

The Church's Mission amid the National Crisis

*Fourth Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Romero,
Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1979*

To my beloved brothers and sisters, the priests, religious, and laity of the archdiocese of San Salvador, and to all other Salvadorans of good will: the peace of Jesus Christ, our divine Savior.

A PROVIDENTIAL FEAST

[1] To call ourselves the Republic of the Savior (*Republica de El Salvador*), and each year to celebrate, as our titular feast, the mystery of the transfiguration of our Lord is, for us Salvadorans, a true privilege. It was not only through the piety of Don Pedro de Alvarado that we were baptized with so majestic a title, as the servant of God, Pope Pius XII, reminded us in his outstanding address to our Eucharistic Congress of 1942. It was the providence of God that baptized us, the providence that gives each people its own name, its own place, and its own mission.

To hear each August 6 the voice of the Father in our church's liturgy proclaiming that our patron is none other than *My Son, the beloved*, and that our duty is *to listen to him*, constitute our most precious historical and religious legacy, and the most effective motivation for our hopes as Christians in El Salvador.

That is why I feel it one of my most important pastoral duties to make real here and now, for the archdiocese that the Lord has given into my charge, this legacy, and to revitalize that motivation in line with the new circumstances in which, each August 6, we find ourselves. In these new circumstances there is one constant: the challenge, made in love, of Christ's transfiguration, which should lead to the transfiguration of our people. This is the traditional challenge of the divine Savior to our homeland and to the church. It is unchangeable --- as unchangeable as the truth and revelation of God. It ought to enlighten the changing realities of our history. We must learn to express it in the language spoken by persons of today, as their new needs and their new hopes demand it.

My Three Earlier Pastoral Letters

[2] My first two pastoral letters, in 1977, were inspired by the new situation of the archdiocese of San Salvador. I wrote the first when I replaced the distinguished Archbishop Luis Chávez y González, and it was my letter of introduction. It was a profession of faith, of confidence in the Spirit of the Lord who builds up and encourages, who gives unity and progress to the church even when the human beings who are its members and who direct it change. Under the title *The Easter Church*, I wanted to dwell on the circumstances, both liturgical and actual, of lent, Passiontide, and Easter that marked that *moment of replacement*. In *The Church, the Body of Christ in History* I tried to deepen that same idea of the church and of its service to the world as

a prolongation of the mission of Christ. I wrote it for August 6, 1977. I recalled the history --- intense, tragic, but also paschal --- of my first six months in this beloved see.

And once again for August 6, Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas of Santiago de Maria and I last year wrote the pastoral letter *The Church and Popular Political Organizations*. We had together made an *ad limina* visit to the unforgettable Pope Paul VI. Our contact with that outstanding pontiff, who so well understood the modern world, had been illuminating, and it inspired us to give a response in faith to the highly unusual political anxieties of our people.

I bless the Lord for the good that that letter brought about. And it goes on bringing it about, for some of our Christian communities have taken it as an outline for reflection. I bless God, too, for the generous, enthusiastic welcome that communities, institutions, and publications elsewhere on this continent and also in Europe have given it. Annexed to that third letter and published in a separate section there were three studies: *The National Situation in Which the Church Develops Its Mission*, *The Word of God and Human Misery*, and *The Most Recent Teaching of the Church*. I believe that they have fulfilled their purpose by enriching your reflection on the letter.

So I ask you now, keep the three previous letters in mind when studying this one. I will not repeat myself here, but I will take for granted many concepts that have been examined in the earlier ones.

The Reasons for This Fourth Pastoral Letter

[3] On this new celebration of the transfiguration of our Lord, the light of this feast day illumines the new situation in which the country and the archdiocese find themselves. It is right to think of our life in that light.

In El Salvador new kinds of sufferings and outrages have driven our national life along the road of violence, revenge, and resentment. As Puebla describes them, these are the *anxieties and frustrations which have been caused by sin, which has very broad personal and social dimensions*. But, thanks be to God, we also feel that there are in our nation those *hopes and expectations of our people [that] arise from their deeply religious sense and their richness as human beings* (Puebla, 73)

[4] For its part the church has this year lived through new situations that have made it better able, in accordance with its own nature, to identify with the people in its *anxieties and frustrations, hopes and expectations*.

Outstanding among these new events was the Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, which took place at Puebla, Mexico, at the beginning of the year. Under the overall theme of *evangelization at present and in the future of Latin America*, that new *Pentecost* of our continent brought together the rich heritage of our history and urged the church onward into the century to come. At Puebla we were able to call upon *the unique inheritance left to the church by Popes John XXIII and Paul VI*, as his holiness Pope John Paul II called it in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, when he was discoursing on the new era of *John Paul*. Like

the one at Medellin ten years before, the assembly at Puebla was a new step forward for the church on our continent. It was an effort to follow the policy for renewal that Vatican Council II spelled out, and which those two immortal pontiffs of our time brought to a happy conclusion.

In Memory of Paul VI and John Paul II

[5] It is fitting to recall here again, as I did last year, *the eloquent coincidence of Paul VI's death and our own titular feast of the transfiguration*. Since his holy death on August 6 last year, how many signs during the pontificates of his successors have drawn attention to the evangelical grandeur of the church! The very tomb of Paul VI, which I visited this year with devout admiration and filial affection and gratitude, highlights a new style of simplicity and humility in the service of the church. I recalled there beside the tomb the warmth of his two hands grasping mine scarcely a year ago, as he told me of his concern and love for our homeland. He recommended that I stand with my people in their demand for justice, so that they might not turn aside into paths of hatred and violence.

And in Rome I likewise received from his holiness John Paul II both understanding and guidance for my difficult pastoral labor, as well as a ratification of my hierarchical communion with him and of my commitment to the people God has entrusted to me. The new pope's attitude, and what he said, pointed to Christ as the only force for complete liberation, for in his name is demanded the highest respect for the dignity and for the freedom of men and women.

Commitment to Puebla and to my Archdiocese

[6] From this bountiful source of the papal magisterium, of the council, and of the Latin American bishops has sprung forth *the spirit of Puebla*.

This pastoral letter is intended to be a solemn witness of my acceptance of, and personal commitment to, that spirit. At the same time it will be a call --- an urgent call, as the pope wished --- to all priests, religious communities, and laity *that in a short time all your ecclesial communities will be informed and suffused with the spirit of Puebla and the guidelines of this historic conference* (Letter of Approval).

Archdiocesan Survey

[7] But *the holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office ... under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority (Lumen Gentium, #12)*. And Paul VI of happy memory counseled us *with the help of the Holy Spirit ... in dialogue with other Christians and all men and women of good will, to discern the options and commitments that are called for in order to bring about the social, political, and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed* (Octogesima Adveniens, #4)

Taking account of the charism of dialogue and consultation, I wanted to prepare for this pastoral letter by undertaking a survey of my beloved priests and of the basic ecclesial communities of the archdiocese. I have been struck yet again by the maturity of the reflection,

by the evangelical spirit, by the pastoral creativity, by the social and political sensibility expressed in the large number of replies. I have read them with great care.

Notwithstanding their occasional inaccuracies or doctrinal and pastoral impetuosity, they have served to stimulate that charism of teaching and of discernment with which the Lord has entrusted me. All the disquiet, all the suggestions made, have been taken into account. In thanking you very cordially, I want to repeat my invitation to continue this dialogue and reflection in the way that I began it a year ago when, fully conscious of my limitations, I made *a call to the whole people of God to reflect on these matters in their local churches, with their pastors, and with the universal church, in the light of the gospel and in fidelity to the true identity of the church.*

[8] To sum up, then, this pastoral letter is meant to be, as the title suggests, a formal consignment to the archdiocesan church of the Final Document of Puebla. And it is also an attempt, in the light of the theological and pastoral teaching contained in that document, to face up to the disquiet expressed by our local church in the present situation in our country. Backed by the universal magisterium of the Church and by the magisterium of the Church on this continent, I believe it possible to give expression to the views of the church of this archdiocese. At a time when it is a serious obligation in conscience on the part of every Salvadoran to contribute ideas and guidelines from within his or her special competence, the views of the church are its specific response, and contribution, to the country in its hour of crisis.

[9] I shall develop my thinking in four parts: (1) the national crisis seen in the light of Puebla; (2) the church's contribution to the liberation of our people; (3) light on some concrete problems; (4) Puebla's pastoral approach applied to the archdiocese.

PART ONE: THE NATIONAL CRISIS IN THE LIGHT OF PUEBLA

Pastoral Criteria

[10] *Pastoral Overview of the Reality that is Latin America* is the title of the first part of the Puebla Final Document. From the very beginning, therefore, one is made to understand what are the criteria it uses to analyze the situation of the world that the church is to evangelize. Pastoral Criteria have also guided the first point in our survey of the archdiocese: the country's present crisis and prospects for the future.

It is never to be forgotten that the church's mission is in the realm of religion. It is not in the political, social, or economic realms. But nor is it to be forgotten that *out of this religious mission itself came a function, a light, and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to divine law (Gaudium et Spes, #42).*

With the Backing of Puebla

[11] Many would have liked Puebla to speak out more concretely on certain particular situations in Latin American countries. But in its analysis of, and evangelical judgment on, the

situation in Latin America, there is enough to be found to allow each country or each pastor to draw material relevant to their own situations, and hence to speak with the collective voice of all the continent's pastors.

In this pastoral letter, therefore, I want to back up the advice given by the archdiocese about the crisis in this country with the judgments approved at Puebla for the whole of Latin America.

Limits of This Analysis

[12] It is not my intention to undertake an exhaustive analysis of the economic, political, and social structures of El Salvador. A brief survey was offered last year as a leaflet appended to my third pastoral letter. Nor am I trying to offer a complete account of what has happened in this country --- the events that have so much preoccupied us this year. I have been required, in my service to the word of God, to be faithful to the truth and to justice when I was faced with these events in the course of an event-filled year of our history. It has also been a great satisfaction to me to have had the opportunity to offer a pastoral service by means of the Legal Aid Bureau and the Secretariat for the Means of Social Communication of the Archdiocese in the difficult ups and downs of our communities and families, and of individuals.

One more observation. Even during the crisis in our country there are many positive signs, and it would be wrong not to recognize that fact. They give us solid ground for coming to see that we Salvadorans are capable, by using our intelligence, of finding a peace based on justice. It is not necessary to pay the high price of violence and of blood spilt for the liberation of our people. I give these hopeful signs due credit. They have my admiration. I am encouraged by them. But today it is not my intention to dwell upon them.

Here I am going to emphasize only the negative aspects of our country's crisis which have been pointed out and remarked upon by our communities, because it is these that require our attention. To them I will apply the evangelical judgment that Puebla formulated for such situations.

At the Root of Social Injustice

[13] What Puebla asserted about social injustice throughout the continent is true of El Salvador. It has here a very tragic aspect, and it makes urgent Christian demands: there are today more people than ever living under conditions of great injustice. That *muted cry* of wretchedness that Medellin heard ten years ago, Puebla now describes as *loud and clear, increasing in volume and intensity, and at times full of menace* (Puebla, #89). It calls the characteristics that delineate this situation of injustice *the most devastating and humiliating kind of scourge* (Puebla, #29). They are infant mortality, the housing shortage, health problems, starvation wages, unemployment, malnutrition, no job security, and so on:

This situation of pervasive extreme poverty takes on very concrete faces in real life. In these faces we ought to recognize the suffering features of Christ the Lord, who questions and challenges us. They include:

---the faces of young children, struck down by poverty before they are born, their chance for self-development blocked by irreparable mental and physical deficiencies; and of the vagrant children in our cities who are so often exploited, products of poverty and the moral disorganization of the family;

---the faces of young people, who are disoriented because they cannot find their place in society, and who are frustrated, particularly in marginal rural and urban areas, by the lack of opportunity to obtain training and work;

---the faces of the indigenous peoples, and frequently of the Afro-Americans as well; living marginalized lives in inhuman situations, they can be considered the poorest of the poor;

---the faces of the peasants; as a social group, they live as outcasts almost everywhere on our continent, deprived of land, caught in a situation of internal and external dependence, and subjected to systems of commercialization that exploit them;

---the faces of laborers, who frequently are ill-paid and who have difficulty in organizing themselves and defending their rights;

---the faces of the underemployed and the unemployed, who are dismissed because of the harsh exigencies of economic crises, and often because of development-models that subject workers and their families to cold economic calculations;

---the faces of marginalized and overcrowded urban dwellers, whose lack of material goods is matched by the ostentatious display of wealth by other segments of society;

---the faces of old people, who are growing more numerous every day, and who are frequently marginalized in a progress-oriented society that totally disregards people not engaged in production (Puebla, #31-39).

