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THE DIVINE SAVIOUR IS PERSONALLY PRESENT IN OUR EUCHARIST

**Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time
19 August 1979**

Proverbs 9:1-6
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-59

Dear fellow concelebrants and beloved sisters and brothers, again we are celebrating our Sunday Eucharist in this church of El Rosario since our cathedral is still occupied by workers on a hunger strike. We are grateful for the hospitality of the Dominican Fathers.

Here in El Rosario you are seeing something special, a concelebration, that is, several priests gathered round the bishop for a more solemn celebration of the Eucharist. As I've explained before, a group of priests, working on their own initiative and with the support of other religious and lay communities, has decided to conduct several vigils of intense prayer and fasting since these are spiritual forces that the church uses for very serious moments in our Christian life. At the end of Mass a priest will explain how the vigils will work, but I would like to make very clear that it is one thing to occupy the cathedral so that we're unable to celebrate our liturgy there, and it is something else to join together as Christians in the church of El Rosario and to unite with the bishop in celebrating the Eucharist. In the latter case people feel the nourishing force and inspiration that allows their language to be understood by the church, and through the church to reach the world. For the church is involved in the world precisely to continue the mission of Jesus Christ, who lived and acted in service to the world and was obedient to the mission the Father entrusted to him.

Today I also want to express my sincere gratitude for all the manifestations of sympathy and solidarity that were offered me on the occasion of my birthday. Believe me, my spirit was newly enriched by the testimonies, the congratulations, and especially by all those messages of people offering me their sorrows, their sicknesses, their sufferings. How enriched I feel when people who are sick or paralyzed or suffering in any way feel that their prayer has real meaning when united with their pastor! One very nice letter told me, «I feel that, alongside you, we are saving the people and saving souls for eternity». There is an abundance of such testimonies. I had the same experience at the Mass we celebrated with priests, sisters, and the faithful in the church of San José de la Montaña and at another Mass we celebrated in Chalatenango. These communities were saying that they understand that a church should find in her bishop the sign of unity, of truthful teaching, and of the mission they must preach in the world. For me all of this signifies not a commendation of me as a person but a very rich experience of the church herself, and I feel great joy in knowing that our archdiocese is steadily maturing in its sense of being church. May the Lord therefore reward you for all your demonstrations, not so much of personal sympathy, but of true ecclesial faith.

In today's reading we're looking for that same force of unity and inspiration that our Lord wanted to give to his church. I want to remind you that for three Sundays our gospel readings have been taken from the sixth chapter of Saint John, the most ecclesial and sacramental of all the gospels. We can't understand everything he says about Christ unless we read him through the church community and its sacramental life. This gospel, and especially this sixth chapter, gives us a rich understanding of the relation between the Divine Savior and our church. That's why I've told you on these last three Sundays that we should consider these four Sunday readings to be a truly providential gift that shines brilliant light on the figure of our Divine Patron. All four of these Sundays of August have used the words of Saint John to render a splendid homage to the Divine Patron of our country, the Divine Savior of the world.

All this began with a miracle of Christ, the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, but Saint John, the man of signs, wanted to see more than the joy of five thousand people who were satisfied with bread. Christ reproached the people, telling them, «Do not seek me for bread that perishes, but seek rather the bread that gives eternal life» (John 6:27). The whole sixth chapter of the Fourth Gospel is a beautiful explanation of this bread that gives eternal life. According to Saint John, therefore, the sign of the multiplication of the loaves reveals to us the gifts of redemption. All the riches that Christ has brought with him in his dying, rising, and offering us new life is symbolized in this bread. In him is found the true liberation, the true flourishing of the human person. «Let us not work only for the bread that perishes», says Christ (John 6:27a). Let our struggles not be only for earthly forms of liberation. They are all good and necessary, but if everything stops there, as we've said a thousand times before, our liberation remains truncated. Christ and his church serve and support those efforts to free us from earthly servitude by elevating them into the higher liberation that Christ, the true Savior of the world, offers us: liberation from sin.

None of those who are still enslaved to sin can speak of liberation, for they are badly in need of being freed themselves from hatred, vengeance, unjust violence, and other atrocities. We must be liberated from sin, and we must advance with the help of Christ to being not simply a free people but a people with authentic freedom, possessed of the dignity and the human rights proper to children of God. Only thus will we be truly made in the image and likeness of God and elevated to be his children. As happy and free and worthy as people believe themselves to be on this earth, if they lack the faith they need to attain the heights of heaven where they will be God's citizens forever, then their flourishing will always be limited and lacking in transcendental meaning. In the symbol of bread, therefore, the Fourth Gospel offers us the true liberation that roots out sin, and it makes possible the true glorious flourishing that makes us children of God and citizens of eternity alongside our Father God.

