the director of *El Independiente*, Don Jorge Pinto, is extremely sick in one of the city's hospitals.

May God restore him soon to health. I also take this opportunity to thank him for the information he constantly sends us.

I make mention now of the various communities that have consoled me with their testimonies of solidarity and of firm adherence to the stance of the archbishop. They express regret that «there are some communities that have become accomplices of your adversaries by creating doubts and interpreting your attitudes as a political option». This statement consoles me greatly because I have never sought to make my pastoral norms a political option. I have simply followed a pastoral plan that enlightens all the communities. In any case, I'm delighted that many communities have stated that they understand their bishop and agree with him.

I was even more moved by this message from a certain community: «Your service to this kingdom of sisters and brothers is so tremendous that it is hardly possible to criticize it responsibly, but that is the joyful risk that is run by those who try to proclaim the kingdom of God proposed by the Lord. Your radical Christianity has clearly shown us one thing: the kingdom of God can make progress if we are as radical as Christ», and it goes on. (Applause)

I also like very much this letter because it comes from a member of the People's Revolutionary Bloc. He writes, «I was sorry when I heard the news that you were not accepted by the Bloc when you offered to mediate in a dispute. I regret it, and I offer to work with you until we finally solve these problems. With all the valor and strength of my soul I am ready to help you to the end of our path together. I realize that you and I are working for the sake of God's integral justice, and I sincerely recommend that you continue struggling, as you've always told us to do, for the justice that will liberate all our people from social and spiritual injustice», and so on. (Applause)

This letter is very instructive for me because, as I said in my fourth pastoral letter, I feel that as pastor I have a duty toward the people's political organizations. Even when they distrust me, it is my duty to defend their right to organize and to support all that is just in their demands. At the same time, I want to maintain my autonomy so that I can criticize all the abuses of the organizations and can report and denounce everything that points toward organizational idolatry. I want to summon them instead to engage in dialogue so that we can search for solutions together. The organized forces have power in a society, and they can accomplish everything when they are capable of dialogue. They diminish their strength, however, when they are fanatical and want to hear only their own voice¹. So the word of the archbishop is not systematically opposed to the organizations. I am delighted when one of them recognizes our points of agreement and also understands where the church is in disagreement with them.

The sisters doing parish ministry have made their spiritual exercises, and when they finished they wrote a lovely letter, from which I take this thought: «It is marvelous to observe that by being inserted among the people we can collaborate with you and help you make progress in carrying out your mission. Our insertion among the people is also a force that enriches our spirituality».

¹ *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis: The Fourth Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero of San Salvador (6 August 1979) 49-50.*

Speaking of our sisters, the Dominicans of the Annunciation have had a visit of the superior general, and they've held their provincial chapter, at which Mother Nieves was reelected as provincial. These sisters are known in El Salvador for their human development projects in Santa Tecla and for their work in the Colegio de Fátima, the Escuela Masferrer in Santa Tecla, and the San Martín de Porres schools in Quezaltepeque and Suchitoto. There is much enthusiasm in this congregation that has contributed much to the church and promises to give much more. We send our congratulations.

Two Belgian sisters working in Quezaltepeque were in a serious accident and are still hospitalized in the Policlínica. Let us pray for their speedy recovery and their return to their labors in the parish of Quezaltepeque.

The Mercedarian Sisters of the Eucharist made their spiritual exercises along with other congregations. These exercises are a time of renewal for the sisters while they are on vacation from their educational activities.

The Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart have had several jubilees: three sisters are celebrating twenty-five years of religious consecration, and one lay oblate is celebrating fifty years of faithful service. We esteem them greatly and desire them much happiness.

Let us take a look at the communities. In the diocese of Santiago de María, the Cursillos of Christianity had a course for woman last week and one for men this week. May God give ever greater success to these encounters of so many men and women with God.

There was a beautiful first communion ceremony in Divina Providencia parish in the Colonia Atlacatl. The Redemptorist Fathers, the Mercedarian Sisters, and the catechists all deserve our heartfelt congratulations.

There was also a wonderful celebration of the Immaculate Conception in the village of El Espino in San Pedro Perulapán. It was organized by the pastor, Father Solórzano, and his lay collaborators, who are making great progress on the church in that village.