Deterioration of the Political Situation

[14] Together with Puebla we must also denounce the serious deterioration of a political situation that institutionalizes injustice. *The participation of citizens in the conduct of their own affairs and destiny* has declined (Puebla #46). Governments *look askance at the organizing efforts of laborers, peasants, and the common people; and they adopt repressive measures to prevent such organizing. But this type of control over, or limitation on, activity is not applied to employer organizations, which can exercise their full power to protect their interests* (Puebla #44).

The graph of violence presented by the Legal Aid Bureau is very striking (cf. *Orientación*, July 22, 1979). Simply from January to June of this year the number of those murdered by various sections of the security forces, the armed forces, and the paramilitary organizations rose to 406. The number of those arrested for political reasons was 307. The discrimination to which Puebla drew attention is borne out, and that makes the statistics even more scandalous. Not a single

victim comes from the landowning class, whereas those from among the *campesino* population abound.

Faced with this oppression and repression, there arises naturally what Medellín called the *explosive revolutions of despair* (Medellin Documents, *Peace*, #17, quoting Paul VI, homily, Bogota, August 23, 1968). To date, it has accounted for more than 95 victims in this country (*Orientación*, July 22, 1979).

The *spiral of violence* is racing toward hitherto unsuspected levels of cruelty. It is making increasingly problematic the likelihood of resolving the structural crisis peacefully. It has reached the stage where it seems we are engaged in a real civil war. It may be informal and intermittent, but it is nonetheless pitiless and without quarter. It tears apart normal, everyday life, and brings terror into every Salvadoran home.

A special section of the third part of this letter will be devoted to a consideration of the problem of violence.

The Government's Attitude

[15] The government shows itself quite incapable of arresting this country's escalating violence. One suspects, in fact, that it tolerates the bands of armed men who, because of their implacable persecution of opponents of the government, can be regarded as creatures of the government. This contradicts in practice the government's emphatic statements against any sort of violence; it seems to demonstrate, on the contrary, the repression of any political opposition and of any organization of social protest.

The state of siege, which was imposed on May 23 and lasted until July, served in no way at all to allay political murders. Facts and figures about the murdered and those who have disappeared reveal an environment of impunity that favors the proliferation and activities of right-wing gangs of assassins who have worsened the picture of violence in this country.

Puebla's judgment on all this is very eloquent. It denounces *countries ... where there is frequently no respect for such fundamental human rights. . . . [They] are in the position of permanently violating the dignity of the person* (Puebla, #41). The Latin American bishops mentioned by name these *abuses of power, which are typical of regimes based on force* (Puebla #42). They put themselves in solidarity with *the anxieties based on systematic or selective repression; it is accompanied by accusations, violations of privacy, improper pressures, tortures, and exiles. There are the anxieties produced in many families by the disappearance of their loved ones, about whom they cannot get any news. There is the total insecurity bound up with arrest and detention without judicial consent. There are the anxieties felt in the face of a system of justice that has been suborned or cowed* (Puebla, #42).

Faced with this worrisome situation, Puebla recalls, in the name of the supreme pontiffs, that *the Church, by virtue of an authentically evangelical commitment, must raise its voice to denounce and condemn these situations, particularly when the responsible officials or rulers call themselves Christians* (Puebla #42).

Economic and Ideological Bases

[16] Analysts of our economy point out that, if it is to function well, it needs a large and cheap labor force. Producers of coffee, sugar cane, and cotton, which go to make up the agricultural export trade, need unemployed, unorganized *campesinos*. They depend on them for an abundant and cheap labor force to harvest and export their crops.

On the other hand, the agricultural and cattle-raising sector of the economy is the one that pays the most taxes to the public treasury --- which is one of the reasons why it has the greatest influence upon the government.

And still today many industrial or transnational corporations base their ability to compete in international markets on what they call *low labor costs*, which in reality means starvation wages. All of this explains the firm opposition of important sectors of capital to initiatives, whether of the people or of the government, that, through trade union organizations, seek to improve the living conditions, or to raise the wages, of the working class. The ruling class, especially the rural elite, cannot allow unions to be organized among either rural or urban laborers so long as, from a capitalist point of view, they believe their economic interests are at risk. This viewpoint makes repression against popular organizations something necessary in order to maintain and increase profit levels, even though it is at the cost of the growing poverty of the working class.

And if we add to this the country's population explosion and its high cost of living, then the growing unrest among workers and the unemployed can be easily understood. Repression of late has been the only kind of answer to protest against *institutionalized violence*, and hence it feeds the spiral of violence.

The Puebla document backs up this analysis when it refers to the right to form trade unions:

In many places labor legislation is either applied arbitrarily or not taken into account at all. This is particularly true in countries where the government is based on the use of force. There they look askance at the organizing efforts of laborers, peasants, and the common people; and they adopt repressive measures to prevent such organizing. But this type of control over, or limitation on, activity is not applied to employer organizations, which can exercise their full power to protect their interests (Puebla #44).

[17] This is the right place to draw attention also to the ideology that underlies this unjust repression. I am speaking of the *ideology of national security*, which the Puebla document firmly denounces on many occasions. This new political theory and practice lies at the root of this situation of repression and of repressive violence against the most basic rights of the Salvadoran people. But because it is an *absolutization* or idolatry of power, I shall speak of it in the next part of this letter when I explain, as the church's specific contribution to the crisis in this country, its mission of unmasking idolatries and of denouncing false absolutes.

Moral Deterioration

[18] There is an eloquent coincidence between Puebla's thinking and the replies that our communities gave to the survey. Both singled out moral deterioration as the origin of our fearsome decline in social, political, and economic life.

Puebla says explicitly: *Recent years have seen a growing deterioration in the sociopolitical life of our countries. They are experiencing the heavy burden of economic and institutional crises, and clear symptoms of corruption and violence* (Puebla #507-508).

As particular causes and expressions of this scandalous moral deterioration in Latin America, Puebla mentions:

---individualistic materialism, the supreme value in the eyes of many of our contemporaries ... and collectivist materialism [which] subordinates the person to the State.

---Consumerism, with its unbridled ambition to 'have more,' [which] is suffocating modern human beings in an immanent reality that closes them off to the evangelical values of generosity and austerity...

---The deterioration of basic family values [which] is disintegrating family communion, eliminating shared and responsible participation by all the family members and making them an easy prey to divorce or abandonment. In some cultural groups the woman finds herself in a position of inferiority.

---The deterioration of public and private integrity. . . We also find frustration and hedonism leading people to such vices as gambling, drug addiction, alcoholism, and sexual licentiousness. . . .

---Information is manipulated by various authorities and groups. This is done particularly through advertising, which raises false expectations, creates fictitious needs, and often contradicts the basic values of our Latin American culture and the Gospel. The improper exercise of freedom in these media leads to an invasion of the privacy of persons, who generally are defenseless (Puebla #55-62).

[19] Our country is, sadly, no exception to these painful symptoms to be found throughout Latin America. Our survey produced an even more horrific inventory of infidelities to, and betrayals of, ethical and Christian values, and even of our political Constitution itself. For example:

In Public Administration

---The infidelity of the Supreme Court and of other courts of justice to their noble mission of fulfilling, and ensuring the fulfillment of, the constitution of a democratic country,

showing themselves, on the contrary, to be feeble instruments at the beck and call of a regime based on the use of force.

---As a result, the prostitution of justice and the destruction of the freedom and the dignity of men and women.

---The fact that so many fearful crimes go unpunished, a good number of them carried out either openly or, it is popularly reported, in civilian disguise by the security forces.

---Indifference to the anguish of so many families who seek liberty for, or, at least, news of, their loved ones who have disappeared into the power of civil authorities.

---The ineffectiveness of so many constitutional appeals for the right of habeas corpus, a tragic mockery of the guarantees of such an appeal.

---Silent connivance at so many breaches of the constitution or at other administrative maneuvers that promote the interests of privileged groups or individuals, despite the fact that these interests are harmful to the interests of the common good.

---Manipulation of the popular will in the democratic electoral process. • Discreditable propaganda for, and imposition of, anti-birth policies that are practically *castrating* our people and are undermining their reserves of morality.

In Private Life

[20] ---Maneuvers by which many employers repress the rights of their workers, or buy the impartiality of trade union leaders.

---Unjust handling of some strikes or of the rightful demands of trade unions or workers.

---The low, even nonexistent, output by some employees and workers neglectful of their duties; or the demand for further payments ("tips" or "bribes") for services, or for work that has already been paid for in wages.

---Taking advantage of administrative positions either for one's own benefit or for the benefit of one's relatives and friends.

---The salting away, or misuse, of public or private funds by means of fictitious reports and expenses, and other pretexts.

---Indecent bargaining with the dignity of another by a variety of means, such as demanding sexual favors in return for providing work, or by setting up lucrative centers for vice, such as cafés, *motels*, *guest houses*, and every kind of disguised brothels for the human slave traffic in prostitution and illegal drug-taking.

---Manipulation of the means of social communication by way of pressure or by bribes to defame persons, or pervert the truth in other ways.

---Modern forms of blackmail, such as kidnappings, threats from real or imaginary secret organizations --- sometimes with the suspicion of official complicity.

[21] Our moral decline is self-evident. On every side we find that what our Lord called *the mystery of iniquity* has taken over. It is the church's pastoral duty not to cease in denouncing this reign of sin, and urgently to appeal to the personal responsibility of each of us, and to each social and family group, and especially to individuals or groups in authority who, directly or indirectly, benefit from this state of affairs. For it is these last who have in their hands the most effective means of remedying this situation.

The Crisis within the Church

[22] In my earlier letters I drew attention to many of the positive things one might say about the church. It is therefore unnecessary to insist upon them here, but rather to encourage perseverance and strenuous efforts for improvement. Furthermore the fourth part of this letter will offer pastoral approaches for us to go on building up our archdiocese in line with the suggestions and the ideals of Vatican II and of the Medellin and Puebla assemblies of the Latin American Episcopal Council. It is, however, necessary to recall today --- also in the light of Puebla --- the denunciations and criticism that draw attention to our own failings as the human components of the church. For at a time of national crisis those of us who feel it our duty to denounce the sin that lies at the root of the crisis ought also to be ready to be criticized so as to bring about our own conversion and to build up a church that can be, for our own people, what Vatican II defines as *the national sacrament of salvation (Lumen Gentium, #48)*.

The same council guides us in this examination of our consciences when it states frankly, and with all humility, that *the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal (Lumen Gentium, #8)*.

According to the reflection undertaken in our communities, there are three main failings within the church that call for conversion. They are: disunity; failure of renewal and adaptation; disregard for the criteria laid down in the gospel.

Disunity

[23] The most obvious of the sins to which our survey drew attention is the disunity within a church that ought to have unity as a mark of its authenticity. Our communities pointed out that when this disunity affects the hierarchy itself and the clergy there results even greater confusion among the people of God. This is indeed true, and faced with this evidence one can only be repentant, reflect, and exhort.

What is needed is a confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness, together with the sincere intention to seek out, with each other's help, ways toward unity, and the supernatural courage to follow them.