The passage that was read today culminates with the wonderful revelation of the Eucharist. Dear sisters and brothers, I hope the text we read helps us to understand the reason for our presence here each Sunday. We should not come to Mass out of curiosity, for political reasons, or for purely human ends. If we do, we'll be disappointed. The Mass is not meant to satisfy such motivations. If we come to Mass, let us do so for the reason Christ gave: «Do not seek me for the bread that perishes; seek rather the bread of eternal life» (John 6:27). What I truly hope is that, at the end of my meditation on this word of the Lord, we all feel more Christian and more grateful to Christ who gives us the Mass every Sunday, this Eucharist which nourishes us on our journey. I feel sad that there are so many people who have no regard for the Mass because they do not understand the Eucharist or the gift of God.

Christ begins today's gospel with the great revelation: «I am the living bread that has come down from heaven. The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world» (John 6:51). Are we aware, sisters and brothers, that Christ is present in person when we come to Mass? Do we realize that Jesus Christ is the main actor, personally present here, even though we don't see his face as we see each other's faces? Accordingly, I want to take the title of my homily from the word of God and make it an argument for his presence: «The Divine Savior Is Personally Present in Our Eucharist». I would like us to engrave this title deep within us so that we live it in truth. The Divine Savior is not just a statue that we take out for the processions on August 5. Many people make fun of the faith we have in images. Certainly we know that the image is made of wood or some other material; it is a reflection of ourselves. But if we reach out to the reality of the Christ who lives among us, then we're reaching out not just to a portrait or a wooden image but to the real person present here, and we're practicing a religion that is truly worth the effort because it helps us find the Divine Savior in person. So my three reflections will be the following: first, our church as the sacramental sign of the salvation of humankind; second, the Eucharist as the sign of the personal presence of Christ; and third, our own decision before this sign of contradiction: either we accept it or we reject it, either we go with Christ or we go without Christ.

Our church as the sacramental sign of the salvation of humankind

First, our church as the sacramental sign of salvation. Today's very first reading presages a church that will be a sign of God's wisdom: «Wisdom has built a house with seven columns and has prepared a feast» (Prov 1-2a). Here we have the language of the prophets: images of banquets and buildings, of festive joy and glory. Christ himself could not do without such comparisons, and that's why Saint John offers us the sign contained in the joy of eating bread.

How many times do the images of the first reading—the building of a house, the preparations for a banquet, the sending out of servants to invite the guests to come—appear in the exquisite parables of the kingdom (Matt 22:1-10)? The kingdom is a banquet, and the host who has prepared the banquet invites guests from all the crossroads of history: «Come for I have blended this wine and prepared these many delicacies that I want to offer all my guests» (Matt 22:4). How wonderful it is that we are invited to such a banquet every Sunday when we come to Mass!

The Second Vatican Council calls the church «the universal sacrament of salvation» (LG 48) because in her are found all the means that the Divine Savior desires to offer us so that we can be saved. Peoples and individuals must listen to the words of Saint Peter: «No other name has been given us by which we can be saved except the name of Jesus» (Acts 4:12). Only in him is there liberation; only in him is there salvation. Christ desires to represent all this richness present in the church with the image of a banquet. The Divine Savior is present in the church with all the means of salvation. That doesn't mean that only those who are in the Catholic Church can be saved. Let us be very clear about this: outside the church there are also many paths of salvation. What is certain, though, is that Christ left the complete and absolute means of total salvation in the church that was authentically founded by him upon the apostles. Many people will not make use of these means, and many who belong to this church which is God's banquet will prefer to rely on the idols of the world. Of these people the Council says, «They are in the body of the church, but they are not in the heart of the church» (LG 14). Conversely, there are many people who have no knowledge of the Catholic Church but who

want to be saved according to their own religion—they are in the heart of the church even though they are not in the body of the church. It is better to be in the heart, but it is much better still to be in both the heart and the body of the church. So good Catholics know that God has placed in the church all the marvelous means of salvation; they should therefore take advantage of them and experience the treasures that the Lord has placed so near at hand.

From our catechism we learn that the church has seven sacraments. The church is sacramental. Indeed, she is the «universal sacrament of salvation». But why is this so? It is because Christ acts in the church by means of the sacraments. The sacraments are not administered by human beings such as a bishop or a priest. The bishop and the priest are nothing more than humble instruments of God, who is truly the one baptizing, forgiving, and nourishing. Let us be very mindful of this because often we are tempted to personalize the administration of the sacraments, as if this priest celebrates the sacraments well while that other priest does not. The sacraments do not depend on the goodness or the badness of the priest!