The feast of Guadalupe was celebrated on the evening of the eleventh in El Calvario parish in the Colonia Delicias of Santa Tecla. On the feast day itself, the twelfth, celebrations took place in the Colonia Guadalupe in Soyapango and in the parish of Dulce Nombre de María. I went there to share in the joy of these popular feasts, and they reaffirmed for me what Puebla says about devotion to Mary, namely, that it forms part of the identity of the Latin American continent. With the help of Mary, our people reflect on the history of our country so that it can be illuminated with the faith of our church. These are wonderful festivities that must be maintained. The same can be said of the feast of Santa Lucía in Suchitoto, where the church was packed with the faithful.

There was a special gathering yesterday afternoon at the Ana Guerra de Jesús Center, where they give excellent assistance to the women who work in the market.

I want to let the young people know that they are invited to be here on December 22 and 23, that is, next Saturday afternoon, all night Saturday, and Sunday morning early. Here in the cathedral several seminarians will be given their ministries. The youth gathering will

possibly take place in San José de la Montaña. At the end of Mass a seminarian will give you more information about this.

This afternoon I will be... Excuse me, next Tuesday I will be at San Laureano parish in Ciudad Delgado; on the nineteenth I'll be in Quezaltepeque, where they celebrate Saint Joseph; and on the twenty-first I'll be in Santo Tomás, where they celebrate Saint Thomas as their patron.

I want to inform you that the homilies for the first cycle of the liturgical year have been published. The complete collection can be obtained at the pastoral bookstore.

There are some very good programs on YSAX, and you can find them listed in this week's *Orientación*. I also recommend that you continue to spread the news about our newspaper. Collaborating in the distribution of our church's media is a good Catholic thing to do.

Evelyn Verónica López thanks her friend Jesus (that's what she calls him) for her restored health. Clotilde Pineda de Mejia requests prayers for a special intention during this Mass.

I want to make an appeal myself. I've been informed that the Red Cross is in a very difficult economic situation. All of you who know the wonderful work done by that institution would do well to help it out. An institution that does so much good for our people shouldn't be allowed to die.

Lifting our eyes to global horizons, I was happy to read in the paper that the Catholic Church's influence was especially felt during the past year. Besides the marvelous activities of Pope John Paul II, the paper stated that the church has taken on a much more active role in solving the great problems of Latin America. Mention was made of the church in Nicaragua and in El Salvador, where the archbishops have made public declarations against the authoritarian regimes of those countries. (Applause)

Members of the hierarchy meeting in Manila expressed what they felt was their obligation to extend the church's mission by identifying closely with the poor. (Applause) They humbly confessed and repented for the inconsistency between words and deeds that has given the church in Asia the reputation of not being passionately concerned for the rights of the poor or totally committed to liberating them from injustice and oppression. Having spoken of conversion this very morning, we should desire that all the members of our church experience sincere conversion toward the poor.

Another note of glory for our church is that the famous bishop of North America, Fulton Sheen, has ended his days with much renown. More than eighty years old and full of merits, he has gone to receive his reward from the Lord. Let us pray for him.

The pope urged the bishops of Ecuador to shed light on the challenges presented by the outrageously unequal distribution of wealth. He told them that they must meet these

challenges by providing responses and guidance drawn from the Gospel and by following the great principles in the church's social teaching².

Events of the week

This morning, instead of giving you a whole bunch of reports, of which there have been plenty this week, I want to follow the pope's recommendation to the bishops of Ecuador and give my support to the principal event of the week. Besides this event, I will try to mention other matters on which the church must also throw light as part of her history. Without a doubt the central event of this week was the announcement of agrarian reform³. (Applause) This promise has aroused tremendous expectation among the great majority of people, especially the rural workers. But there is also much fear and even antagonism among that small but powerful minority constituted by the large landowners.

With regard to the government proposal and the diverse reactions it has provoked, it's not my job to make technical or economic statements. I cannot comment on the economic advantages or risks involved in agrarian reform or on the method that should be followed. That is not my competence; I am not a technician. But it *is* my duty as pastor to state my opinion in view of God's plan for the goods of this earth.

First, there is the reality of the rural workers. There can be no question that the situation of rural workers is distressful and alarming. The most recent data provided by the Minister of Agriculture himself should give cause for concern not only to those directly involved with the agrarian problem but to all Salvadorans. According to the report, which you heard yourselves, sixty-seven percent of rural mothers give birth without any medical assistance;—I ask you, please don't go about selling things during Mass⁴—sixty out of every thousand children born in the rural areas die; only thirty-seven percent of *campesino* families living have access to water sources; seventy-three percent of *campesino* children are malnourished; fifty percent of the rural population cannot read; more than 250,000 rural families live in dwellings with just one room, and the average family size is five or six persons⁵.