The way to explain this sad phenomenon of disunity, and to establish a basis for conversion to unity, is to consider that the lack of unity within the church is nothing else than an echo of the division that exists all about it --- the division within the society in which it lives and works. It is the human element in the church. In today's society there is a polarization of political forces from the extreme right to the extreme left. Groups and organizations either support one another, or reject one another totally.

Church members, not excluding the hierarchy, are forced to operate in this environment. They run the risk of siding with one or other polarization if they fail to keep in mind their vocation, and their evangelical mission, defined by Puebla as a *preferential option for the poor*.

[24] This preference for the poor, which the gospel imposes upon Christians, neither polarizes nor divides. It is a force for unity because it does *not propose to exclude the other representatives of the social corpus in which we live ... we invite all, regardless of class, to accept and take up the cause of the poor as if they were accepting and taking up their own cause, the cause of Christ himself: 'I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me'* (Puebla, Message to the Peoples of Latin America, #3)

This preferential option for the poor, understood in the sense of the gospel, can alone be the key to this crisis of our unity. The Puebla document here draws attention to the cause of our internal divisions: *Not all of us in the Latin American Church have committed ourselves sufficiently to the poor. We are not always concerned about them, or in solidarity with them. Service to them really calls for constant conversion and purification among all Christians. That must be done if we are to achieve fuller identification each day with the poor Christ and our own poor* (Puebla #1140)

Out of this reflection on our own sin of disunity flows the exhortation that we should make the effort to convert ourselves to that common ideal. But an interior conversion would be pointless were there not at the same time, as Puebla teaches, *a radical conversion to justice and love ... transforming from within those structures of a pluralistic society that respect and promote the dignity of the human person, and that provide persons with the possibility of achieving their supreme vocation: communion with God and with each other* (Puebla #1206).

[25] Inasmuch as we have not yet achieved this beautiful unity among all within the church, it is only proper to exhort everyone to maintain a calm Christian maturity so that we are not scandalized by the sin within the church, and so that all will do what they can in their Christian lives even though others do not do likewise. As far as our archdiocese is concerned, we are ready to continue structuring our pastoral life along the lines Puebla put forward as the authentic way to this unity: the preferential option for the poor. This is the demand the gospel makes upon us, and unity is authentic only when it is built up on the basis of the gospel. This will also be the best contribution the archdiocese can offer to the changes needed in the country.

Failure to Renew and Adapt

[26] Both at Medellin and at Puebla the bishops of Latin America tried to interpret for our continent the concern the council expressed about the age in which we live: to bring the church up to date, and to learn today's language in order to pass its message on. Even more, Puebla's theme looks towards the future: *evangelization at present and in the future of Latin America*. It frankly states:

Until recently our continent had not been touched or swallowed up by the dizzying flood of cultural, social, economic, political, and technological changes in the modern age. At that time the weight of tradition helped the communication of the Gospel. What was taught from the pulpit was zealously welcomed in the home and the school; and it was safeguarded and sustained by the social pressure of the surrounding milieu. Today nothing like that happens. The faith proposed by the Church is accepted or rejected with much more freedom and with a notably critical-minded sense. Even the peasants, who previously were isolated from contact with civilization to a large extent, are now acquiring this same critical sense. This is due to the ready contact with the present-day world that is afforded them ... it is also due to the consciousness-raising efforts of pastoral agents (Puebla #76-77).

With an identical point of view and conviction, several communities in the archdiocese lament the difficult, anti-apostolic attitude displayed by some priests, religious communities, and other pastoral workers who reject the efforts toward renewal and adaptation that our pastoral strategy is promoting in obedience to the guidelines mentioned above.

Several of the answers to the survey analyze the high levels of unrest and agitation that move our people in the direction of social and political changes in the country. *The church*, to quote one of them verbatim, *has to interpret for, and to accompany, this people as it struggles for freedom; if not, in the course of time it will be marginalized. With or without the church the changes will take place, but by its very nature its duty is to be present in the midst of these changes, which are delineating the kingdom of God.*

[27] This criticism of the internal workings of the church draws the attention of pastoral workers to another serious motive for reflection and conversion. It urges upon all of us who work in the apostolate, and especially upon priests and religious communities who, by their vocation, profession, and mission, most intimately belong to the life and mission of the church, to make determined efforts toward our own improvement so that we can always be abreast of the modern church. It is in this spirit, most recently expressed at Puebla, that we are trying to conduct the apostolate in our own archdiocese. The inexplicable opposition or lack of comprehension --- an object of criticism --- results, in our present circumstances, in a regrettable lack of that *communion and involvement* that the spirit of Puebla so much insists upon.

Adulteration of Gospel Criteria

[28] To lose sight of or to alter Christian principles constitutes another sin or danger within the church. When making a noble effort to renew or to adapt our church for a membership now

highly politicized, one can fall into the sin that is at the opposite extreme from the one we have just pointed out --- namely, the political or ideological adulteration of the faith and of Christian criteria. Those Christians who, motivated by the faith, take up concrete political options are in particular danger of this sin.

[29] I am not going to develop further this topic, which is of enormous interest for Christian communities, because I have already treated it sufficiently in my third pastoral letter. That letter focused precisely upon the relationship between the church and popular organizations. I recommend that those guidelines be kept well in mind. Far from losing their pertinence, they are daily more necessary for a Christian in El Salvador.

For the rest, there will be two places in this fourth pastoral letter where guidelines will be offered on this subject: when treating, in part three, the danger of *absolutizing* an organization and, in part four, on the need for an *apostolate of following*, to accompany Christians in their political options --- without the church thereby losing its identity and Christians their faith.

**PART TWO:
THE CHURCH'S CONTRIBUTION
TO THE PROCESS OF LIBERATING OUR PEOPLE**

[30] If the Puebla document, which is the basis of our reflection, supports the pastoral focus upon the situation here in El Salvador, it invites us also to search out, in a sincere spirit of service to the nations of Latin America, the specific contribution our local church can offer El Salvador at this time of crisis. Here I am also taking into account the valuable suggestions made by our Christian communities.

What, then, is the contribution which, in the spirit of Puebla, the archdiocese can offer to the process of liberating our people? I think it can be understood under the following headings. I shall develop them in the course of this part two: the Church's own identity; integral evangelization; a solid doctrinal orientation; denunciation of error and sin, with a view to conversion; unmasking the idolatries of society; promoting integral liberation; pressing for far-reaching structural changes; sharing life and the gospel with both the ordinary people and the ruling class.

The Church's Own Identity

[31] This is the prime contribution our church ought to make to the life of this country: to be itself. This is what I call its own identity.

I have said, over and over again, that the whole effort of the apostolate in this archdiocese ought to be turned to this before all else, to building up our church. Despite all the clashes and all the opposition, the church is not looking for opposition. It does not want to clash with anybody. It wants only to build up toward the great affirmation of God and his kingdom. It will clash only with those who oppose God and his kingdom.

The church wants to offer no other contribution than that of the gospel. It has no purely political contribution to make, nor any merely human skill to offer. Quite truthfully, the church is interested only in offering the country the light of the gospel for the full salvation and betterment of men and women, a salvation that also involves the structures within which Salvadorans live, so that, rather than get in their way, the structures can help them live out their lives as children of God.

The church is well aware that anything it can contribute to the process of liberation in this country will have originality and effectiveness only when the church is truly identified as church --- that is to say, only when it is most clearly that which Christ wants it to be at this particular hour of the nation's history.

It is in this sense that one has to understand the ceaseless exhortation of John Paul II: the church has no need to politicize itself in order to make its saving contribution to the world. It is also in this sense that I believe one ought to interpret certain fears expressed at Puebla, when there was talk of misinterpretations of Medellin, and concepts were pointed to that could make a theology of liberation ambiguous.

[32] Because it is not turning itself into a political power, and because it is not doing anything else that might be alien to its nature and to its mission, the church as church can contribute something fundamental to the betterment of this country. As Paul VI warned, should the liberation the church is preaching and promoting be reduced to the dimensions of a simply temporal project ... to a man-centered goal . . . its activity . . . would become initiatives of the political or social order. But if this were so, the Church would lose its fundamental meaning. Its message of liberation would no longer have any originality and would easily be open to monopolization and manipulation by ideological systems and political parties. It would have no more authority to proclaim freedom as in the name of God (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #32).

[33] But neither can we call wrong --- a sin of the church against its own identity --- the effort it makes to come close to the real problems that affect human beings and that drive it to commit itself to them. The contrary would be sinful: to be so concerned with its own identity that this preoccupation gets in the way of its closeness to the world. As Pope John Paul II has insisted, men and women are the pathways on which the church seeks to fulfill its mission.

The church's mission is transcendent. As Vatican II teaches, *it is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. It is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person (Gaudium et Spes, #76)*. But this is not a transcendence that loses hold of what is human. It is by transcending the human being from within that the church finds, and brings into being, the kingdom of God that Jesus promised, and which he continues to proclaim by means of the church's work.

Integral Evangelization

[34] In order to safeguard its own identity, the church offers first and foremost, as its specific service to the world, its work of evangelization. That is why we pastors, when we were

gathered together at Puebla, said to Latin America that we would concentrate our deliberations on *evangelization at present and in the future of Latin America*.

At the root of our reflection there was always that Magna Carta of modern evangelization, the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of his holiness Pope Paul VI, which was, in its turn, the fruit of the 1974 world synod of bishops. *We want to confirm*, said the fathers at that synod, *once again, that the task of evangelizing all men and women constitutes the essential mission of the church*.

And this is the case because at the root of evangelization is the person and the mission of Jesus himself. He himself is *the gospel of God* and the *first and greatest preacher of the gospel*. From him sprang the church evangelized, which in turn became the church evangelizing when he sent it out, identifying himself with it so that it might carry his salvation to all peoples (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #13). *Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, its deepest identity. It exists in order to evangelize, that is to say in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of his death and glorious Resurrection (Evangelii Nuntiandi, #14)*.

Complex Mission

[35] Evangelization, then, taken in its full sense, is the whole of the divine mission of Jesus and his church. Given the complexity of this mission, there is a danger of reducing it simply to some elements *of preaching, of catechesis, of conferring baptism and the other sacraments*. But *any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity, and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it (Evangelii Nuntiandi, #17)*.

In evangelization, therefore, there is *the essential content, the living substance, which cannot be modified or ignored without seriously diluting the nature of evangelization itself*. But *there are certainly many secondary elements in evangelization, and their presentation depends greatly on changing circumstances (Evangelii Nuntiandi, #25)*.

In keeping with that rich modern theology of evangelization, and adapting it to our continent, we bishops gathered at Puebla proclaimed that, *evangelized by the Lord in his Spirit, we are sent out to bring this Good News to all our brothers and sisters, especially to the poor and the forgotten. This evangelizing task leads us to complete conversion and communion with Christ in the Church. It will impregnate our culture. It will incite us to the authentic improvement of our communities. And it will make us a critical-minded, guiding presence in the face of the ideologies and policies that condition the fate of our nations (Puebla #164)*.

Liberating Evangelization

[36] What, then, will be the evangelization our archdiocese ought to offer this country so that, through it, the full force for liberation with which our divine Redeemer has endowed it may run its course? As has been said, to limit it to just a few elements would be to betray this mission of

our church at a time when its contribution ought to open up a unique hope for the entirety of our people.

Generally speaking, in our circumstances this danger of reductionism as far as evangelization is concerned can take two forms. Either it can stress only the transcendent elements of spirituality and human destiny, or it can go to the other extreme, selecting only those immanent elements of a kingdom of God that ought to be already beginning on this earth.

The evangelization our archdiocese has to offer, as the church's specific contribution to our homeland in its crisis, must not fall victim to either of those two forms of reductionism. It ought to be inspired by the balanced guidelines laid down this century by Vatican II, so clearly presented and lived out by our modern popes, and adapted to our continent by the two great meetings of bishops at Medellin and Puebla.

