

35

SAINT MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL AND THE CHURCH'S STRUGGLE

**Feast of Archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael
Huizúcar
29 September 1977**

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Revelation 12:7-12a

John 11:47-51

My dear sisters and brothers, women and men religious, and all the faithful.

I come to visit you as pastor, but I come here also as a Christian, the same as you. I come as a pilgrim to honor Michael the archangel. As your parish priest just stated, I come to bring you the message that the Lord wants spoken to this community of Huizúcar on the occasion of your patronal feast. And as a pilgrim of Saint Michael the archangel, I come with an awareness of how powerful is the struggle that the church is engaged in with the world. In this struggle she feels in her flesh the power of the enemy who wants this kingdom of God to be done away with so that it does not advance. We come to recite with you, the faithful people, the prayer that through the centuries expresses our trust in Saint Michael the archangel: «Saint Michael the archangel, defend us in battle; be our defense against the powers of evil».

I believe, sisters and brothers, that our Mass and our prayer in this blessed parish of Huizúcar, which has been placed beneath the powerful wings of the archangel Saint Michael, will be for the benefit of the whole archdiocese because we are here now to pray for all the concerns, for all the priests, for all the communities, and for all the Christians who form part of what is called the local church of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

Every time we celebrate a patron saint, our hopeful gaze is directed to heaven where our patron reigns with God. But in the case of Saint Michael the archangel we do not honor a pilgrim of this earth who went to heaven, as is the case with the other patron saints. Rather, we honor a prince of that other world whom God sends to protect and guide this people of God. That is why our prayer and our confidence become more devout, more respectful, more trusting. We know that we are in a mysterious presence that has not arisen from this world but from that world of which our Creed speaks: «We believe in God, Creator of all that is seen and unseen». Saint Michael is part of the kingdom of that invisible world of which we have no more knowledge than that which God has wanted to reveal to us.

I am delighted to be here, sisters and brothers. I confess to you that I felt great emotion when I was received by you with that special warmth that is so characteristic of

our people. As I come to accompany you, I am pleased to find myself on this scenic mountaintop where our ancestors were inspired to build this church. These churches and cathedrals have the appearance of spiritual fortifications, built by Christians of every century in the most exquisite countryside that nature can provide. After the picturesque landscape at the entrance to the plaza, we enter this church and are amazed at the presence not only of Saint Michael at the center of this altar but on either side the two great archangels who with him form the three majesties who have come from heaven to visit earth and whose names express their glorious relationship with God.

Saint Raphael means «the medicine of God» because he accompanied the pilgrim Tobit and healed his family of their spiritual and material suffering, as you can read in the wonderful book of that name. Tobit never imagined that he was being accompanied by an archangel. It was only after Rafael finished his mission on earth and was leaving that he told Tobit, «I am one of the seven spirits who stand before the throne of God» (Tob 12:15). Only then did both Tobits, older and younger, and the whole family realize that they had been in contact with the divine through the infinite wisdom of God. They fell to their knees, prostrated themselves on the ground, and adored with their faces covered because they had been with an archangel without realizing it (Tob 12:16). I believe this is also our attitude today: adoring one of the seven spirits who are near the throne of God.

The Bible presents Gabriel to us in no less a role than bringing from God the message of the world's redemption. Gabriel means «the power of God» because he manifested the power of redemption through the incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of Mary. To save the world from sin, the power of infinite love was necessary, and that is why God sent the archangel whose name spoke of divine power. The archangel Gabriel was sent by God to the town of Nazareth, and there we hear the beautiful dialogue between the Virgin and the archangel that announced the nearness of human redemption (Luke 1:26).

In addition to these two princes, Gabriel and Raphael, another name stands out, Michael, which in Hebrew means «who is like God?». Michael was constituted a prince in order to defend the rights of God against the pretensions of hell and the rebellion of Satan who at that time had become a demon, the prince of darkness. It is said that Satan had been the most beautiful of the angels, but in his rebellion he was subdued and became a devil. Michael was then put in charge of those rights of God not only in heaven, where he is the prince of the heavenly hosts, but also on earth, where his relations with humans are more frequent and better known than those of the other two archangels. The Old Testament presents Michael in a constant relationship with the synagogue, that is, with the church of the Old Testament. He is the protector of Israel, defending the people in their faith and in their battles on this earth.