This scandalous situation affecting our *campesino* brothers and sisters is largely explained by the unjust and unequal distribution of land in our country. According to data released by the same minister, some ninety-nine percent of property owners possess barely fifty-one percent of all the land. That means that just one-half of El Salvador is distributed among all the poorer farmers. In contrast, not even one percent of the property owners —just 0.7 percent—possess forty percent of the land, and to be sure, this is the best land of all⁶.

² JOHN PAUL II, «Allocution at the *Ad Limina Apostolorum* Visit of the Bishops of Ecuador», 11 December 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (23 December 1979).

³ «Presentation of the Minister of Agriculture, Enrique Alvarez Córdova, on the Radio and Television Broadcast of 11 December 1979» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (14 December 1979).

⁴ Admonition addressed to vendors in the cathedral.

⁵ «Presentation of the Minister of Agriculture, Enrique Alvarez Córdova, on the Radio and Television Broadcast of 11 December 1979» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (14 December 1979).

⁶ Ibid.

What is the position of the church at this time? That was decided by the Second Vatican Council. I have the satisfaction of knowing that what I'm preaching has long had the support of the church's solemn magisterium. The Council stated,

In many underdeveloped regions there are large or even very extensive rural estates which are only slightly cultivated or lie completely idle for the sake of profit, while the majority of the people either are without land or have only very small fields; at the same time, it is evidently urgent to increase the productivity of the fields. Not infrequently those who are hired to work for the landowners or who till a portion of the land as tenants receive a wage or income unworthy of a human being; they often lack decent housing and are exploited by middlemen. Deprived of all security, they live under such personal servitude that almost every opportunity of acting on their own initiative and responsibility is denied to them, and all advancement in human culture and all sharing in social and political life is forbidden to them. Depending on the circumstances, therefore, reforms are necessary: income should be increased, working conditions should be improved, employment should be made more secure, and incentives to working on one's own initiative should be given. Indeed, insufficiently cultivated estates should be distributed to those who can make these lands fruitful; in this case, the necessary services and means, especially educational aids and the right facilities for cooperative organization, must be supplied. Whenever, nevertheless, the common good requires expropriation, compensation must be reckoned in equity after all the circumstances have been weighed» (GS 71).

Accordingly, the transformation now planned for El Salvador is fully backed by the Second Vatican Council. An even clearer message, being more recent, is found in the discourse that John Paul II gave in Oaxaca. Listen to what John Paul II told the *campesinos* of Oaxaca,

The depressed rural world, where workers toil in sweat-covered affliction, cannot wait any longer for full and effective recognition of their dignity, which is in no way inferior to that of any other social sector. They have the right to be respected and should not be prevented from aspiring to their own flourishing. They have the right not to be dispossessed of the little they have by maneuvers that are sometimes tantamount to outright robbery. They have the right to be free of the barriers of exploitation, often reinforced by insufferable selfishness, against which their best efforts of advancement are shattered. The *campesinos* have the right, not just to alms or the crumbs of justice, but to effective assistance that will give them access to the kind of development that their dignity as human beings and children of God deserves. For their sake there must be prompt and far-reaching action. Bold, profoundly innovative transformations must be brought about. Urgent reforms must be undertaken without delay. It should not be forgotten that the measures to be taken must be appropriate. The church defends the legitimate right to private property, but she teaches no less clearly that a social mortgage weighs heavily on all private property, in order that the earth's goods may serve the general purpose that God has given them. And if the common good requires it, there should be no hesitation even to expropriate property, provided it is done in due form⁷. (Applause)

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the *Campesinos* and the Native Peoples in Oaxaca», 29 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (11 February 1979).

I don't want to tire you with more quotations, but I've also brought with me the pope's words at Puebla, the statement of the Guatemalan bishops, the statement of the Honduran bishops, and several texts of Medellín, all of which point to the absolute need for agrarian transformation in our country⁸.

As regards those who want to brand this measure communist, I would refer them to the pastoral letter of the bishops of Nicaragua, which I won't read out of respect for your patience. Their letter has a passage about socialism that I think is highly original: «At times», they say, «We hear the fear expressed that the present process is moving toward socialism, and we are asked what we think about it»⁹. The bishops then say what they think: «There is a type of socialism that cannot be tolerated because it is in no way evangelical or Christian, but there is also a type of socialism that in no way contradicts but rather is quite in accord with the Gospel of social justice in the world»¹⁰. You can read this document yourselves, and I especially recommend that evaluation of socialism for it's a burning question also in our own context. This is the doctrine of the church.