[37] Seen in that light, the suggestions put forward by our Christian communities have stressed certain aspects of evangelization of which our people stand in most need. With the cooperation of all, this archdiocese is ready to offer its help, with great pastoral love, and despite persecution and misunderstanding. These aspects of evangelization are treated in the remaining six major subsections of part two of this pastoral letter.

A Sound Doctrinal Orientation

[38] The first element in evangelization is its content: *We now wish to shed the light of the truth that makes us free (John 8:32) on our compelling pastoral concern. It is not a truth that we possess as something of our own. It comes from God (Puebla #165).*

And so at Puebla we laid down the criteria that are to guide us as pastors and teachers of the church when we are addressing the peoples of Latin America. The content of evangelization is the truth that God has revealed, and that we human beings accept through faith. How necessary this *pillar of truth* is in an atmosphere of lies and insincerity, where the truth is itself enslaved to the interests of wealth and of power. *But the word of God is not in chains*, and so long as we believe in that truth we are free.

To teach the truths of the gospel, and by means of them to cast light on our own situation so as to bring it closer to God's truth and not to human sophistries, is the most important service that the church can render to this country. Hence it is important that not only our pastoral ministers but all who have influence upon society and upon the family should know this truth well, and spread its light about them.

[39] The Truth about Christ, about the Church, and about Humankind Applying to Latin America the wide content of evangelization, his holiness John Paul II drew attention to the threefold doctrinal synthesis incorporated in the Puebla document. These are the three *central truths of evangelization*: the truth about Christ, about the church, and about humankind.

Christ, our hope, is in our midst as the Father's envoy, animating the Church with his Spirit and offering his word and his life to people today in order to lead them to full and complete liberation.

The Church, a mystery of communion, the People of God in the service of human beings, continues to be evangelized through the ages and to bring the Good News to all.

For the Church, Mary is a cause for joy, and a source of inspiration because she is the star of evangelization and the Mother of the Latin American peoples.

Human beings, by virtue of their dignity as the image of God, merit a commitment from us in favor of their liberation and their total fulfillment in Christ Jesus. Only in Christ is their more intimate reality fully known. Hence we, being pastors, speak to human beings and proclaim to them the joyful news that humanity has been assumed and exalted by the very Son of God. For he chose to share with human beings the joys, labors, and sufferings of this life and the heritage of eternal life (Puebla #166-169).

Social Teaching

[40] The pope also reminded us at Puebla of the importance that the study of the church's social teaching ought to have for us today: *When injustices increase and the gap between rich and poor widens distressingly, then the social doctrine of the Church --- in a form that is creative and open to the broad areas of the Church's presence --- should be a valuable tool for formation and action. He counseled us to place responsible confidence in this social doctrine, even though some people try to sow doubts and lack of confidence in it; to study it seriously; to try to apply it; to teach it and be loyal to it; in children of the Church, all this guarantees the authenticity of their involvement in delicate and demanding social tasks, and of their efforts on behalf of the liberation or advancement of their fellow human beings (Opening Address, III, #7).*

Denunciation of Error and of Sin

[41] As a logical consequence of the proclamation of truth, love, and the holiness of the kingdom of God, evangelization has the mission of denouncing every lie, every injustice, every sin that destroys God's plan. The purpose of this denunciation is not negative. It has a prophetic character. It seeks the conversion of those who commit the sin. *God does not want the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live.* The church itself cannot stand aside from this need for denunciation and conversion. We preach it and we want it for ourselves as church, in order to demand it of society. *For the faith denounces everything that is opposed to the construction of the Kingdom. This entails necessary and sometimes painful breaks (Puebla #358) and persecution (Puebla #1138).*

John Paul II has again reminded us of this inescapable mission of the church:

This service of truth as a participation in the prophetic service of Christ is an obligation upon the church. It finds itself fulfilling it in very diverse historical contexts. It is necessary

that injustice be given its correct designation: the exploitation of some human beings by others, the exploitation of a people by the state, by institutions, by the structure of economic systems, or of regimes that sometimes operate callously. It is necessary to give the correct name to every social injustice, to every act of discrimination or violence inflicted on human beings, whether on persons themselves, or their spirit, or their consciences, or their convictions (Osservatore Romano, February 22, 1979).

Unmasking the Idolatries of Our Society

[42] Adhering to the demands of the same prophetic denunciation and conversion, the church reminds us that making any created thing into an absolute is an offense against the one Absolute and Creator, because it erects and serves an idol, which it attempts to put in the place of God himself.

As well as offending God, every absolutization disorients, and ultimately destroys, human beings. It is the vocation of human beings to raise themselves to the dignity of the children of God and to participate in God's divine life. This transcendence of human beings is not an escape from problems here on earth, still less is it an opium that distracts them from their obligations in history. On the contrary, by virtue of this transcendent destiny people have the capacity to always remain critical vis-a-vis the events of history. It gives them a powerful inspiration to reach out to ever higher goals. Social forces should hearken to the saving voice of Christ and of true Christians, cease their questioning, and open themselves to the values of the one and only Absolute. When a human value is turned into an absolute and endowed, whether in theory or in practice, with a divine character, human beings are deprived of their highest calling and inspiration. The spirit of the people is pushed in the direction of a real idolatry, which will only deform and repress it.

Among the evils that afflict El Salvador, I find that there are three idolatries, or absolutes, that the church ought to unmask in the name of the one God and Lord.

The Absolutization of Wealth and Private Property

[43] The absolutization of wealth holds out to persons the ideal of *having more* and to that extent reduces interest in *being more*, whereas the latter should be the ideal for true progress, both for the people as such and for every individual. The absolute desire of *having more* encourages the selfishness that destroys communal bonds among the children of God. It does so because the idolatry of riches prevents the majority from sharing the goods that the Creator has made for all, and in the all-possessing minority it produces an exaggerated pleasure in these goods.

[44] As for the absolutization of private property, John Paul II, speaking at Puebla, gave voice to the contrary opinion of the traditional and of the modern teaching of the church. For *this voice of the Church, echoing the voice of human conscience, . . . deserves and needs to be heard in our own day as well, when the growing affluence of a few . . . parallels the growing poverty of the masses.... The Church's teaching [is] that there is a social mortgage on all*

private property.... This Christian, evangelical principle will lead to a more just and equitable distribution of goods (Opening Address, III, 4).

[45] Absolutizing wealth and private property brings about the absolutizing of political, social, and economic power, without which it is impossible for the rich to preserve their privileges, even at the cost of their own human dignity. In our country this idolatry is at the root of structural and repressive violence. In the final analysis, it is the cause of a great part of our economic, social, and political underdevelopment.

This is the capitalism condemned by the church at Puebla, following the teaching of recent popes and of Medellin. Whoever reads these documents would say that they are describing a situation in our country that only selfishness, ignorance, or servility could defend.

The Absolutization of National Security

[46] I have already drawn attention in the first part of this letter to the doctrine or ideology of national security as the ideological foundation for repression. Puebla frequently denounced this new form of idolatry, which has already been installed in many Latin American countries. In this country it has its own particular way of working, but substantially it is identical with that described at Puebla: *In many instances the ideologies of National Security have helped to intensify the totalitarian or authoritarian character of governments based on the use of force, leading to the abuse of power and the violation of human rights. In some instances they presume to justify their positions with a subjective profession of Christian faith* (Puebla #49; see also #314, 547, 549, 1262).

By virtue of this ideology, the individual is placed at the total service of the state. His or her political participation is suppressed, and this leads to an unequal participation in the results of development. Peoples are put into the hands of military elites, and are subjected to policies that oppress and repress all who oppose them, in the name of what is alleged to be total war. The armed forces are put in charge of social and economic structures under the pretext of the interests of national security. Everyone not at one with the state is declared a national enemy, and the requirements of national security are used to justify *assassinations, disappearances, arbitrary imprisonment, acts of terrorism, kidnappings, acts of torture ... [all] indicate a complete lack of respect for the dignity of the human person* (Puebla #1262).

[47] The interests and advantages of the few are thus turned into an absolute. This absolutization becomes a mystique --- as if the national security regime, which attempts to give itself a good public image by *a subjective profession of Christian faith* (Puebla #49), were the only, or the best, *defender of the Christian civilization of the West* (Puebla #547). This perverts the noble function of the armed forces. Instead of serving true national interests, they become the guardians of the interests of the oligarchy, thus furthering their own ideological and economic corruption. Something similar is happening to the security forces. They, instead of caring for civil order, have turned themselves basically into an organization for repressing political dissidents. And finally, the high command unconstitutionally changes the political procedures that ought to decide democratically the country's course.

[48] The judgment merited by the ideology of national security has, for Christians, been clearly expressed at Puebla: it is *not compatible with the Christian vision of the human being as responsible for carrying out a temporal project, and to its vision of the State as the administrator of the common good* (Puebla #549).

The omnipotence of these national security regimes, the total disrespect they display towards individuals and their rights, the total lack of ethical consideration shown in the means that are used to achieve their ends, turn national security into an idol, which, like the god Molech, demands the daily sacrifice of many victims in its name.

The legitimate security that the state ought to seek for its members is cruelly perverted, for in the name of national security *the insecurity of the individual becomes institutionalized* (Puebla #314).

The Absolutization of Organizations

[49] There is a third absolute, typical of the present situation in this country. I am speaking of the absolutization of an organization. This is a trap into which many members of popular organizations fall. They make their own organization the supreme value, and subordinate everything else to it.

This organizational absolutization differs from the other two just mentioned. They are fundamentally evil, as has been indicated. The absolutization of an organization, on the other hand, has a good side to it because it arises from among the people, as it puts to use its right of forming organizations for the purpose, at least in theory, of attaining the good of that same people. But in practice they become so fanatical that the interests of the people are no longer their chief concern, but the interests of the group or organization. Here are some of the evils that flow from this new idolatry:

---Their activities become too political, as if the political dimension were the only, or even the main, element in the lives of *campesinos*, workers, teachers, students, and other members who go to make them up.

---They try to subordinate the specific mission of trade union, social, and religious organizations to their own political objectives. They try to manipulate the church, its worship, its magisterium, its teaching mission, and so on, so that they serve the political and strategic aims of a political organization.

---The leaders of an organization, by making an absolute out of the political problem of achieving power, can in practice lose interest in other real problems, and can misunderstand the ideological criteria that underlie them, despite the fact that these are the very problems and criteria that concern the majority of the people --- for example, some of their more immediate socio-economic needs, or the Christian principles of the members of the organizations. Another example would be the choice of a strategy that could needlessly offend religious sensitivities (taking over churches, for example).

---They can become so highly sectarian that their partisanship gets in the way of establishing dialogue or alliances with another type of organization also fighting for justice.

---The most serious kind of this fanaticism is that which changes what might be a force for the good of the people into an obstacle in the way of achieving that same good, and into an obstacle to profound change.

[50] I put forward a more detailed account of the evangelical service the church could offer to popular organizations in my third pastoral letter. They included defense of the right to organize, support for what was just in their demands, support of Christians who joined them, and denunciation of their possible mistakes and injustices, such as the mistake of turning them into absolutes, as I have just been saying. And above all, the church turns its entire effort for the liberation of the people toward the sole absolute, that definitive liberation toward which all strivings for justice ought to converge: the liberation in Christ, which sets sin aside and, while promoting liberation on earth, does not lose sight of the people's final vocation to the one and only Absolute.

An organization runs the risk of turning itself into an absolute and of becoming an idol when atheistic ideologies, or the limited interests of the group, cause it to lose sight of those wide, transcendent perspectives, and lose hold of the ideal of the country's common good.

[51] In this context guidance has to be given about the possible presence, or infiltration, of Marxism in El Salvador's popular organizations. But I prefer to defer this topic until I discuss some special problems in the third part of this pastoral letter.

Promoting Integral Human Liberation

[52] Another contribution that our archdiocese, in the name of evangelization, is offering to this country is its teaching on human nature and the drive for integral human advancement. Pope Paul VI explicitly taught that there is an inseparable link between evangelization and human advancement (cf., *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #31). The pope based the inseparability of these two tasks upon anthropological, theological, and evangelical arguments.

