

Saint Oscar Romero

VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

THE FOUR PASTORAL LETTERS
AND OTHER STATEMENTS

Anniversary Edition

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The Easter Church

*First Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Romero,
Easter Sunday, April 10, 1977*

To my beloved brothers and sisters, the auxiliary bishop, the priests, religious, and laity of the archdiocese of San Salvador; to you and to all men and women of good will, the Easter greeting of Jesus: peace be with you.

A Time of Transition

On February 22, the feast of the Chair of St. Peter, the archdiocese of San Salvador lived through that mysterious moment of “apostolic succession,” a characteristic of the human and historical side of Jesus’ divine and eternal church. Salvadoran episcopal history began on September 28, 1842, when Pope Gregory XVI erected the diocese of San Salvador as a suffragan see of Guatemala. Four bishops followed each other in the new see until, on February 11, 1913, St. Pius X, the father of our ecclesiastical province, elevated it to the rank of metropolitan see. Since that date three important figures in the Salvadoran hierarchy have held the office of archbishop.

For the past thirty-eight years of turbulent history, Archbishop Luis Chávez y González successfully guided the ship of our local church. Now his distinguished but weary hands have turned over the finely balanced rudder to a new successor of the apostles. I have taken hold of it with all the respect and delicacy of one who feels that he has received an inheritance of inestimable value to help him continue to guide and sustain the church toward new and difficult horizons.

The work of my venerable predecessor will stand out when the ecclesiastical history of El Salvador comes to be written. During the thirty-eight years of his apostolate, God abundantly blessed the life of the church. The seminary, the number of vocations, the priests, the parish communities, the religious communities, the colleges, the schools, the work of catechesis, the organizations and initiatives taken for the betterment of men and women,

the luminous teaching in his pastoral letters—all these will be chapter headings in the written record of his episcopacy. And it was backed up by the personal testimony of a holy life that faithfully traversed the road of his priestly vocation. Against this rock of authenticity and virtue have broken cowardly storms of calumny, but they have succeeded only in adorning his life, rather as rocks in the ocean are adorned by the furious foam of the waves.

A Paschal Moment

Were I to search for an appropriate adjective to describe this moment of apostolic succession in the archdiocese, I should have no hesitation in calling it paschal.

Yes. We are passing through a very beautiful Eastertide. It coincides with the Eastertide of our liturgical year. Only the spirit of a risen Christ who, down the years, lives in and builds up his church, can explain the rich heritage that my venerable predecessor Archbishop Chávez has handed on to me. Only the divine impulse of the Spirit of Easter can explain this unexpected beginning of my hierarchical service to the archdiocese. Never did I imagine so beautiful an entrance as pastor into this church of the divine Savior. In the special circumstances of this past Lent, the ecclesial mystery of Easter, which never fails to delight me as a Christian, has enriched my life, not only as a private individual but also as I have lived it from my position as a pastor in communion with the whole church: in a dialogue of common responsibility with my beloved clergy, in close involvement of concern and prayer with ecclesial communities and with the faithful. In communion with the church universal, I have shared in the fellow feeling and the solidarity of many of my brother bishops and of other dioceses. And, above all, I have had once again the support of the successor of St. Peter who, during my recent trip to Rome, entrusted to me Christ's charismatic commission: "strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

An Easter Greeting

All of this imposes upon my first pastoral letter addressed to the whole archdiocese a paschal theme and manner. It is my letter of introduction, my first greeting. In a spirit of optimism and of Christian hope it seeks to express:

- first of all, to my brothers and friends who are the priests of the archdiocese, my offer of, and hope for, a dialogue with each other,

and of collaboration in the service of the People of God whom together we have to evangelize, sanctify, and rule;

- to the communities of religious, my pastoral affection and my gratitude for the way they enrich the life of prayer and contemplation, and for the many ways in which they bring into being, among our people, the divine mystery of the church;
- to generous lay people, all the vision and all the hope that the Second Vatican Council aroused in the hearts of pastors for the promotion of the lay vocation as a call to sanctity in the world, which they are to order according to the plans of God in committed collaboration with the church's apostolic mission;
- and to all men and women who await from the church an answer that will throw light on their doubts, their disquiet, and their problems, the certain promise that God is holding out his hand to them from the church, "to all who seek him with a sincere heart" (Eucharistic Prayer IV).

Especially is this Easter greeting directed to all my friends who, in different ways, expressed to me their loving welcome of, and adhesion to, the will of the Holy Father when he appointed me to this metropolitan see. It is also directed to those who, with much display of solidarity, shared the grief and the hope that were aroused by the murder of the never-to-be-forgotten Father Rutilio Grande—may he rest in peace—and by other attacks on the freedom of the church.