The reading proclaimed by Father Alvarenga presents us with the first characteristic I want to highlight: the archangel of hope. The second reading, from the Apocalypse, presents us with the archangel as he battles in the kingdom of God on earth. The gospel, where Jesus speaks of the angels descending and ascending on the Son of Man, shows that the archangel's strength is not his own, since he is a humble creature, but comes from God and from Christ. It is the power that saves the world. Let us focus

on these three thoughts, my sisters and brothers, so that we can understand the clear message of this feast of Saint Michael the Archangel, the patron of this blessed town.

The archangel of hope

Our first reading from the book of Daniel tells us that Daniel had great visions. He saw that a throne was being prepared in heaven for God, the Eternal One. Then, when God was seated on this throne, the prophet saw «one like the son of man» (Dan 7:13). What is the meaning of the prophet's words? Christ also spoke often of the «son of man», taking the term from this prophecy of Daniel. When Christ calls himself the Son of Man, he is thinking of Daniel's vision of «one like the son of man» drawing near to the throne of God. According to those who study Sacred Scripture, this prophecy points to the kingdom that Christ is going to conquer on earth. But he is not the Son of Man all by himself. He is the Son of Man because he and all the women and men who are redeemed by him form there in heaven one single person, one single kingdom. Christ is the head, and all of us who have the good fortune of being saved—let us do everything possible toward this end—will form with Christ a glorious people, a single Son of Man. We will form one nation as it says in the passage that was read today: «One like a son of man advanced toward the ancient and venerable One, and nations and people of every language served him» (Dan 7:13-14). How wonderful it will be, sisters and brothers, to form part of that entourage of Christ the Lamb as he enters the eternal city of heaven! There, in that kingdom, all who have been saved will form this Son of Man along with Christ. The children of this earth will become a glorious Christ in eternity. Our beloved dead who have been saved are already there. There also are our martyrs, there in the triumphant city of heaven. How many members of our family are already part of that Son of Man who triumphs in heaven by drawing close to eternal splendor! God has crowned them forever.

There dwells Michael the archangel, in that mysterious kingdom that is beyond history, the kingdom toward which we journey, knowing that when we complete our life here on earth the kingdom of happiness will begin. Saint Michael comes to tell those of us who are still on our pilgrimage that that kingdom exists and that God has made him a prince of that kingdom because of the courage with which he defended God's rights. There is the archangel of hope. This should strengthen us in our hope. Every time we think about the patron of this town, Saint Michael the archangel, let our hope be enlivened. When we are discouraged by the suffering, the persecution, and the anxiety of this world, let us raise our eyes to that Son of Man who dwells in the heavenly city where we will all be glorified. Let us understand that we are defended by these heavenly creatures who did not have to live on this earth but were created by God to form his entourage as we read in the Scriptures, «Millions upon millions of spiritual beings were serving him» (Dan 7:10). Thus is the marvel of that heaven where God's wisdom fills everything, where God is all in all.

What a great city of eternity is opened to us this morning by Saint Michael the archangel! A magnificent scene, more beautiful than the one I described before, is revealed to the hopeful gaze of Christians by this vision of Saint Michael and his heavenly army.

The archangel engaged in battles for the kingdom of God on this earth

Let us now look at the second reading, from the Apocalypse. In this famous twelfth chapter, Saint John, caught up in contemplation, beholds a tremendous struggle going on in heaven. The dragon has seven heads and is crowned with diadems as a symbol of this creature's power. The image reveals how the mighty governments of this earth can become horrible beasts that fight against the kingdom of God when they forget that all their power comes from God. It is the same arrogance as when Lucifer, crowned with diadems, thought that he could do without God. That is when his ruin began and he was converted into the fierce dragon, the beast that drags down all those who allow themselves to be deceived. Let us dread the moment, sisters and brothers, when the powers of government seek to become like God! Saint John wrote these pages when the Roman emperor believed he was a god, but the Christians refused to adore any but the true God and Jesus Christ the Lord. Because they would not adore the emperors, many of them died as martyrs. This is always the cause of martyrdom. When Jesus confessed that he was God, the priests of the temple tore their garments and said, «He has blasphemed! He deserves to die!» (Mark 14:62-64). When Christ proclaims himself God before the powers of earth, he disturbs them so that they persecute and kill him.