The Italian writer Manzoni said, «When I kneel before a priest to ask forgiveness for my sins, I don't need to know whether he has greater need of forgiveness than I do. He may be a great sinner, but at the moment when he says to me, "I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", I am absolved—not by him, for he is not the one who forgives me, but by God by means of him». And a converted Protestant once wrote, «How deceived I was! I thought that the sacraments were obstacles between Christ and myself. I wanted to save myself by my faith in Christ, so I rejected the sacraments in order to have a direct relationship with Christ. But now after reflection I see that there is no such screen between Christ and me. Rather, the sacraments are the actions of Christ himself. When I confess my sins to a priest, I am not confessing to him but to Christ who is in him and who through his lips will tell me, "I forgive you". And when the hand of the priest baptizes, it is not he who takes away original sin but the redemptive power of Christ who gave the command: "Go and baptize, not in your name, but in God's"».

This would be an opportunity, sisters and brothers, to review the sacraments, but I think all of you know them: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, and the two great social sacraments, matrimony and priesthood. These are seven channels of the sacramental church through which the Divine Redeemer saves humankind and human society. By the sacraments he sanctifies both the love of man and woman in the home and the mission of priests. By vocation they have all been given the difficult task of continuing the work of Jesus Christ, which is the redemption of humankind.

Thanks to the sacraments, we enjoy the benefits of redemption. Moreover, as Pope Paul VI said, we must show that we belong to the church by means of the sacraments (EN 23). No one can say, «I am a Catholic, but I don't need to go to confession». No one can say, «I am a Catholic, but I don't take my children to be baptized». The sacraments are signs that you belong to Christ. Consequently, you cannot say that you belong to the church if you spurn these signs of your belonging. The church, therefore, continually preserves and performs all the means of salvation that Christ has entrusted to her.

The Eucharist as the sign of the personal presence of Christ

Today's reading from Saint John gives us a second thing to consider: the Eucharist as the sign of the personal presence of Christ. Take note that in the other sacraments Christ is not personally present. In baptism there is only the redeeming power of Christ, who through the priest of the church removes original sin from the child and makes her a child of God. But Christ is not personally present in baptism. The same with confirmation, where the bishop imposes his hands and anoints the young Christians with chrism. Christ is not present in person but in power, giving the Holy Spirit of confirmation by means of the bishop. Likewise in confession, Christ is not present personally but virtually, forgiving through the priest. In the anointing of the sick there is also a virtual presence, that is, the power of Christ is there but not Christ in person. In the sacraments of matrimony and priestly ordination the same is true. The two people who wed are the ministers, so Christ is present there, blessing their love. Neither is Christ personally present in ordaining a priest. But there is one sacrament where Christ *is* personally present, and it is the one we are studying this morning: «The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world» (John 6:51b).

In the words of today's gospel, sisters and brothers, Christ very clearly affirms his personal presence, especially in the statement I just cited: «The bread that I will give is my flesh». Last Sunday I explained the meaning of «flesh» in relation to the human person. Christ was telling the people, «The bread that I am announcing to you is my very person. I am personally in this bread of eternal life». But the Jews doubted him: «Who could ever eat that flesh or drink that blood?» (John 6:52). Christ knew that they had understood him well so he did not retract but reaffirmed what he had said: it was a matter of flesh and blood. He told them, «You have understood me correctly. My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have eternal life» (John 6:54-55).

Quite different was the time when Nicodemus misunderstood Christ and Christ corrected him. Christ told him, «If you are not born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God». Nicodemus took his words literally: «How can a grown person become small and reenter his mother's womb to be born again?» So Christ explained to him, «No, I don't mean that. Being born again means being baptized so that you become a new person» (John 3:3,4,5).

Similarly, when Christ told the Samaritan woman, «Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I will give will never thirst», she understood it literally and responded, «Give me this water so that I don't have to keep coming to the well to draw water every day». So Christ corrected her: «I'm not speaking about the water in this well but about the water of grace, the water of eternal life, the gift of God that springs up into eternal life» (John 4:13,14,15).