Now I ask this question of all of you: what is the position of the archdiocese? You already know the answer. It can only be that we attempt to apply the general position of the church while pointing out the rights and duties of the different actors in the agrarian transformation.

First of all I want to say that many people will have to suffer for identifying with and defending this position of the archdiocese, which is the position of the church. Such is the case of Father De Sebastián, with whose basic concepts the archdiocese is in full agreement. It is regrettable that some people, in defending their selfish interests, have tried to malign him and to create antecedents for a possibly more serious threat¹¹. But I repeat: in what is most important, Father De Sebastián is following the pastoral line of the archdiocese concerning the matter in question. He can therefore rely on the full support of our archdiocese.

I want to urge the government and the armed forces not to create false hopes in the people. If you have promised agrarian reform, then you should carry it out, no matter what the reactions of that tiny minority of two thousand large landowners who own forty percent of the land. Don't let ourselves be intimidated! (Applause) And don't let yourselves be bribed in any way. Money is powerful, and there they have millions to spend. (Applause) I point out one particular danger because it can also cause our people to become frustrated: don't allow yourselves to be divided. Unite together when the battle gets difficult. Let there be no seeking of political favors within the government. You aren't there to fight for power but to defend the people. (Applause) It's not just that the junta has the right to decree an agrarian

⁸ The documents to which Archbishop Romero is referring are the following: JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Opening of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979; «United in Hope: Message of the Bishops of Guatemala», 25 June 1976; «On the Development of *Campesinos* in Honduras: Collective Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Honduras», 8 January 1970; «Justice», Medellín 14. See *Manuscripts of the Schemas of the Homilies of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero*, in the Office for the Cause of the Canonization of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero, Archbishop's Office of San Salvador.

⁹ «Christian Commitment for a New Nicaragua: Pastoral Letter of the Bishops Conference of Nicaragua», 7 November 1979, ECA 374 (1979)1104-1105.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *La Prensa Gráfica* (12 December 1979).

transformation; it has an obligation to do so! (Applause) The words of John Paul II should serve as a motto: «Remove the barriers of exploitation from the *campesinos* and the poor»¹².

It also seems important to me that the present government carry out its reform without making it seem like a wonderful present the junta is giving the people to gain their support. The agrarian reform is a conquest that the people themselves have earned with the blood they've shed. (Applause) That is why we tell the organizations that we esteem their just struggles, but they are part of a very long struggle, one that they did not begin. Rather, twenty centuries ago it was the church that began the struggle to make the world a more just place. (Applause) The government, therefore, should not make the people feel that they're being offered a gift and so they should remain passive. No, the reform is a fruit that they have achieved because they began to take action themselves and to participate in the economic and political processes of the country. (Applause)

The governing junta has not initiated a process; rather, they must incorporate themselves into the process the people have already got going. (Applause) This should be our great hope: that the people and the government come to a mutual understanding regarding their just demands. That is what we always said during the previous government: the problem is not between the church and the government; it is between the government and the people, and the church is with the people. (Applause)

The agrarian reform should not be done with the intention of adapting to the capitalist model of economic development. Such a model would allow wealth to continue to accumulate and to be concentrated in very few hands, but now with the involvement of the industrial, commercial, and financial sectors. Nor should the reform be carried out in order to put the *campesinos* back to sleep and prevent them from continuing to organize and to increase their participation in social, economic, and political affairs. The agrarian reform should not make the *campesinos* dependent on the state but should leave them free with respect to the state. (Applause) If the government wants to win the people's confidence, it must now more than ever be very vigilant regarding those vestiges of repression that are still being felt in various places. Be very vigilant. We know that elements of ORDEN and certain military officials are opposed to any increase in freedom, if that is what is sincerely being offered to the people. There have been episodes of official repression in some places.

Finally, land reform in El Salvador should have a broad perspective. It should involve the redistribution not only of land but of social resources. All *campesinos* and all poor people should have access to doctors, schools, hospitals, electricity, water, and all the rest. (Applause) In a word, it is what the Council described so beautifully as «the development of the whole human being and of all human beings» (GS 64).