These arguments guided us at Puebla in urging that the exigencies of the integral betterment of human beings be observed. Thus Puebla added its weight to the teaching of John Paul II when we recalled that as bishops we were *defenders and promoters of dignity*, because, as he said, the church *does not have need to have recourse to ideological systems in order to love, defend, and collaborate in the liberation of the human being. At the center of the message of which the Church is the trustee and herald, it finds inspiration for acting in favor of brotherhood, justice, and peace, and against all forms of domination, slavery, discrimination, violence, attacks on religious liberty, and aggression against human beings and whatever attacks life* (Opening Address, III, 2).

The Truth about Humankind

[53] This difficult, little understood task of the integral advancement of human beings has its basis in *the truth about humanity* that Puebla, guided by the pope, saw as one of the three theological foundations of the evangelization of Latin America.

Humanity, seen from the perspective of Christ and of the church, could be wholly summed up in that rich message of John Paul and of the Puebla assembly: *With what veneration an apostle of Christ ought to pronounce the word 'man,'* exclaimed the present pontiff when, on October 22, 1978, he began his worldwide pastorate. According to his first encyclical, "this human being is the primary route that the church must travel in fulfilling its mission: the human being is the primary and fundamental way for the church (*Redemptor Hominis*, #23). He discussed human beings concretely, in history, as they live out their lives today (*Redemptor Hominis*, #41), a life and existence that are threatened (*Redemptor Hominis*, #46), whose *situation in the modern world [is] far removed from the objective demands of the moral order, from the exigencies of justice and, still more, from social love* (*Redemptor Hominis*, #53).

The Peoples of Latin America

[54] We, the bishops gathered at Puebla, looked toward the people of Latin America. We wanted to begin our evangelical and ecclesial reflections by taking account of the actual situation of millions of our compatriots so that we might find, in that situation, what it was that God and the people are asking of the church today. *The truth is that there is an ever increasing distance between the many who have little and the few who have much. The values of our culture are threatened. Fundamental human rights are being violated* (Message to the Peoples of Latin America, 2).

This is the primary fact about the situation of the peoples in Latin America. The church must direct and convert itself to this, if it is to fulfill its mission of evangelization. And what it offers to its Latin American brothers and sisters is that which is most typically its own, that which is most in accordance with the gospel: it offers them human betterment and plenary liberation in Christ: *We have neither silver nor gold, but what we have we give you! In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise and walk* (Message to the Peoples of Latin America, #3, quoting Acts 3:6).

This is the integral evangelization for which the church goes on striving, in the bitter context of a people which suffers, which lives under constant threat, yet in the hope of the liberation that the divine Savior wants for all, and for which he lived, worked, died, and rose again. That is what our archdiocese understands as proclaiming and building the kingdom of God among the Salvadoran people.

Faith with a Historical Dimension

[55] This ideal brings together all the dimensions of human reality, excluding none, and it does not reduce the faith merely to the improvement of the social or political order. Today, however, we should stress the social and historical dimensions of this liberation, as Puebla requested:

Confronted with the realities that are part of our lives today, we must learn from the Gospel that in Latin America we cannot truly love our fellow human beings, and hence God, unless

we commit ourselves on the personal level and, in many cases, on the structural level as well, to serving and promoting the most dispossessed and downtrodden human groups and social classes, with all the consequences that will entail on the plane of temporal realities (Puebla #327).

[56] The church, then, would betray its own love for God and its fidelity to the gospel if it stopped being *the voice of the voiceless*, a defender of the rights of the poor, a promoter of every just aspiration for liberation, a guide, an empowerer, a humanizer of every legitimate struggle to achieve a more just society, a society that prepares the way for the true kingdom of God in history. This demands of the church a greater presence among the poor. It ought to be in solidarity with them, running the risks they run, enduring the persecution that is their fate, ready to give the greatest possible testimony to its love by defending and promoting those who were first in Jesus' love.

This preference for the poor, I must repeat, does not mean an unfair discrimination between the various classes of society. It is an invitation to all *regardless of class, to accept and take up the cause of the poor as if they were accepting and taking up their own cause, the cause of Christ himself: 'I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me'* (Message to the Peoples of Latin America, #3)

[57] The basic ecclesial communities are a very effective pastoral method for achieving this evangelical presence of the church among our people and to bring about this integral betterment of human beings. I mention this providential instrument here only to recommend it to pastoral ministers, for I shall spend more time on it in the fourth part of this letter.

The Need for Profound Structural Changes

[58] To preach and to encourage the urgent need for profound structural changes in the social and political life of our country is another contribution that the pastoral mission of the church can make. The church sincerely believes that without such changes the structural bases of our whole malaise will remain. The full liberation of the Salvadoran people, not to mention personal conversions, demands a thorough change in the social, political, and economic system. The government has itself recognized this, and has said so many times. It is the continued demand of political groups --- those recognized by law, and those not. The perspective of the church is naturally one that stems from its own evangelical identity, and in line with the documents both of the universal magisterium and the magisterium of the bishops on this continent.

A Healthy Unrest

[59] I realize that it is difficult, that it gives rise to conflict, to talk about structural changes with those who benefit from the old structures. It is perfectly true that there is a reactionary, extreme right-wing. But there are also men and women aware of the need for change, groups actively committed to working for change, working for a situation that favors the whole population of El Salvador. There is, then, a healthy unrest. But this itself requires of the church a greater subtlety in its judgments. The means of bringing about change are many and varied, and the Christian

must take great care in choosing critically from among them, because not all merit the same judgment.

There are groups that would be content with small steps forward or minor reforms. There are other groups that want to bring about change rapidly, radically, and violently. There are differences in detail among these last mentioned groups, but in general their tactic is to sharpen the contradictions in society so as to bring on an intolerable situation.

Profound, Urgent, but Nonviolent Changes

[60] The church favors urgent and profound social changes. But as it was also said at Medellin, *violent changes in structures would be fallacious, ineffectual in themselves and not conforming to the dignity of men* (Medellin Documents, *Peace*, #15). The church therefore invites all who put their trust in violent means of change to reflect on the following points:

---Before any violent defense of the common good, or of human rights, can be undertaken, all nonviolent methods must be tried. The church urges, therefore, that every effort be made for dialogue, reasoning, and persuasion.

---It has to be remembered that many violent political acts serve only to provoke an overwhelming response from the state's repressive machinery, thereby generating great harm and suffering for the innocent, and for those unable to look after themselves.

---Therefore, instead of simply criticizing and rendering ineffective others' efforts to bring about peaceful change, it is better that group fanaticism --- the belief that one group alone has the capacity to bring about all the changes we need --- be overcome. Groups would then open themselves up to the possibility of dialogue and political negotiation so as to achieve the hoped for common objective by rational means. When our homeland is in danger, its needs must come before every party or group interest.

Sharing with the People

[61] Without denying its own identity --- on the contrary, being most itself --- the church offers the country the service of companionship and guidance in its aspirations to be a free and liberating people. In this way it can carry out the mandate that Jesus gave it to be light, salt, leaven, becoming more and more part of the people's history, of its sorrows and hopes.

Liberating evangelization will be adapted differently when it is directed to the masses and when it is directed to the classes that run the country.

The Masses

[62] It is a defamation of the church when its *preferential option for the poor* is interpreted to mean blind partiality in favor of the masses and disrespect for the powerful classes. The church does not approve of the poor and the oppressed simply because they are poor and oppressed --- though it cannot forget that the Redeemer himself offered the grace of redemption to them first

of all. The church knows perfectly well that among those who lack material goods there is a great deal of sinfulness. It therefore makes every effort to see that persons are saved from their inveterate vices, many of which are fomented by our historical situation. In the name of the preferential option for the poor there can never be justified the machismo, the alcoholism, the failure in family responsibility, the exploitation of one poor person by another, the antagonism among neighbors, and the so many other sins that our survey pointed to strongly as being concurrent roots of this country's crisis and violence.

[63] Without rationalizing that clearly wrong behavior of the masses, the survey also drew attention to great human and Christian values. The church holds these in high regard, and believes it to be its duty to strengthen and guide them in the spirit of the gospel and in the light of faith. One might single out among these values the spirit of service, of solidarity, of responsibility, the experience of love, of toil, of courage.... One of the most basic of these values is that sense of community by which Salvadorans can overcome their selfishness and their sterile divisions.

[64] In the present social and political conditions of this country, the evangelizing of the Salvadoran people cannot simply continue the tradition of preaching and encouraging en masse, or in a moralizing fashion. It has to pursue a personalizing education in the faith, one that forms, by means of small groups meeting for reflection, persons who take a critical stance vis-a-vis the world about them with criteria drawn from the gospel.

[65] Evangelization, here and now, has to defend and encourage the political and social organization of the great mass of rural and urban workers and their families. I thank God that in this task the church can already count upon well-qualified lay Christians to whom it offers, as Pope Paul VI said, *the inspiration of faith, the motivation of fraternal love, a social teaching ... [as] the foundation of [their] wisdom and [their] experience (Evangelii Nuntiandi, #38).*

In my third pastoral letter I defended, by means of the church's teaching, the right to form organizations, a right made sacred for Salvadorans in their country's Constitution. It is not only a matter of rights. It is a necessity and an obligation if there is to come about a more just order that takes real account of the majority of the people of this country.

The church does not, therefore, regard it as a crime but rather as a duty to encourage and to guide Christians who have the ability to organize themselves, drawing members from the people and acting for the people. By reason of the same duty the church also denounces the sin of those organizations that turn politics into an absolute, thereby hindering the full development of the human person and showing disrespect for those Christian values that were the inspiration of many of those who belong to various organizations.

[66] The experience of recent years shows both the power of Christian values to animate popular organizations and the danger that organizations risk when they cease being animated by those same values. It is possible that popular organizations, with their political alliances, come to think that Christian values are no longer necessary for them, that they are self-sufficient in their task of giving the great mass of the people, and especially the *campesinos*, all that they need. It is even possible that they come to believe that they have the right to manipulate the

church, the gospel, the faith, for the benefit, not of the ordinary people, but of their organizations. By so doing, however, they rob the salt and the leaven of the power that the gospel portions out so that the whole be not corrupted, and they display little respect for the deeply-held beliefs of many members of their organizations. It would be a mistake to oppose the driving force of political organizations to the driving force of the church. This would be to subordinate to the absolutization of a human organization the bringing into being in history of the kingdom of God.

The church, I must repeat, is pleased that in this country there are lay persons who are capable of politically organizing the masses. Vatican II itself recognizes the autonomy of temporal undertakings and values, such as political and organizational activities. The church therefore also reminds all of, and demands, its own proper independence and its transcendent identity, its apostolic mission in the midst of the temporal activities of men and women. It must not allow itself to be manipulated for any political purpose, although its apostolic mission obliges it not to abandon its specific mission as church to the political organizations. It will support them in what is just in their demands and, above all, it will defend their right to exist, which is based upon the legitimate human right to organize --- a right so vulnerable to attack in our repressive environment.

The Elites

[67] With respect to the classes that have social, political, and economic power the church calls upon them, before all else, to be converted, to remember their very grave responsibility to overcome disorder and violence not by means of repression but through justice and the participation of ordinary people.

In a society such as ours, in which the majority have hardly anything, the privileged minority, separated as if by an abyss from all the rest, enjoys a standard of living similar to that which a few enjoy in the richest countries. They have, moreover, enormous power simply because our political organization is undemocratic. Would that they should favor social change rather than impede it, or violently resist it! They could do so out of self-interest, but especially because charity demands it. Charity consists not only in giving others what is their due, but even in giving them something that is one's own. Would that they might honestly judge that this would be the best for everybody --- including, in the long run, themselves and their children! Would that they might remember those words of Jesus, that they will be dealt with both in this life and the next according to the measure they have dealt out to others!