In other words, when in the gospel Christ affirms something and is misunderstood, he corrects the other person. But when his meaning is understood, even if it's a mystery beyond human understanding, then he reaffirms it and doesn't correct the other person. When he talked about the bread that is his flesh that he gives as food, they understood him and so he ratified his statement: «Yes, I will give my flesh, and you must also drink my blood in order to have eternal life» (John 6:54). That is why the Council of Trent chose three words to affirm the presence of Christ to refute the enemies of the Eucharist, who asked, «How can Christ be personally present in this little piece of bread and this wine?» Inspired by the words of this gospel, the Council stated, «Christ is truly present, really present, and

substantially present»¹. These are three characteristics of Christ's personal presence that respond to the objections of those who say, «He may be present but only symbolically. "Take and eat" refers to his symbolic body». That is not the case. Christ truly means, «This is my body in reality and substantially».

This is something we must understand well. We should not understand «eating Christ» as cannibalism. That's not the case, as Christ made clear: «This is my flesh, but you must understand what kind of flesh I am. I explained the conditions of my flesh in this discourse in Capernaum». First, it is flesh offered on the cross: «This is bread for the life of the world» (John 6:51b). It is an expression of how Christ gave his life for the world. Christ also told them, «The flesh counts for nothing. What counts is the spirit that gives life to the flesh» (John 6:63). And the flesh that Christ is offering is his life in the world, the very life that reconciled humankind with God. In a short while we'll be reciting in the Eucharist, «We announce your death! We proclaim your resurrection!» Present in the Eucharist is the personal flesh of Christ, who died painfully as his flesh exuded blood, «the blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins» (Matt 26:28). This flesh and this blood are present in our Mass, representing the person of Christ at the culminating moment of redemption.

Another marvelous thing is how united the life of Christ is to the life of the Father: «I have life because of the Father, and all those who feed on me will have life because of me» (John 6:57). In other words, there is a flow of life: «I am just one God-man, but I'm going to invent a way to share this human flesh as food because it carries the life of God». Those who are nourished by this body and this blood under the form of bread are not eating human flesh; they are consuming the flesh of the Son of man, a conjoining of the human and the divine in which God becomes nourishment for men and women and children.

So let us not forget these two conditions: Christ offering his flesh on the cross and Christ united in divine intimacy with the Father. This is the flesh that is given to us to be eaten; this is the flesh of the Eucharist that makes Christ personally present. His flesh is present not just in a virtual way but in a truly personal way, as he just described: his flesh is united to the sacrifice of the cross that saves the world and also to the Father's eternal life. Only in this way could he affirm something as astonishing as this: «Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life, and those who do not eat my flesh or drink my blood will not have life in them» (John 6:54).

The presence of Christ is indicated by its effects. How marvelous are the effects that Christ describes in today's discourse! «You will live forever», he said. «Your ancestors ate manna, a mysterious bread, but the manna only satisfied the everyday hunger of their stomachs, so that those who ate manna died. But those who eat this bread will never die but will have eternal life» (John 6:49-51a). The effect of the Eucharist is to make us immortal and to give us a share in the very life of God, who does not perish. We participate in the life of the risen Christ, who «once raised from the dead dies no more», as the Holy Bible says (Rom 6:9). What that means, dear sisters and brothers, is that the sacrament of the Eucharist is an eschatological sacrament. We've explained this term many times: it refers to the definitive goal of history, the sea toward which all the rivers of humankind flow, the place where we will all disembark—this is the eschatological, the ultimate, the end. Christ brings us this message by his presence in the Eucharist, and not only the message but the reality of his own flesh for

¹ Council of Trent, Session XIII (11 October 1551), *Decree on the Eucharist*, ch.1, Denzinger 874.

those who receive Communion. Those who come to Mass on Sunday, as well as those who simply kneel before the tabernacle, are capturing the eschatological—they are already on the brink of eternity, savoring the life of God.

Another effect appears in Christ's discourse today: «They will dwell in me and I in them» (John 6:56). What an incredible thing! «Those who consume me will dwell in me and I in them». Reflect on this all of you who are going to receive Communion this morning—what a divine moment! Christ dwells in you, and you dwell in him. In other words, there is an interpenetration that reaches the point where you can say, as Saint Paul did, «I no longer live, but Christ lives in me» (Gal 2:20). This transformation is very difficult to understand for those who have no faith, sisters and brothers, but those who have faith will understand what I saw yesterday in two religious communities. There in Usulután the Franciscan Sisters told me, «See how our little house has been fixed up; it's humble but very habitable. And look at our little chapel, the most beautiful part of the house». Where before there had been a beauty salon the sisters have set up a magnificent tabernacle because for the community there is nothing more beautiful than the tabernacle; it is the place where Christ dwells with the sisters and the sisters dwell with him. And last night I was with the Good Shepherd Sisters to celebrate the memorial of Mother María Mercedes, who died nine days ago; there also the tabernacle stood out. Ah, when we truly understand the reality of the consecrated host, we will want a heaven to keep it in! It is sad to think about the abandoned churches with the tabernacles filled with dust and withered flowers strewn about, or no flowers at all. There's a lack of faith in any church that fails to esteem the life of the Eucharist.