Toward Thoughtful Dialogue

And now, brothers, sisters, and friends, the greeting and the introduction become an invitation to thoughtful dialogue. I represent a church that wants always to converse with all men and women, so that it may pass on to them the truth and the grace with which God has entrusted it, in order that it may guide the world in conformity to his divine plan. Let us put the theme forward in the language of Easter, so as to retain the style of this letter's title: the church does not live for itself, but in order to bring to the world the truth and the grace of Easter. This is the essence of my letter. Its purpose is simply, in the daylight of this paschal hour, to present—with the sincere offer to enter into dialogue with everyone on—the church's identity and mission in these terms: (1) Easter: the origin and content of the church; (2) the church: sacrament and instrument of Easter; (3) the world: designated recipient of the truth and grace of Easter.

Easter

What is Easter? What is the paschal mystery? It is simply the event of Christian salvation, through the death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Second Vatican Council made the paschal mystery the center of its reflections upon the church and its mission in the world. The council explains:

The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved his task principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death and, rising, he restored our life.”¹

The Old Covenant Passover

The event of Christian salvation, then, which we call the paschal mystery, was being prepared for by “the wonders wrought by God among the people of the Old Testament.” Hence, in order to understand the meaning and the manner of Christian redemption a little better, it is necessary to go back to the “wonders of the Old Testament.” The historical and salvific manner of the redemption is mainly revealed to us in the Book of Exodus: God saves Israel, and thus will it be for every people, each within its own history. It is also revealed to us there what this redemption involves: a ransoming from death by means of the protection afforded by the blood of the lamb, while the avenging angel “passes over,” taking only the lives of the firstborn of the Egyptians. It also involves a “passage” from slavery, through the sea and the desert, to a promised land, to freedom and repose.

The redeemed people celebrated that passover every year. But its celebration was more than simply a remembrance of things past. The whole process of redemption was made present in a profound liturgical and sacramental, prophetic and eschatological, sacrificial and communal sense. There were lived out again the “wonders” of the Lord. That is why it was said to those taking part, “On this day . . . you are leaving Egypt.” The passover ritual was to be explained: “this is because of what Yahweh did for me when I came out of Egypt” (Exod. 13:4, 8). The passover was always something in the here and now. God was the savior of Israel by way of its own history. The wonders were praised, and the sins against the covenant were denounced. The failures and the imperfections in their history did not dishearten them, because the passover was open to the

eschatological future. In the strivings of the present there always shone out the hope of a more perfect passover, one beyond history, where there would be the happiness of the perfect paschal feast. The immolation of the lamb conveyed a sacrificial and communitarian meaning, as did the gathering of the family or group, which patriotism later extended to take in the entire national community.

Christ Our Paschal Victim Is Sacrificed

The whole of Israel's paschal mystery comes to its fulfillment in the final passover of Jesus. The preparatory symbol is transformed into the reality of the Christian passover. Upon the structure of that ancient passover Christ himself becomes its wondrous personification by means of his own "passage" from death to resurrection. "Christ our paschal victim is sacrificed," sings the church among the alleluias of the resurrection. The whole of his life and work are marked by that paschal sign: the passover was the hour appointed by the Father for the redemption of the world in Christ, and it was with a keen awareness that Christ approached his own "passover hour." His death upon the cross was the immolation of the true paschal lamb, and in a passover meal Jesus instituted a memorial, a eucharistic representation, which, in the midst of any human situation, will make present the wonder of the redemption.

Who can measure the redemptive power of this passage from death to resurrection? If in his death there were destroyed the empire of sin, of hell, and of death itself, in his resurrection there began now in history the reign of eternal life, holding out to us the opportunity for bold changes in history and in life.² In the resurrection God glorifies the Son (Acts 2:22ff., Rom. 8:11), places the divine seal upon the act of redemption, which began at the incarnation and reached its consummation upon the cross. The resurrection made Jesus "Son of God in all his power" (Rom. 1:4), "Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36), "leader and Savior" (Acts 5:31), "judge and Lord [of] everyone, alive or dead" (Acts 10:42), "the first to rise from the dead" (Acts 26:23; Rev. 1:5), and "Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). He is the first to have entered into the new world that is the ransomed universe. He has the power to offer to all who believe in him the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

For Easter is also the coming of the Holy Spirit, the "power from on high," the spirit of truth and love, the advocate and consoler, the spirit of God through whom men and women can identify with Jesus in his victory over evil and in the renewal of their own lives. The "kingdom of heaven" is not something that comes only after death. That will be its perfect fulfillment. But it has already been inaugurated in history, among men and women, by the Risen One, by his passage from death to resurrection.