The church's struggle is just that: maintaining the unique majesty of God over against the powers of this earth. For her defense of God, the church is maligned; those who promote this kingdom of God on earth are held to be subversives and so are persecuted and denounced. Be very careful, sisters and brothers, about denunciations. You are aware that in these days a flyer has been distributed which states that the bishop—namely myself—is traveling through the towns and villages preaching subversion. What I am preaching to you now is what I have always preached. If someone here were to denounce me and say that I was preaching subversion in Huizúcar, he would be speaking falsehood. It is calumny. What I am saying is that the church preaches the one and only kingdom of God. I maintain that before the only Lord of history the church must defend her God even if it costs us our lives.

When that dragon was defeated by Michael and cast down to earth, the victors sang that beautiful hymn of the Apocalypse: «Now the victory of God has been accomplished» (Rev 12:10). But another spectacular event is described in chapter twelve of the Apocalypse, which for the sake of brevity was not read today. It is that famous passage where the dragon falls to earth and there appears in the sky the great sign of «a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars». She is pregnant and about to give birth. The dragon has its jaws open and wants to devour the child that is the fruit of that woman's womb, but when the moment of birth arrives, the child and the woman are saved. Even so, the persecution by that dragon continues throughout the course of history (Rev 12:1-6).

What is the meaning of this vision? Scripture scholars have interpreted this as referring to the church, but many also apply it to the Virgin Mary, mother of the church. It is all the same because Mary, the Mother of Christ, is the figure of the church. She is mother of the church, and whatever touches on the church touches on Mary. To mention Mary is to mention the church. This mysterious woman, let us understand, is the church, the child of Mary. It is the church founded by Christ to bring Christ to birth in people's hearts, to make Christ be born in those who are converted and who accept him as the Redeemer. It is the church that suffers the threats of the dragon who wants to kill the

fruit of her womb, the dragon who does not want Christ to be born on earth, in people's hearts, in history. Here we see the tremendous struggle being waged by Saint Michael the archangel who has already defeated that dragon and now defends the church so that Christ can be born in people's hearts thanks to the ministry of preaching and the ministry of the priests, the catechists, and the religious who sow the doctrine of Christ so that he will be born in the hearts of children and in the hearts of sinners who are converted.

The devil is disturbed by the fact that Christ is coming to birth more and more on earth, and that is why he persecutes the church which gives birth to that Christ who is born in our hearts. That struggle will continue through the whole of history—the whole of history! Therefore we should not be surprised when we hear that the church is persecuted, for it is the very nature of the church to be persecuted. The prophecy is there in the very pages of the Bible; it is there in the figure of the woman who is persecuted by the dragon who wants to devour her along with her child. Thus are clearly revealed the powers of hell which often use earthly agents as their ministers; they make use of people who in their zeal for persecution do not heed the church but rather malign her and harass her. But the church has the assurance that there is a prince of the heavenly hosts who defends her and guards her. In the last days, the Apocalypse tells us, the dragon will be definitively defeated, and the child of Mary will triumph in the kingdom of heaven together with the people we mentioned before. Blessed are those who are engaged at this time in the battle. Now is the time of struggle here on earth. We lift high the banner of Christ and follow the Lord's teaching. We do not fear persecution for we are protected by the heavenly powers symbolized by Saint Michael the archangel. We persevere in our faith and our hope, and we do not become discouraged by the difficulties of the struggle.

My sisters and brothers, this is the phase of history in which we now find ourselves. Look at all the people who fill this church, a truly incredible scene, teeming with children and with men and women of all ages—a beautiful display of the kingdom of God! You believe. You are united with this woman who is giving birth to Christ. You bear witness to that Christ who lives on earth thanks to the confession, the faith, and the hope of Christian hearts. If Christ lives, it is because we embody him.

I believe that you know about my pastoral letter, «The Church, the Body of Christ in History», which states that all of us now living are the church. In our flesh we incarnate Christ who lives here now in El Salvador, in 1977, in this church of today—just as our ancestors incarnated the church of earlier centuries and just as future generations will incarnate the church after we have died. Christ will continue to be incarnated in this church, and that is why Christ and his church, as this passage from the Apocalypse prophesies, will continue the struggle throughout the history of the world and will also sing a final hymn of victory.

All the power of Saint Michael the archangel comes from God

Finally, my sisters and brothers, my third point in honor of Saint Michael has to do with what Jesus spoke to Nathaniel in the wonderful gospel passage we heard today. Father Pocasangre read the passage about how Christ met a man named Nathaniel and told him that he knew all his secrets: «I saw you under the fig tree» (John 1:48). What was

Nathaniel doing under the fig tree? No one knows, but it must have been something that was to be kept secret. He was perhaps thinking or meditating on things that only he knew. Surprised in his secret thoughts, he said, «Rabbi, I see that you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel that we are awaiting». And Christ responded, «Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see even greater things than this. You will see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man» (John 1:49-51).