The story is told about some tourists and scientists who visited the island of Molokai, where Father Damian was living with the lepers. Damian's superiors had wanted to send him away, but he told them, «No, leave me here», and he asked God for the grace of leprosy so that he could remain with his flock. One day, as he raised the consecrated host, he noticed the signs of leprosy on his hand, and from that moment on he always said, «We lepers», when he spoke with his people. He identified so much with them that they felt he was their brother. When people came offering him help and asking how many dollars he needed, he would answer, «I wouldn't stay here a minute for dollars! If I am here, it is for love of Jesus Christ». What gave strength to Father Damian, what gives strength to all the missionaries and all the sisters and all the priests, what gives life to the ecclesial base communities, what forms the center of the parish is the bread of eternal life. «Those who eat my flesh are nourished with eternal life. I am with them, and they are with me» (John 6:51a,56).

This is incomprehensible, sisters and brothers, for those who have not had an invigorating experience of the Eucharist. That explains why our Christian communities are maligned and misunderstood. People simply don't understand the folly of men and women who are willing to expose themselves to death unless they're actually subversive rebels. No, there is a force that is greater than all the revolutions: it is the love felt by the person or the community that has discovered the treasure that Jesus Christ is revealing today: his living and life-giving presence in the Eucharist.

As I said, I would like us to attend our Sunday Mass in light of these reflections. With what delight we would come to Mass if we thought that we weren't just going to meet up with some bishop or priest, but to encounter, through the priest, Christ himself and eternal life! We receive communion, we adore him, and we truly feel that he is in us and we are in him. From him we will draw force for our life during the coming week, and our family life will be

holier, sweeter, smoother, and more loving because we have been nourished with the love of Jesus Christ. We will be more ready to make sacrifices, we will work harder, and we fulfill our obligations more faithfully. Do you see how the Eucharist is truly the bread that gives life to the world?

Our own decision before this sign of contradiction

Finally, then, my third reflection concerns our own response to this sign of the Eucharist. We could call the consecrated host the sign of contradiction because some people are madly in love with it while other people scornfully despise it and pay it no mind because they have no faith.

In today's three readings we find people categorized precisely by the position they take with respect to God's wisdom as incarnated in Christ. According to the first reading we can say that there are two kinds of people: on the one hand, there are those who lack experience and judgment and so reject the work of wisdom, and on the other, there are the prudent folk, those who are nourished by knowledge of God (Prov 9:1-6). These latter, even if they are perhaps less intelligent in worldly ways, possess the wisdom of God that is given in the holy Eucharist where Christ is present.

In the second reading Saint Paul also depicts a category of people who are senseless, confused, inebriated, or dissolute. «Don't be that way», Saint Paul tell us, «but be wise and do what the Lord desires. Be filled by the Spirit, and make your lives a joyful liturgy. Sing hymns to the Lord, and give him thanks at every moment» (Eph 5:15-20). How beautiful life becomes when it is brightened by faith and when we realize that our bodies, whether healthy or infirm, become hosts themselves when they receive Communion and are united to the consecrated host. All the actions of our lives, all the obligations we fulfill, all the sacrifices we make, all the love we pour out, all the patience we extend to the impertinent—they all are converted into Christ crucified, the flesh that saves the world. We bring to Christ our own little hosts, our small sacrifices, our tiny drops of water mixed in the chalice of wine so that they all become one. The little drop of water cannot be distinguished from the wine in the chalice but is seen only as the blood shed for the salvation of the world. That is when the life of all of us becomes a liturgy. Whatever our job might be, when we do it in union with the Lord, we are all priests.

In today's gospel we also see Christ our Lord distinguishing the ways in which people respond to his promise: some were skeptical of him, and others understood him in such literal terms that they almost made him a cannibal. That was not how Christ wanted to be understood. His language was very subtle and so was not understood in the vulgar setting of a world where flesh was understood only in terms of pleasure, as something to be exploited with arrogance and pride. Flesh was involved in the worship of earthly idols, but this was clearly not the flesh that Christ was offering the people. What he was offering was the flesh that was divinized in the sacrifice of the cross and united to God in the mystery of the incarnation. The flesh the Lord offers us is truly divine, and it is understood by those who have faith. Those who have lost their faith or have no faith cannot understand it. In the light of this reflection, I would like us to analyze what class of people we belong to.