I realize that some terrorist activities induce a state of mind in the powerful that hardly favors serenity and reflection. But they ought to overcome that preoccupation and generously lay down the basis for a democratic evolution, so that the majority of the population may participate equitably in the national resources that belong to all. Thus the root cause of terrorist and all other unjust violence would be eradicated.

Puebla states:

*It is of the utmost importance that this service to our fellow human beings take the course marked out for us by Vatican II: 'The demands of justice should first be satisfied, lest the giving of what is due in justice be represented as the offering of a charitable gift. Not only the effects but also the causes of various ills must be removed. Help should be given in such a way that the recipients may gradually be freed from dependence on others and become self-sufficient' (Puebla #1146, quoting *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #8).*

PART THREE: LIGHT ON SOME SPECIAL PROBLEMS

[68] In this third part I am going to propose clarification and guidance on violence, Marxism, and national dialogue.

Undoubtedly there are other problems that disturb consciences at this time of national crisis. But these three, together with the others upon which I have tried to throw light elsewhere in this letter, stand out in the reflections of our Christian communities. This reflection ought to continue in a dialogue between pastors and Christian communities because only in that way can we progress in throwing light, and guidance, on the many and varied subjects under discussion.

I beg those who are learned in these matters to study them and to pass on their thinking about them to others, so that they too may offer, at this critical period of research, a valuable service not only to the members of the church but to all persons of good will. It should help them clarify their own thinking, and to adopt positions that are tenable.

Violence

[69] I have spent a good time already, in the third part of my third pastoral letter, on the judgment of the church on violence. Here I am going to presuppose that summary of the church's traditional moral teaching on violence. I only want to dig a little deeper, to bring those ideas up to date, given the escalation of the violence that casts a shadow over so many families in our homeland. Would that this reflection might persuade Salvadorans to lay unjust attitudes aside, and to get them, with sincere change of heart, to wash clean so many hands and consciences stained by social injustice and human blood!

Inspired by the gospel, the church feels itself driven to seek peace before all else. But the peace that the church urges is the work of justice (*opus justitiae pax*). Therefore its judgments on the violence that disturbs the peace cannot ignore the demands of justice. There are many different judgments, just as there are many different forms of violence. The church cannot state, in a simplistic fashion, that it condemns every kind of violence.

Structural Violence

[70] The church condemns *structural* or *institutionalized violence*, the result of an unjust situation in which the majority of men, women, and children in our country find themselves deprived of the necessities of life (cf. Third Pastoral Letter). The church condemns this violence not only because it is unjust in itself, and the objective expression of personal and

collective sin, but also because it is the cause of other innumerable cruelties and more obvious acts of violence.

More and more Salvadorans are learning the point that the deepest root of the serious evils that afflict us, including the renewed outbreak of violence, is this *structural violence*. It takes concrete form in the unjust distribution of wealth and of property --- especially insofar as it includes landownership --- and, more generally, in that amalgam of economic and political structures by which the few grow increasingly rich and powerful, while the remainder grow increasingly poor and weak (Puebla #1259).

Arbitrary Violence of the State

[71] The church likewise condemns the arbitrary and repressive violence of the state. We in El Salvador well know, as did Puebla, how any dissent against the present form of capitalism and against the political institutions that support it is repressed with ever increasing violence and ever greater injustice --- inspired by the theory of national security. We also know how the majority of the *campesinos*, the laborers, slum dwellers, and others who have organized themselves to defend their rights and to promote legitimate structural changes are simply declared to be *terrorists* or subversives. They are therefore arrested, tortured, murdered, or they simply disappear --- and all without reference to the law or to any judicial institution that might protect them or give them the chance to defend themselves and prove their innocence. Faced with this prejudicial and unjust situation, many have decided that they had no alternative but to defend themselves with violence. And recently they have encountered, in response, the arbitrary violence of the state.

Public authority certainly has the right to punish social disorder. But in order to do so there must be the intervention of a court of justice that gives the accused the chance to defend themselves and can declare the guilty worthy of punishment. Any other kind of sanction --- arbitrary and repressive --- is an abuse of authority.

Violence of the Extreme Right

[72] The church equally condemns the violence favored by right-wing gangs of terrorists. They go absolutely unpunished, which makes one suspect official connivance. They have cast their shadow over the country's teachers, over the popular organizations, over political parties, and even over the church itself. Their intention, which they clearly cannot sustain indefinitely, is to try to uphold the unjust social order to which I referred above. Therefore they, more than anyone else, are involved in the injustice of the system.

Terrorist Violence

[73] The church also condemns the violence perpetrated by politico-military groups or individuals when they intentionally victimize innocent persons, or when the damage they do is disproportionate, in the short or medium term, to the positive effect they wish to achieve.

Insurrectional Violence

[74] On the other hand, Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, quoted at the Medellin assembly, takes up again the classic teaching of Catholic theology, according to which insurrection is legitimate *in the very exceptional circumstances of an evident, prolonged tyranny that seriously works against fundamental human rights and seriously damages the common good of the country, whether it proceeds from one person or from clearly unjust structures* (cf. Third Pastoral Letter). In addition, our own national constitution recognizes the right of just insurrection.

Violence of Legitimate Defense

[75] In the same class as legitimate insurrectional violence, we can place the violence of legitimate defense. This occurs *when a person or a group repels by force an unjust aggression that they have suffered* (Third Pastoral Letter).

These are the dangerous, violent forces that are aroused when changes in the structures of oppressive violence are delayed, and when it is believed that the structures can be kept in being through repressive violence.

Conditions for Legitimate Violence

[76] We must not forget the necessary conditions, which I recalled, in line with the church's theology, in my third pastoral letter already quoted. For the violence of insurrection or of defense to be legitimate, it is required:

- 1) that the violence of legitimate defense not be greater than the unjust aggression (for example, if it is enough to defend oneself with one's fists, then it is not permitted to shoot an aggressor);
- 2) that one resort to a form of violence, in proportion to the need, only after every other possible peaceful means has been tried;
- 3) that the violence used in defense not bring in retaliation an even greater evil than that being resisted.

In practice it is very difficult to take account of all these theoretical measures for the justification of violence. History has taught us how cruel and painful is the price of blood, and how difficult it is to repair social and economic damage caused by war. This is an opportune moment to recall that celebrated phrase of Pope Pius XII on war: *Nothing is lost by peace, everything may be lost in war.*

The most reasonable and effective thing for a government to do, therefore, is to use its moral and coercive force not to defend the structural violence of an unjust order, but to guarantee a truly democratic state, one that defends the fundamental rights of all its citizens, based on a just economic order. Only in this way will it be possible to make those instances distant and unreal in which recourse to force, by groups or by individuals, can be justified by the existence of a tyrannical regime and an unjust social order.

The Christian Is Peaceful, but Not Passive

[77] In this atmosphere of violence and of change in the country, how much to the point, and how valuable, have those guidelines become that Medellín expressed: *The Christian is peaceful and not ashamed of it. He is not simply a pacifist for he can fight, but he prefers peace to war. He knows that violent changes in structures would be fallacious, ineffectual in themselves, and not conforming to the dignity of man* (Medellin Documents, *Peace*, quoting Paul VI, homily, Bogotá, August 23, 1968).

Marxism

[78] The problem of Marxism is very complex. It is not dealt with simply by condemning it. Puebla itself teaches us to distinguish between Marxism as a dominant ideology for the whole of behavior, and collaboration with groups who share this ideology. Naturally if one understands by Marxism a materialistic, atheistic ideology that is taken to explain the whole of human existence and gives a false interpretation of religion, then it is completely untenable by a Christian. A Christian's faith must guide his or her whole life, starting from the existence of God, toward a spiritual and eternal transcendence made possible in Christ through the Holy Spirit. These are two diametrically opposed interpretations of life.

But Marxism can also be understood in other senses. It can be understood as a scientific analysis of the economic and social order. Many in El Salvador, as elsewhere in Latin America, use this analysis as a scientific tool because, they claim, it in no way affects their religious principles. The magisterium of the church (in *Octogesima Adveniens*, for example), although it recognizes the distinction between Marxism as an ideology and as a scientific method, prudently warns of possible ideological risks.

Understood in terms of political strategy, many use Marxism as a guide in the struggle for socio-political power. Perhaps this aspect has in practice greater hidden dangers. Marxist political praxis can give rise to conflicts of conscience about the use of means and of methods not always in conformity with what the gospel lays down as ethical for Christians. Such political praxis can lead to the absolutization of popular political organizations. It can dry up the Christian inspiration of their members, and even cut them off from the church, as if the church had no right to exercise, from the perspective of its own transcendent ideology, a critical function in relation to political activities.

[79] So it is evident that we are here dealing with a complex concept. Many of our communities frankly admit that they have little knowledge about it, and ask for greater clarification. As a pastor, therefore, I beg all those skilled in this science to spread knowledge of it, along with Christian criteria. The topic is of absorbing interest to many, and worries a large number of Christians.

One could benefit in the meantime from studying sections 543-45 and 550-51 of the Puebla Final Document, and sections 69 and 71 of the conciliar constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

[80] Moreover, although there may be very little scientific understanding of Marxism, it must not be forgotten that some anti-Marxist declarations and courses of action that Christians may make can turn into support for capitalism. Such is the situation in this country. And in concrete terms, capitalism is in fact what is most unjust and unchristian about the society in which we live. *Fear of Marxism*, says Puebla, keeps many from facing up to the oppressive reality of liberal capitalism. One could say that some people, faced with the danger of one clearly sinful system, forget to denounce and combat the established reality of another equally sinful system. We must give full attention to the latter system, without overlooking the violent and atheistic historical forms of Marxism (Puebla #92). The best way to defeat Marxism is to take seriously the preferential option for the poor.

National Dialogue

[81] A realistic national dialogue is a necessity for this country if it is to find a way out of its crisis. It is therefore, I believe, the right time to throw some light on this topic. And I have to begin by regretting that the government's call for national dialogue has wasted a good opportunity, because it was not offered under acceptable conditions. From the start, therefore, that call met with a very cool public reception. There was criticism of the lack of confidence and of the lack of freedom to give voice to, on equal terms with the government, all the unrest and all the strong viewpoints held by Salvadorans.

[82] For genuine dialogue as a means of guiding us out of our present crisis, the following points seem to me essential:

1) There must be involvement of all social forces, or at least all those that have not gone underground. All have the right to speak and to be heard in this dialogue, and it should, in principle, be possible to reach agreement with all. But national dialogue would, on the contrary, become nonsense if it were to be reduced to a forum where were welcome only the views of the government's friends and of those who, deep down, do not want profound change.

2) Another essential element of this dialogue is that an end be put to all kinds of violence. Dialogue searches for truth and justice by way of reason. It requires an atmosphere of confidence and serenity. This is especially pertinent to the government's attitude. So long as there is violent and disproportionate repression of all public protest; so long as the present level of politically motivated murder continues; so long as persons disappear and there are political prisoners; so long as political, social, and religious leaders are banned from the country --- it is absurd to talk about a dialogue. On these issues there is no room for dialogue. They are preconditions for dialogue.

One cannot simplistically point to the existence of terrorist groups as an argument for excluding certain opinions from the dialogue. As has already been pointed out when talking about violence, terrorism originates in a context of institutionalized violence. This situation strongly influences many to act violently in response to the continual, systematic oppression exercised by the groups in power --- or at least it gives them a pretext for doing so. And the purpose of dialogue is precisely to rid the country of this root cause of violence.

Naturally terrorists, and all other partisans of a violent situation, must lay their attitude aside when they come up against a serious and sincere wish for dialogue. They must cooperate to create the atmosphere of serenity that is needed for realistic dialogue with a view to changing profoundly this country's structures.

3) The chief topic of dialogue is to be reform and structural changes. I have to say it again: in order for repression to be eliminated, the roots that feed the violence in the social sphere, and which thus provoke the temptation to further acts of violence, must be attacked. National dialogue cannot be effectively brought into being unless there is some sign of a desire and a determination to approve the changes that might guarantee a better standard of living for all Salvadorans.