Regarding this serious and divisive issue, I also want at this time to address the economically powerful sectors that will be affected by the agrarian reform. I want to speak to you, dear sisters and brothers, not as a judge or an enemy, but as a pastor and a Salvadoran who is a brother to all Salvadorans. I really want to urge you to become aware of the tremendous responsibility you have to collaborate at this time so that the economic, political, and social crises of the country can be overcome without resorting to violence. There have

¹² JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the *Campesinos* and the Native Peoples in Oaxaca», 29 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (11 February 1979).

been incidents involving gunfire, and I don't know if there's any truth to it, but people are especially afraid that the right is bringing arms into the country and is planning to pay mercenaries. That's not the way to defend the country's well-being. I want to remind you what Medellín says in this regard: «If they zealously retain their privileges and above all if they defend them by violent means, they are making themselves responsible before history for provoking "explosive revolutions of desperation"». (Applause) And Medellín addresses further words to the oligarchy: «The peaceful future of the countries of Latin America depends to a large extent on their attitude» (M 2,17). (Applause) God is calling you through the cries of the Salvadoran people, through the efforts of agrarian reform, through these signs of the times. God is calling you just as the voice of John the Baptist has called out this Sunday: «Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none, and those who have food should share with those who have none» (Luke 3:11). (Applause)

We have been given a wonderful example these days by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who has received the Nobel Peace Prize. She forewent the gala banquet at which they were going to give her the award and asked that the thirty thousand dollars the meal would have cost be spent in service to the poor of India¹³. (Applause) We should think the way Mother Teresa does. What an insult it is to people to spend on an evening's meal what could feed four hundred people for a year! (Applause)

At this time, dear sisters and brothers who hold economic power, the prospect of agrarian reform is probably making you feel discouraged, fearful, and perhaps revolted. You may even have decided to oppose the reform in every way possible. There are probably even some people who would prefer to destroy everything and inflict severe damage on the country's economy as long as they don't have to share anything with the workers whose labor they have exploited for many years. (Applause)

The church, which has served you well, tells you today: now is the time to show yourselves to be generous Christians and to love others as Jesus has loved us, for he, «being rich, became poor for our sake» (2 Cor 8:9). (Applause) Remember that Puebla's call for us to exercise a preferential option for the poor is not demagogical incitement of class struggle or of distinction between classes. Puebla's statement is clear: «We are calling all social classes to make their own the problem of the poor, which is the problem of Jesus, for when our lives are judged, he will tell us: "Whatever you did for one of these, you did for me"» (Matt 25:40)¹⁴. Continue to develop your business experience and your talents, which have in part allowed you to accumulate so much wealth, but do so now not only for your own benefit but for the whole Salvadoran community. (Applause)

At the same time I want to speak to those rural workers who are not yet organized and who may be inclined to remain passive at this decisive juncture. I speak to those of you who just want to wait and see whether you'll have the opportunity to benefit from this reform. I speak to those who want to be mere spectators, waiting to see how the government will fulfill its promises. I remind all of you that you also are responsible for this situation, as Medellín said in section 18 of its document on peace: «Also responsible for injustice are all those who fail to act on behalf of justice with the means at their disposal but instead remain passive out of fear of the personal sacrifices and risks that all bold and truly effective action requires. Justice and

¹³ *La Prensa Gráfica* (11 December 1979).

¹⁴ *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, 3.

therefore peace are achieved by the dynamic action of awakening and organizing the majority population in such a way as to put pressure on the public authorities, which are often incapable of carrying out their social projects without strong popular support» (M 2,18). (Applause)

I express my solidarity with the Minister of Agriculture, who is hoping that the *campesinos* will no longer remain silent and is willing to defend the rights that have so long been denied them. That is to say, he will defend the process of agrarian reform and will not allow the process to be side-tracked. (Applause) And he won't allow it to be used to promote new forms of dependence, oppression, and exploitation of the *campesinos*¹⁵.

I want to address some words as well to the members of the people's political organizations and also the people's military organizations. This week the revolutionary struggles have intensified. The armed groups, or at least some of them, have carried out violent military operations, and it seems that they're forming a people's army. At Medellín the church stated that the people have the right to put pressure on the public authorities for the authorities, lacking such pressure, are often incapable of carrying through on social projects. Moreover, at this time when there is a sector seeking to derail the agrarian form, the organizations have a special responsibility to apply pressure so that the reform will be carried out and will yield benefits for the people who most need it. (Applause) However, they should not do this by violent means. Medellín acknowledges that «when people place their hope in violence as the result of serious injustices and unreasonable resistance to change, their ultimate motivation may often be noble impulses of justice and solidarity». But they should consider, Medellín also says, that «the general condition of our countries, the tremendous difficulties and the horrible evils caused by civil war, and the people's Christian option for peace should move them to collaborate so that their progress as an awakened and organized people can be put at the service of justice and peace» (M 2,19).