Life of the church

As we usually do, I want to present you first a series of events within our church. How I wish that all of us were crazily in love with the Eucharist! That's why I want to refer first to our beloved priests. Have you ever thought, sisters and brothers, about how the sacrament of the Eucharist was born as a twin to the sacrament of priesthood? In order to maintain this treasure of the bread of life that gives life to the world, Christ conferred the priesthood on some men on that very same night. As the eternal Priest, he celebrated the first Mass and distributed the first Communion, but then he said to the apostles, «Do this in memory of me» (Luke 22:19). That is the moment when we priests came into existence and were charged with maintaining the Eucharist. Our principal mission as priests is to give the Eucharist its full meaning, which consists not just in distributing consecrated hosts but in redeeming the people and saving humanity. When you come to Communion, therefore, you should feel that you are truly flourishing. That's why we're now insisting on the importance of receiving the sacraments more conscientiously. People should not receive Communion unless they feel truly responsible for the bread that gives life to the world.

Our priests understand that their mission requires them to be incarnated on earth, and I'm talking here not just of priests of the archdiocese but of all the priests in the country. In recent days, while the priests were involved in deep reflection, I told them that they should understand their present actions as priestly actions. They shouldn't confuse them with simply political or revolutionary actions. I know that there'll be news reports about some rebellious priests seizing the church of El Rosario, but that is not the case! What's been happening in the church of El Rosario in these days is that the priests are calling the people to prayer and fasting. This is an initiative that they have taken as members of the church, and as pastor I respect it. I ask all of you to make an effort to understand what they're doing, and soon they will explain it to you themselves. I have tried to understand the concerns that these priests have, and I ask all of you, as God's beloved people, to remain closely united with our priests. Let us try to help them so that all their discourse and all their action may be truly as we want it to be, a discourse of the Gospel—a living Gospel, not a dead one!

I also want to refer to several communities within the church communion of this archdiocese. I had the good fortune to visit Mejicanos for its patronal feast on August 15, San Jacinto for its patronal feast on August 16, and Chalatenango, whose communities offered me a holy Mass.

To be sure, the kindness of the communities of Chalatenango was in stark contrast to the treatment I got at the checkpoint when I was entering the district. They made me get out of the car, and they almost made me place my hands on the car; they even searched the car's motor. They opened everything, even the correspondence, which I believe is unconstitutional because correspondence is inviolate. They did a whole series of things that displayed their cowardice more than anything; it is the kind of cowardice that delights in a display of arrogance. For my part, I had only one answer for them, the answer I've always given them, which is the answer of the church and the truth: «Search whatever you want. You'll find nothing».

Even then they weren't satisfied because after Mass we were still under constant surveillance in Chalatenango. Even the departmental commander arrived with his recorders and his officers. As I was finishing my homily, I thought to ask the people, «Do you think I have said anything subversive? If so, speak out because I want to be corrected. Have you heard anything subversive in my words?» And all the people said, «No, Bishop Romero, nothing

subversive!» Instead there was loud applause, and so I told them, «Those who are keeping watch on this event should be aware of how the people have understood my words. They should not go and report them in some other way».

I also visited the community of Usulután and Santa Elena in the diocese of Santiago de María, after receiving a kind invitation.

We also have things to rejoice in here in San Salvador. The Good Shepherd Sisters are today celebrating the feast of their founder, Saint John Eudes. I especially wanted to mention this community because one of their recently deceased sisters, Sister María Mercedes Peñate, was a beautiful example of Christianity lived in silence and holiness. The sisters are now collecting her writings and testimonies about her life and her activities. I truly believe that she was one of those hidden saints who bring great blessings and favor on the community of our archdiocese. I congratulate the Good Shepherd Sisters, and I hope they produce many more saintly women like the one they just handed over to heaven, and I wish the same for all the sisters and all the communities.

I rejoice also with the Carmelite Sisters of Saint Teresa, four of whom celebrated their silver anniversaries this week. May the Lord preserve their enthusiasm for our Lord Jesus Christ beyond these twenty-five years.

I also extend greetings to the Franciscan Sisters who are flourishing in the diocese of Santiago de María: in Usulután, in Berlín, and in Santiago.