4) Another important topic for dialogue ought to be freedom to organize. Our natural inclination and Christian sensitivity make us prefer methods of achieving social justice that are based on organization of the people, in line with the principles of our Constitution, and eminently peaceable. I believe that trade unionism is a definite gain for the working classes in all democratic countries, and that it neither can nor should be rejected in El Salvador.

When taking part in national dialogue, employers ought to understand the logic and the justice of trade unionism. It has not arisen to do harm to business. We all depend on the national economy for our livelihood. Trade unionism has arisen to achieve a more equitable distribution of what is produced by capital and labor working together.

On the other hand, in order to be worthy participants in such a dialogue, the trade unions and the workers themselves must be conscious of the effectiveness of their organized forces. They must not allow themselves to fall into that same sin that they complain of in others --- letting themselves be manipulated by interests far removed from those of the workers. Nor must they abuse the power that solidarity gives them by making exorbitant demands.

[83] As long as the national dialogue that we need does not come to pass, there is an even greater obligation upon citizens to contribute their opinions in the search for the guidance that our homeland needs, so that it may find once more the peace that it has lost. *To gain it is its greatest glory*, as our national anthem says.

For its part, our archdiocese offers the general force of this pastoral letter as a voice of the church in national dialogue. It repeats the offer, made once before, to put its modest means of social communication at the service of constructive points of view.

PART FOUR: PUEBLA'S PASTORAL APPROACH APPLIED TO THE ARCHDIOCESE

[84] I turn now very especially to my beloved pastoral co-workers --- to the Priests, religious, and laity --- because we have together to translate into real terms the valuable contribution the church offers the country at this time of crisis. Our situation, seen in the light of the church's teaching that I have just been putting forward, shows us that our people in El Salvador, together

with all the peoples of Latin America, *are journeying amid anxieties and hopes, frustrations and expectations," as Puebla puts it (Puebla #72).*

Sharing Puebla's concern, then, let us ask ourselves some questions. How has the church viewed this reality? How has the church interpreted it? Has the church been successful in finding some way to focus on it and clarify it in the light of the gospel? Has the church managed to discern which aspects of this reality threaten to destroy the human being, who is the object of God's infinite love, and which aspects have been developing in line with God's loving designs? How has the church been developing itself in order to carry out the saving mission that was entrusted to it by Christ, which is supposed to be implemented in concrete situations and reach out toward concrete human beings? What has the church done in the last ten years in the face of the changing reality around it?

Puebla says that *these are the great questions that we, as pastors, ask ourselves ... keeping in mind that the fundamental mission of the Church is to evangelize in the here and now with an eye on the future (Puebla #75).*

In response to this grave questioning, let us renew our apostolic generosity in the direction of those steps toward which the *spirit of Puebla* also inspires us and which, thank God, coincide with efforts already being made in this archdiocese.

Attitude of Searching Here

[85] I am going to go back again over a problem already mentioned earlier in this letter: the pastoral need to adapt evangelization to the present circumstances of this country. Puebla notes the great changes in this sphere since only a short time ago:

The weight of tradition helped the communication of the Gospel. What was taught from the pulpit was zealously welcomed in the home and the school; and it was safeguarded and sustained by the social pressure of the surrounding milieu. Today nothing like that happens. The faith proposed by the Church is accepted or rejected with much more freedom and with a notably critical-minded sense. Even the peasants, who previously were isolated from contact with civilization to a large extent, are now acquiring this same critical sense. This is due to the ready contact with the present-day world that is afforded them, chiefly by radio and means of transportation; it is also due to the consciousness-raising efforts of pastoral agents (Puebla #76-77).

Hence, without failing into the sin of infidelity to our mission, we cannot remain unmoved before the demands of a world in a state of flux.

There are two important factors in the apostolate: the gospel message we preach, and the changing reality of peoples, times, and places in which the church finds itself, and where it has to fulfill its mission. Therefore we have to shake off our laziness and bring ourselves up to date, as far as we are able, with current theological thinking. And those of us who can do so have to spread that thinking of the church as far as possible with all available means. It is also necessary that, together with the universal church, we should go on, as Puebla tells us, *acquiring an*

increasingly clear and deep realization that evangelization is its fundamental mission; and that it cannot possibly carry out this mission without an ongoing effort to know the real situation and to adapt the gospel message to today's human beings in a dynamic, attractive, and convincing way (Puebla #85).

In this attitude of search, let us recall that the church is historical, that it is moving forward. It is not something fixed and determined. It does not have a closed system for interpreting the gospel, applicable to each epoch and every circumstance. The church is a pilgrim. The word of God is inexhaustible; it forever discloses new facets that have to be more deeply understood. So the church goes on evolving in the way it presents the unique message of the gospel, in keeping with the particular period in which it is living. We believe in the Lord of history, and in his Spirit who makes all things new.

The Preferential Option for the Poor

[86] Puebla continues:

The situation of injustice . . . forces us to reflect on the great challenge our pastoral work faces in trying to help human beings to move from less human to more human conditions. The deep-rooted social differences, the extreme poverty, and the violation of human rights found in many areas pose challenges to evangelization. Our mission to bring God to human beings, and human beings to God, also entails the task of fashioning a more fraternal society here. And the unjust social situation has not failed to produce tensions within the Church itself. On the one hand they are provoked by groups that stress the 'spiritual' side of the Church's mission and resent active efforts at societal improvement. On the other hand they are provoked by people who want to make the Church's mission nothing more than an effort at human betterment (Puebla #90).

The church of this archdiocese, thank God, has taken many sure steps in keeping with this meaning of the preferential option for the poor. From the time of my honored predecessor Archbishop Luis Chávez y González, who led the archdiocese wisely and firmly, the foundations were laid for an apostolate that took shape with a preference for the great mass of the dispossessed, the rural poor above all. And as evidence of his great catechetical work there still remain the radio schools for adult literacy, the cooperatives, and so on.

It is a deep satisfaction to me that Puebla said we were right in our apostolic labors, for some at home and abroad had interpreted them negatively. Pastoral documents on social justice, the creation of organizations to express solidarity with those who suffer, the denunciation of outrages, the defense of human rights, stimulating priests and religious to opt for the poor, supporting them sometimes to death in testimony of their prophetic mission, are all aspects mentioned by Puebla of an ecclesial apostolate in Latin America concerned about its fidelity to Christ. And that is what we are doing here, even at the risk of being unjustly interpreted.

I realize nonetheless that there is still much to be done. But here the remedy that Puebla stressed for unity is apropos --- to take seriously the preferential option for the poor:

---Striving to *understand and denounce the mechanisms that generate this poverty* ((Puebla #1160).

---Uniting our efforts *with those of people of good will in order to uproot poverty and create a more just and fraternal world* (Puebla #1161).

---Supporting *the aspirations of laborers and peasants, who wish to be treated as free, responsible human beings. They are called to share in the decisions that affect their lives and their future, and we encourage all to improve themselves* (Puebla #1162).

---Defending *their fundamental right to freely create organizations to defend and promote their interests, and to make a responsible contribution to the common good* (Puebla #1163).

United in a Joint Apostolate

[87] Different situations require different responses, but all responses ought to converge upon fundamental options and common objectives, thus moving toward a combined apostolate. We must never think that the various responses, to which one single Spirit gives rise, as being at odds with one another. They have to be seen as complementary, and all beneath the watchful overview of the bishop, the person responsible for the apostolate in the diocese. Let us remember that the apostolate ought to be a joint response, and if it is not, then it is neither a pastoral response nor a response of the church.

I realize that the apostolate, the apostolic spirit, is the fruit of the Spirit, to whom persons generously respond. But just as a river has to be channeled if it is to irrigate the land better, so too the apostolate, which the Spirit promotes through a variety of charisms, needs to be planned and carried out as a whole if it is to serve the well-being of the mystical body of Christ. An apostolate without the apostolic spirit is a technique devoid of inspiration. An apostolate without pastoral planning becomes ineffective, it wastes itself. A united apostolate is at the same time a technique and a mystique.

This is Puebla's guidance too: *We assume the necessity of an organic pastoral effort in the Church as a unified source of dynamism, if it is to be effective in an ongoing way. This would include, among other things, guiding principles, objectives, options, strategies, and practical initiatives* (Puebla #1222).

I want to refresh the memories of all pastoral ministers on options taken during the archdiocesan pastoral week, January 5 to 10, 1976, which have served to shape the pastoral approach during my episcopate, and which today can count on new backing from Puebla:

---The fundamental option for evangelization at every level; this is to be regarded as serious, urgent, and necessary.

---Renewal of all the means at our disposal for an adequate evangelization that will brook no delay, but neither will it tolerate superficiality.

---The urgent need to select, and adequately to form, pastoral workers, especially lay persons.

---Christian communities as the objective on the horizon, if we intend to revitalize the church.

---The creation and preparation of mechanisms to give dynamism to, and to put into execution, the options we have taken.

Pastoral Adaptation

[88] When I reflect on the fruit of pastoral experience, the unrest to which Christian communities draw attention, and the creative richness shown by the many new ways found to embody the message, I am urged to put great emphasis on what I want to call *pastoral adaptation*. To explain this I am going to distinguish between three types of apostolate:

- 1) The mass apostolate, which refers to extensive evangelization.
- 2) An apostolate for basic Christian communities or small groups, in the sense that they are sign, leaven, salt, and light. This refers to intensive evangelization.
- 3) An apostolate of companionship or following, which refers to a personal or group apostolate faced with the diversity of concrete options that Christians can take, as the faith demands for the urgent changes needed in society to make it more human and more Christian.

The Mass Apostolate

[89] Nothing derogatory is meant by the idea of a mass apostolate. It envisions extensive evangelization. The masses do not have to go on being treated as faceless. The apostolate has to find precise ways of giving all Christians a critical outlook, an ability to value themselves as persons, made to the image of God, in control of their own destiny. The mass apostolate ought to be a liberating response by the church, helping the masses to become a people, and helping a people to become the people of God.

As Puebla puts it:

Like the Church as a whole, the religion of the people must be constantly evangelized over again ... Evangelization will be a work of pastoral pedagogy, in which the Catholicism of the common people is assumed, purified, completed, and made dynamic by the Gospel ... Guided by the light of the Holy Spirit and imbued with 'pastoral charity,' the agents of evangelization will know how to elaborate a 'pedagogy of evangelization.' Such a pedagogy demands that they love the people and be close to them; that they be prudent, firm, constant, and audacious. Only then can they educate this precious faith, which is sometimes in a very weakened state (Puebla #457-458).

The evangelization of the people is a slow, but forward-moving, process. It demands in every pastoral worker creativity, imagination, respect in the way things are put so as not to hurt others' feelings. But at the same time it has to be staunch in its criticism of abuse. This apostolate takes great patience. Jesus himself compares the kingdom to a mustard seed. The sower waits while it germinates, grows, flowers, bears fruit. It is not up to us to accelerate the stages of this evangelization. God can do so if he thinks fit. He can convert, in an instant, the persecutor Saul into the apostle Paul. But we have to wait for the normal process. And this will not always be easy.

I therefore urge pastoral workers to evaluate, honestly and sincerely, all the forms of mass apostolate that they use to embody the liberating message of Christ among the people: the use of churches, processions of faith, slogans, and so on, so that they neither stagnate nor fall into abuses.

The Apostolate of Basic Christian Communities

[90] One can say of the apostolate of basic Christian communities that it has undergone modification and development according to the times and places in which it operates. But the direction and the purpose remain the same: to form groups of Christians committed to the church and committed, as is the church, to their respective societies.

Puebla says of the basic Christian community:

[it] brings together families, adults, and young people, in an intimate interpersonal relationship grounded in the faith. As an ecclesial reality, it is a community of faith, hope, and charity. It celebrates the Word of God and ... it fleshes out the Word of God in life through solidarity and commitment to the new commandment of the Lord; and through the service of approved coordinators, it makes present and operative the mission of the Church and its visible communion with the legitimate pastors. It is a base-level community because it is composed of relatively few members as a permanent body, like a cell of the larger community (Puebla #641).