The position of the archdiocese with regard to the struggles and the just demands of these organizations is the same as that expressed by Paul VI: «We will try to comprehend your afflictions and transform them, not into rage and violence, but into strong and peaceful energy for constructive works» (M 2,19).

We condemn the murders that took place this week, especially the horrendous actions in Nejapa¹⁶. The people there are in a state of shock. Don't take justice into your own hands. Pressure the government to make justice prevail since that is their duty. Those who shed the blood of their sisters and brothers should hear the judgment of the Lord: «Those who kill by the sword will perish by the sword» (Matt 26:52), and «The blood of those slain cries out to heaven» (Gen 4:10).

I want to refer now also to the pressures being applied on workers at the cotton plantations. Several persons who work in that sector are calling for more agile dialogue between the management and the People's Revolutionary Bloc in order to open up channels for the jobs the people need.

¹⁵ «Presentation of the Minister of Agriculture, Enrique Alvarez Córdova, on the Radio and Television Broadcast of 11 December 1979» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (14 December 1979).

¹⁶ Substituting «Nejapa» for Romero's «Guazapa». See *La Prensa Gráfica* (15 December 1979).

The vendors in the market have also asked us to request that the dialogue be speeded up so that their lives can soon return to normal, for the market is a place where many families of our nation earn their living.

I've also received a special plea from the Peace Corps on behalf of a young woman who is among the hostages taken in the San Jacinto market. I am earnestly urging the February 28 People's Leagues to try to come to an accord with the respective authorities regarding this distressing situation.

With regard to the kidnapping of Jaime Batlle, I want to say that I am always quite willing to intervene, but I am not so naïve as to believe just any statement that's made. Identify yourselves properly, and I will personally do everything in my power to restore the gift of freedom to a person who has been unjustly deprived of it.

I have a letter in which the family of Jaime Hill Argüello expresses gratitude regarding his kidnapping: «We wish to express our gratitude to you for what you have done regarding the situation of our brother. He is now a victim of threats and injustice, and for that reason you have come to his defense. Our brother was kidnapped on October 31 of this year. We do not want to dramatize our feelings, but you can understand perfectly what our parents, his wife, his children, and all of us who love him are going through». So once again, in the name of this family and the families of other kidnapped persons, I make a plea—and will do so on my knees if necessary, as the pope said in Ireland¹⁷—that you restore freedom to these brothers of ours and tranquility to their beloved homes.

Finally, in this regard I also want to address the faithful, especially the sector of clergy and religious. Dear sisters and brothers, at this time when I am asking all Salvadorans to work for a more just distribution of our wealth and resources, I think it is important that those of you who are priests and religious, without getting involved in matters that do not pertain to us, cooperate with the bishop in bringing to the people Gospel enlightenment and the church's authentic teaching on the rights and duties that the present time requires. Moreover, we should review the ways we redistribute our own income and resources in service to the people.

«What then must we do?» the people asked John the Baptist (Luke 3:10). We must ask similar questions of the precursor ourselves. What must we do so that the priests working in the poor zones have the same possibilities as those who work in the rich zones? What do we have to do so that, proportionally, there are as many priests and pastoral services for Christians living in the countryside as there are for those living in the cities? As Medellín says, «The present situation demands that bishops, priests, religious, and lay people have the spirit of poverty so that "Christians, by breaking the bonds of selfish possession of temporal goods, will work to orient economic and political power for the benefit of the whole community". The poverty of the church and her members in Latin America should be both sign and pledge: a sign of the inestimable value of the poor in the sight of God and a pledge of solidarity with those who suffer» (M 14,7).

I hope that we'll keep on striving to reach the ideal that Medellín recommended for vowed religious: «May we be ever more able to share our possessions with others, especially the most needy, by sharing with them not only what we have left over but what we have for

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in Drogheda, Ireland», 29 September 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (7 October 1979).

our own needs. May we be ready to allow our buildings and other resources to be used for the service of the human community» (M 14,16).

The message this Sunday is a message of joy. We should not let the need for such austerity take away our joy. Profound joy is impossible without the cross of austerity. Our people know how to smile and be happy; they are not naturally inclined to resentment or hatred, unless someone poisons their minds. Still, I believe our people will smile and most truly be happy when they see genuine transformation, a transformation that, as Saint Paul says, liberates from the slavery of sin this natural world that God made to be shared with all his children. Let it be so! (Applause)