I now raise an important issue. Questions have been raised about the letter that was published here with great fanfare; it was an open letter from the Conference of the Diocesan Clergy of Bolivia². You probably remember it. Wanting to know the truth, we wrote to Bolivia and receive the following reply:

Most Esteemed Archbishop. We have received a newspaper clipping about an open letter addressed to you by Father Luis Rojas, a diocesan priest belonging to the archdiocese of Santa Cruz. We want to express to you our displeasure and our disagreement with the content and the tone of said letter, which was written tendentiously and without regard for the truth. Moreover, we believe it necessary to inform you that the Conference of Diocesan Clergy is an organization of Bolivian diocesan priests that does not have the approval of the bishops of Bolivia. Also, not all the diocesan priests belong to it; in fact, only a few priests from some of the dioceses do. We therefore consider that said letter may be considered to be a personal statement of the priest Luis Rojas or at most to be representative of the opinion of a very reduced group. In conclusion, we wish to extend to you and to the Salvadoran church our sincere sentiments of admiration, appreciation, and allegiance in view of your courageous and

² Among other things the letter said, «We do not question your personal opposition to the regime, nor do we question your constant concern for safeguarding the “human rights” that are supposedly being violated. ... What wounds our conscience as Catholic priests is that, on this pretext, the church of Jesus Christ is being used to favor communism. ... It is already public knowledge that you have converted your pulpit into a platform for Marxist demagogic. This, Archbishop, is to pass from the Banner of Christ to the Banner of the Antichrist without any possible extenuating explanation». Conference of the Diocesan Clergy, «Open Letter to Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero». *La Prensa Gráfica* (20 June 1979).

sacrificial pastoral labor in defending and promoting human and evangelical values in our fellow nation.

This is the response to the defamation they were trying to spread here. It is better to look for the truth abroad rather than here, where so often all we find is untruth.

Now some notes about the universal church. The pope has just announced the slogan for the next Day of Peace. I find it inspiring that this pope, following the custom of the previous one, will be celebrating the first day of each year as a Day of Peace and will designate a theme for each year. The theme for this coming year, 1980, is «Truth, the Force for Peace». The pope explains, «We chose as our theme "Truth, the Force for Peace" because all too often falsehood affects many sectors of our personal and collective lives, and it leads to suspicion among people. And such suspicion undermines confidence among individuals and among peoples. ... Building peace upon truth means helping people to escape from their present alienation; it encourages them to become true subjects once again and no longer simple objects beholden to their own inventions. Building peace means giving priority to ethics over technology, to the person over things, to the spirit over matter, to the primacy of being over having»³. Let us strive to be clothed with this spirit of true peace even though we are in a situation where false peace is often confused with true.

Another very interesting report from the universal church comes from the bishops of Argentina, who are defending the right to organize as a natural right of workers that cannot be denied or restricted. There in Argentina also, Bishop Jorge Novak celebrated Mass with the relatives of detained political prisoners and disappeared persons in the cathedral of Quilmes.

Another echo comes from our Central American church. The superior general of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe, has been visiting Nicaragua and Honduras for two reasons: first, to assess the situation in Nicaragua; and second, to make arrangements in Honduras, which has been a mission of the Jesuit Fathers from Saint Louis, Missouri, but will now be a mission of the Central American province.

Concerning Nicaragua, Father Arrupe made some very interesting comments that give us good criteria for evaluating the very biased news that is published here. He spoke first about the need to collaborate positively in the work of reconstruction and to give enthusiastic support for the challenging tasks facing that society, while at the same time preserving sufficient evangelical freedom to be able to criticize possible deviations. His position seems to be quite in accord with the freedom of the Gospel and also very practical at the present moment. What Nicaragua needs now is not criticism that will crush people's hopes but assistance in keeping their spirits free. The church cannot commit herself to any system, but she can encourage and assist all systems. The most urgent matter for Father Arrupe was the great need to relieve the people's hunger; he said that every country should take measures to provide the bread that we all need and that is especially needed now in Nicaragua.

Events of the week

³ JOHN PAUL II, «Truth, the Force of Peace» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (19 August 1979).

As a church with this kind of background, we now focus on the reality of our own country, and we do so not out of political ambition or curiosity. We don't criticize just for the sake of criticizing. We are obliged to do so for the sake of the Gospel, which Christ said must be «bread for the life of the world» (John 6:51b). This «bread of life» which the church gives out in El Salvador is the word of the Lord, the Christian religion, and if it does not touch the political, social, and economic realities of our people, then it will be bread that is simply stored away and provides no nourishment. Only bread that is eaten can be assimilated, so we need to assimilate this bread into the realities of the nation.