To live in community is not a matter of choice but of calling. Christianity demands, by its calling, the formation of community. Christianity cannot be thought of except in terms of relationships with other persons, brothers and sisters in whom we make real the comradely love that we preach. There is nothing in revelation about the de facto forms that communities should take. Canonical religious communities are not to be regarded as revealed models of community. It is the particular moment in history, the particular place in which they operate, that should give the precise shape to communities, as the occasion demands. This is where the theology of charisms fits in.

On the formation of Christian communities, moreover, one has to keep in mind what *Evangelii Nuntiandi* says to us, and what I myself had to say in my third pastoral letter:

1) Their encounter with Christ. There has to be a living out of the values of the gospel and of Christianity: faith, hope, love, prayer, the sacraments, the word of God --- a living out that, at the moment when Christians realize what their options are, convinces them that evangelical virtues are true and effective.

2) Their encounter with the church. This entails a full understanding of the mission that they have as Christians and as church, and their relationship to other communities in the parish, in the vicariate, in the diocese. The basic Christian community is part of the Church, it is not the whole church. The Christian community, the parish community, the diocesan community, the universal community --- all these have Christ at their center, visible in the person of the pope, the bishop, the pastor.

3) Their encounter with the world. A basic Christian community is not an end in itself. If it were to become such, it would cease being leaven, cease being church, and become a sect. The purpose of the Christian community is to spread the kingdom of God. It cannot put itself forward to groups of Christians as a place of peaceful refuge that separates them off from the world. It is a deepening, and an intensification of their commitment. That is what the gospel means when it uses the symbolism of leaven, salt, and light. One cannot imagine that yeast would fulfill its function if it were not within the dough it had to leaven, or if salt were not in the food to which it had to give flavor, or if light were not in the place it had to illuminate.

[91] Let us not forget what Puebla says about giving dynamism to apostolic movements, to parishes, to basic Christian communities, and to active Catholics in general, so that they may be leaven more wholeheartedly (Puebla #462). We must give them a genuine missionary spirit.

On the other hand the dynamic to which Puebla drew attention --- popular religion and the people's natural desire to achieve its own liberation --- ought to find within the basic Christian communities its true worth and purification. The basic Christian communities, as Puebla says, *embody the Church's preferential love for the common people. In them their religiosity is expressed, valued, and purified; and they are given a concrete opportunity to share in the task of the Church and to work in a committed way for the transformation of the world* (Puebla #643).

We are well aware that when Christians assume their role of adults in the faith to a greater degree, and become co-responsible for the progress of the church, even more conflicts with parish priests and with ecclesiastical authorities will occur, because some officials will not want to move forward at the same pace as the church of today, and because they will see their authority questioned by the criticism and evaluations made of them. Even in these cases, of course, the good Christian has to be mindful of the supreme values of charity and unity.

The Apostolate of Companionship

[92] By the apostolate of *companionship* or *following* I understand the personal evangelization of those individual Christians, or groups of Christians, who have made the concrete political option that, they believe in good conscience, represents the historical commitment of their faith.

In this sense there are many options, charisms, and callings facing a Christian conscience, and a pastor has to respect, scrutinize, and guide consciences by the light of the Spirit.

In my third pastoral letter I spoke of the proliferation of popular political organizations as a new phenomenon to which the church must respond. We are now confronted, as a logical result of this proliferation, with the particular choices made by Christians and groups of Christians. It is not only that evangelization has a dimension that touches on politics; politicization is reaching out to our Christian communities, which often become standard-bearers for political groups.

[93] I am not speaking of a politicized apostolate but rather of an apostolate that has to guide, in accordance with the gospel, the consciences of Christians within a politicized environment. Political life, like all human activity, needs pastoral guidance. Our situation is made all the more difficult when many Christians, in an environment as politicized as the one in this country, choose their political options before finding their identity as Christians.

It is here, in order to respond to the challenge of the entirety of this complex situation, that the church requires a special kind of apostolate, one that I call an apostolate of *following* or *companionship*, one that breaks out of the already well-known molds of the mass apostolate and of the apostolate of small groups. About this Puebla says:

Speaking in general, and without distinguishing between the roles that may be proper to its various members, the Church feels it has a duty and a right to be present in this area of reality. For Christianity is supposed to evangelize the whole of human life, including the political dimension. So the Church criticizes those who would restrict the scope of faith to personal or family life; who would exclude the professional, economic, social, and political orders as if sin, love, prayer, and pardon had no relevance in them. The fact is that the need for the Church's presence in the political arena flows from the very core of the Christian faith. That is to say, it flows from the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life. Christ sets the seal on the definitive brotherhood of humanity wherein every human being is of equal worth: 'All are one in Christ Jesus' (Puebla #515-516; quoting Galatians 3:28)

[94] There are several requirements for this apostolate --- so urgently needed in our circumstances of political and social crisis --- that are essential if it is to be effective. Some of them are:

---A great spirit of prayer and discernment before taking action.

---A great clarity and firmness about the criteria and the values of the gospel and a search for greater knowledge about more uncertain issues, such as the relationship between faith and politics, commitment in faith, commitment in history, Christianity and ideology, violence, and so on.

---A great respect for the diversity of choices and charisms that the one Spirit can give rise to so that human history itself becomes the history of salvation. A great mental and spiritual purity is needed if we are to rid ourselves of personal prejudices against individuals or institutions. I am not talking about pressuring persons to join political organizations, or

about pressuring them to leave organizations or to abandon the choices they have made. Rather we want to help them evaluate and question their choices, from the perspective of gospel values. This evaluation and questioning can be about their own personal behavior, about the criteria of the group, about the consequences of their actions, about the very complexity of politics. For politics is much wider and more complicated than can be encompassed by one's personal or a group's options.

--A great spirit of commitment and sacrifice. I realize that this kind of apostolate will entail risks, criticisms, and false accusations. But I believe it is necessary because the times require it.

---A deep sense of hierarchical order and of teamwork. Although encouraging priests in this kind of apostolate, and pledging them my support and understanding, I beg them, for the honor of our church and the good of the people, never to take it up lightly, or for personal reasons, or by pure chance, letting themselves be dragged into it by the force of events, generously perhaps, but at times ingenuously or imprudently. They should rather associate themselves with an overall plan, in communion with their bishop, so that they can be part of the response of the church and as representatives of the church.

CONCLUSION

A Local Church in Communion with the Universal Church

[95] I have tried to portray, from a pastoral point of view, the situation of crisis that exists in our beloved country. I have also tried to delineate the service that our church could and should render as part of the effort that all active forces in our homeland could and should render. Within the open and frank dialogue that this country needs with such tragic urgency, this pastoral letter, written under the guidance of the magisterium of the popes and of the Latin American church gathered at Puebla, and with valuable contributions made by our local communities, represents the sincere view of our archdiocese.

Whether it is heeded or not, as pastor of the archdiocese this pastoral letter gives me the satisfaction of having made an effort to unite in it the real purposes that inspire what is called the *pastoral approach of the archdiocese*. To the universal church I offer it in filial devotion, as a contribution from one local church to the renewal that Vatican II began, and to which Medellin and Puebla gave concrete shape for the church in Latin America.

This gives me the opportunity of thanking persons for the many signs of support and solidarity that have come from different parts of Latin America, and from the world at large, support for the pastoral effort being made by our archdiocese from episcopal conferences, from cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, religious communities, and the laity, from ecumenical and secular organizations, and from individuals. I give thanks to the Lord, who is the only one who can comprehend the magnitude of this demonstration of the catholicity of the church and of universal human sentiment, which give proof of the authenticity of one local church.

Presentation of the Puebla Document to the Archdiocese

[96] As I said at the beginning, the central purpose of this pastoral letter has been officially to present to the archdiocese the document of the third conference of Latin American bishops gathered at Puebla. And in presenting it, making it the basis for all my commentary, I am calling upon all priests, religious, and lay persons that we day by day assimilate it better, coming to know it more fully and putting it increasingly into practice, so that the holy father's desire, expressed in his letter of approbation, may be fulfilled in the archdiocese.

In the joint magisterium of the Puebla Final Document the experience of so many pastors who, in Latin America, live in circumstances similar to those of El Salvador teaches us how to analyze our situation and how to offer to this country in its hour of crisis the specific contribution of the church.

To be sure, these guidelines should not be thought of as closed to the creativity and originality of the various churches of Latin America. Their splendor is to be found in the different visages they present, deriving from the diversity of their own histories and problems. They offer us the surest path for our own creativity: they teach us to be always the one church of Christ within the unique framework of our own Salvadoran history.

The Divine Savior: Beginning and End of Our Apostolate

[97] The foundation for all our work of evangelization is the mystery of Christ that we preach, the mystery that was so clearly revealed, in a way that can never be equaled, in the theophany commemorated by our titular feast. It has the certification of the Father, who presents Christ to us as the one and only Savior of the world. He alone is the way forward toward the true liberation of Salvadorans and of El Salvador: *Listen to him*.

The church is his *body in history*. We shall be more the church, and offer a better specific contribution from the church for the liberation of our people, the more we identify ourselves with him, and the more we are docile instruments of his truth and his grace.

The Final Ecstasy of Paul VI and the Point of Departure for John Paul II

[98] It is opportune and pleasing to recall, exactly a year after his death, that this was the final testimony of his holiness Paul VI. This humble pope put his brilliant talents at the service of Christ. Therefore, during his pontificate, he was able to present to the world the shining glory of a church that, in the midst of today's formidable conflicts, did not lose its identity and continued to be a *pillar of truth*. His last angelus message, which he was not able to recite in this world, was the final ecstasy of his life taken up by Christ in the theophany of that August 6. His successor John Paul II guides us along the same lines, and the title of his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, suggests an entire program for the modern apostolate.

Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of America

[99] I could not end this reflection on what the church can offer this country at its time of crisis without mentioning that most tender and most beautiful aspect of its involvement: Mary, mother of Christ, mother of the church, mother of America. Puebla, too, gave a rich interpretation of the role of Mary in the church's work of liberation, and of her providential presence in the devotion of our peoples.

The church, in its Latin American apostolate, has become increasingly convinced that it cannot ignore this devotion of the people to the Virgin Mary if it wants its apostolate among the people to be effective. Of this Marian devotion Puebla says that it is *a vital, concrete experience in the history of Latin America; it is part of the innermost 'identity' of the Latin American peoples* (Puebla #283, quoting John Paul II's homily in Zapopán, #2).

The evangelical service and the liberating force that the church, together with Mary, offers to our country was described by Paul VI *in words that find a timely echo*. She is, he said, *a strong woman who knew poverty and suffering, flight and exile. Such situations can hardly escape the attention of those who wish to corroborate the liberating efforts of human beings and society with the spirit of the Gospel (Marialis Cultus, #37, quoted in Puebla, #302)*. And John Paul II recalled how in the *Magnificat* Mary is depicted as the model for all those *who do not passively accept the adverse circumstances of personal and social life and who are not victims of 'alienation,' as the expression goes today, but who instead join with her in proclaiming that God is 'the avenger of the lowly,' and will, if need be, depose 'the mighty from their thrones'* (Homily in Zapopán, quoted in Puebla #297)

A Blessing with Optimism and Enthusiasm

[100] And so, with this Marian reflection, and in the midst of a crisis that brings despair to many and affliction to all, we feel that the feast of our Lord's transfiguration invites us to hope for the transfiguration of our homeland, placed as it is under the special protection of the divine Savior of the world.

With Puebla's filial optimism I can say, as I give my blessing to the archdiocese: *This is Mary's hour, the hour of a new Pentecost. She presides over this hour with her prayers as the Church, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, initiates a new stage on its journey. On this journey we pray that Mary may be 'the star of a continually renewed evangelization'* (Puebla #303, quoting Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #82)