What does Jesus mean? Among these angels ascending and descending we must see our archangel Saint Michael. According to biblical thinking, the angels are the presence of God. When Christ says that his apostles will see a multitude of angels ascending and descending on him, the Son of God, he is telling them, «Those who believe in me will understand that the life of God has come with me into this world. The angels are the words that I preach to you. The angels are the redemption that I am going to pay for the sins of the whole world». Angels surrounding the Son of God—this is a marvel that we are experiencing here in this church. Each one of us is an angel around the Son of God here present on the altar. Right here the vision of Nathaniel is being realized. Through all the centuries of Christianity, it is Christ who is the center of our love; it is Christ who builds the church; it is Christ who preaches against the injustices and the sins of the world; it is Christ who by means of his church moves forward in history to make men and women happy and to proclaim his kingdom to them. Christ, then, through his word, his message, and his church, is the vision promised in this gospel passage. Because we live in this Christian era, we like Nathaniel are seeing things much more amazing than those miracles by which Christ divines people's thoughts and discovers the secrets of their hearts. There is something greater: it is Christ who speaks to us.

My dear sisters and brothers, this is the great honor that I feel, that through my words it is Christ who is speaking to you. Similarly, when the priest preaches to you here, it is Christ who is preaching through the priest and through the catechist and through the presence of the mothers and fathers who teach their children the right path, which is to know Christ and to make their First Communion, as these children are going to do now. All those who bring people to God and preach Christ in the world are truly angels. This is what the church asks of us at the present time: to make real that miracle of the apostolate that Christ proclaimed to one of his apostles who believed in him, «You are going to see very great things in your preaching and in your ministry» (John 1:50). We are seeing them now, sisters and brothers. We are seeing these wonders in many people who in these days are being converted to the church and in all those who are finding again great hope and great confidence in the church. We are seeing Christ come alive in this world; we are seeing the angels of God, the power of God, coming to this earth; and we see rising from this earth prayers of thanksgiving and petitions for pardon.

All this, sisters and brothers, is the message of Saint Michael. That is why the Bible presents the special ministry of Saint Michael the archangel as I described it at the beginning of this Mass: «I saw at the altar of God the archangel Michael who gathered together in a bowl of incense the prayers of all the faithful. Then these prayers burned like incense and ascended like perfume toward heaven» (Rev 8:3-4). Not one of the supplications, the prayers, the labors, the sufferings, or the hopes of all of you who

gather around the altar for the Mass will be lost. In that prophecy we see that the archangel carries our prayers up to the Son of God. Saint Michael the archangel is fulfilling his work as mediator along with Christ. Naturally, he is subordinate to Christ because there is only one Mediator between God and humankind: Christ Jesus. Saint Michael is a minister, an employee in this ministry of redemption.

My sisters and brothers, this is the meaning of my pilgrimage among you today. I am just another Christian who has come at this dangerous time for our church. I have come to make petition to the archangel Saint Michael, the archangel of hope who reveals to us this heavenly spectacle toward which we travel. I ask you, Saint Michael, to keep alive this hope in the hearts of all your people. Archangel in God's battle, defender of the church against the dragon who wants to devour her, defend us in battle with your power which is not your own but comes from God, as the Apocalypse says, «They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death» (Rev 12:11). The triumph of Saint Michael takes nothing away from Christ. On the contrary, it makes the victory of Christ the victory of all people. Together with Mary and through the ministry of the church, Christ shares this victory with all those who wish to be saved. Finally, may this archangel who gives us the presence of Christ because he shares his power with us make us more convinced than ever. May we believe ever more deeply in Christ the Savior. May we never slander or mistrust this church that was founded by Christ. May we feel proud to belong to this church that is protected by this powerful archangel Michael. May we be fully identified with this church that is the Body of Christ our Lord.

Now, my sisters and brothers, let us place on this humble but magnificent altar of Huizúcar the prayers of this patronal feast. Let us place here all our hopes, all our afflictions, all our anxieties, all our joys, everything that represents the presence of all of you here. How many things do we bear in our hearts! I bring my own problems also. Let us place them in the bowl of incense so that Saint Michael might [raise them up to God].¹

¹ The final words of this homily were not registered on the recording tape.