How can we refrain from illuminating with the words of the bread of life what the president announced this week when he spoke about the changes that are «necessary, indispensable, and urgent» and when he stated that «we should not cling to outdated molds of social existence»? The president stressed that «the people want peace» and declared that «authority should not display arrogance»⁴. We also heard him give instructions so that those in exile would be allowed to return to the country; he promised a thorough investigation of the death of Father Macías; he invited the Red Cross to verify the fact that there are no political prisoners⁵. These statements would give us much encouragement, dear sisters and brothers, if we weren't witnessing contrary realities.

We want to say, therefore, that if there really is a need for urgent changes in the country, then why are persons and organizations that advocate these changes being called subversive? Our own church desires those changes because they are demanded by the Gospel. If it is desirable for authority not to display arrogance, then we ask: why does the repression of our people continue unabated? We have before us lists of the atrocities committed this week: Amado Guardado Mejía, Eugenio Guardado, Francisco Guardado, Esperanza Menjívar de Guardado, Francisco Fuentes Landaverde. All of these were arrested but were denied the constitutional protection of either being brought before the courts or being released. There have also been military raids and assaults on peaceful citizens in several districts of Aguilares: Valle Nuevo, Buena Vista, and Las Tres Ceibas. All these atrocities are described in many letters arriving at the archdiocesan offices, such as this one from a mother who writes, «I am a distressed wife and mother because on May 29 the police arrested my husband Mercedes, my son José María, and my brother Pedro Juan. They were arrested as they were planting rice near the house. We have searched for them in many places but have not found them. You can imagine the anguish I feel, along with my children, so I beg you, please, to ask the authorities about these disappeared persons in your Sunday homily. I ask you this favor with all my heart». This is one of the unheard voices, a voice that we have to make heard. Ours would not be a true Gospel if we remained indifferent to such anguish, especially when others are trying to soothe people's anxieties with promises and news that don't correspond at all to reality but rather keep always concealed what we most fear.

As regards the Red Cross investigation of the prisons, we can say that the OAS and the English parliamentarians have already looked into the matter and reported on the prisoners there and the atrocities committed against them. If the Red Cross finds no prisoners

⁴ «Discourse of General Humberto Romero to Officials of the Armed Forces of El Salvador», 11 August 1979, in *El Diario de Hoy* (13 August 1979).

⁵ «Message of General Carlos Humberto Romero at a Press Conference», 16 August 1979, in *El Diario de Hoy* (17 August 1979). A synthesis of the president's message was also published in the edition of 22 August 1979 of the same paper.

now, we should ask: what have they done with them? where are they? Most certainly there is something horrendous going on there, and the church cannot remain silent about it.

In the field of labor also, dear sisters and brothers, we have some very worrisome matters. When the Ministry of Labor, for example, says it fears that many jobs will be eliminated, we think of all the people who now have work but may lose it. What I would like is for all those concerned about the labor situation—management, workers, and Ministry of Labor—to engage in serious dialogue in order to find the true causes of the problems, so that neither one side nor the other abuses its rights and its authority but all seek the good of the people and provide a means whereby all of us can find bread, work, peace, and tranquility.

There are also many things to regret this week as regards the repression. For example, a teacher named Sánchez was killed. You probably also heard the news about Valentín Contreras, a businessman who was killed by the FPL. Around the same time, an engineer and seven workers were executed near the Children's Park; according to the newspapers they were members of the FPL⁶. It is not known who killed them, but the impression is that they were violent rightist forces. As we said before, all this makes us think that we are in an undeclared civil war that is taking the lives of many people. We therefore need to seek solutions which allow guilt to be judged fairly so as to do away with vigilante types of vengeance.

We could mention other deplorable violent deeds for which I ask your prayers. In the same way that we pray and we fast in this church, let us also use our prayer and our human resources and professional talents to seek solutions to our problems. There is still time left for us to solve them so that we don't have to pay for them with an excess of bloodshed.

We want to unite ourselves with the suffering of some ten thousand dead in India. As you know already know, they died as a result of flooding.

Dear sisters and brothers, such is the history of our country during the week. You could add many other things, but all this reality serves as a backdrop against which we want to experience our Mass this Sunday. For the Mass is where we will receive the bread that comes down from heaven, the flesh by which Christ gives us all his divine life, his redemption, his love. From this perspective let us view and contemplate all that can be done when we place our faith in the Lord and when we truly desire to be instruments of the Lord's love. Let us be nourished with the eternal life of the Eucharist. Let it be so. (Applause)

As I promised you, we're going to ask one of the priests taking part in this action to explain its meaning to us so that we can understand it.⁷

⁶ *El Diario de Hoy* (17 August 1979).

⁷ After the homily, a priest explained the meaning of the vigil of prayer and fasting that took place in the church of El Rosario from 19 to 22 August 1979.