In Him Is Our Hope

When I described this moment in the life of our archdiocese as a “paschal hour,” I was thinking of the superabundant power of faith, hope, and love that the risen Christ—living and working—has called forth in different sectors of our local church—even in sectors and persons who do not belong to, nor yet share in, our paschal faith. With the feelings of a pastor, I see that the spiritual riches of Easter, that greatest inheritance of the church, abound among us. I see that there is already being achieved among us here what was expressly desired by the bishops at Medellín, when they were speaking to young persons: “That the Church in Latin America should be manifested, in an increasingly clear manner, as truly poor, missionary and paschal, separate from all temporal power and courageously committed to the liberation of each and every man.”³

The Church: Sacrament of Easter

Christ’s church has to be an Easter church—that is to say, a church that is born of Easter and exists to be a sign and instrument of Easter in the world.

The Church Born of Easter

In the story of the lance (John 19:35) the fathers of the church found a mystical parallel between the birth of the church from the side of Christ sleeping upon the cross, and the formation of Eve from the side of Adam. There is also a beautiful paschal connection in St. Paul’s linking the origin of the church with the sacrifice of Christ: “Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her in water with a form of words, so that when he took her to himself she would be glorious, with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless” (Eph. 5:25–27).

Jesus, who brought about our redemption beneath the paschal sign, longed to live on, in a paschal manner, in the life of the church. The church is the body of the risen Christ. Through baptism all those who belong to it live out that paschal tension, that “passage” from death to life, that “crossing over” that never ends and is called “conversion,” the continual demand upon us to destroy whatever is sin and to bring into being ever more powerfully all that is life, renewal, holiness, justice. The Holy Spirit began to quicken this life of resurrection in the church from the very day of the resurrection itself when Jesus “breathed” the re-creating Spirit upon the Apostles (John 20:22). With Pentecost—fifty days after

Easter—came the fullness of Easter. There then took place the great pouring out of charisms that were to make the church manifest to the world, and publicly to sanction the testimony of the Apostles. God thus forever anoints his church. He does so to identify it with Jesus in order that all the faithful may, in the same Spirit, have access with Jesus, to the Father.⁴

In other words, the Easter Christ continues, lives, in the Easter church. One cannot be part of this church without being faithful to his manner of “passing” from death to life, without a sincere movement of conversion and of fidelity to the Lord.

Sign and Instrument of Easter

“It was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church,”⁵ “the universal sacrament of salvation,” as Vatican II most beautifully describes it.⁶ The council made the paschal mystery the central focus of its reflections on the church, for the whole purpose of the church’s existence is to make obvious and operative, in the midst of humanity, the abundant energy of the death and resurrection of the Lord.

From this there arises the attractive characterization of a church that does not live for itself but so as to serve as Christ’s instrument in the redemption of the whole of humanity. It is a great joy to me to emphasize this sense of service in a letter whose purpose is to introduce to you a pastor who wants to live out, and, as closely as possible, to share in, the feelings of the Good Shepherd who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life” (Matt. 20:28).

The church, born at Easter to bring to all the grace of Easter, is described thus in one of the most profound Vatican II syntheses: “Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope, and charity, as an entity with visible delineation, through which he communicates truth and grace to all.”⁷

There are here the three elements that make the church to be the “universal sacrament of salvation”: as the visible part of the sacrament, the hierarchical community; as the invisible sacramental content, the truth and grace of the Redeemer. To build the church will always mean to build upon these three foundational stones, so beloved of Christ himself: to gather a community in faith and love around the shepherd, and so make Christ visible; to evangelize that community with Christ’s unique truth, and from that community to evangelize the world; and to live out and pass on that Easter grace, which means to liberate oneself from sin, and to become a sharer in the divine sonship that Christ merited through his death and resurrection.

Or, to put it in the terms used by Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Those whose life has been transformed enter a community which is itself a sign of transformation, a sign of newness of life: it is the Church, the visible sacrament of salvation. But entry into the ecclesial community will in its turn be expressed through many other signs which prolong and unfold the sign of the Church. In the dynamism of evangelization, a person who accepts the Church as the Word which saves normally translates it into the following sacramental acts: adherence to the Church, and acceptance of the Sacraments, which manifest and support this adherence through the grace which they confer.⁸

What Fidelity Demands

If the church's preaching is the "truth that saves" (Rom. 1:16), and if the Eucharist and the other sacraments it administers both signify and communicate the power to become children of God, this is because "grace . . . flows from the paschal mystery of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ."⁹

Its paschal origins require of the church, as a demand of Christ, a careful fidelity to the risen Lord in order that it be true to its identity, and so it is obliged by the requirements of a world in need of salvation not to water down in any way its teaching and its ministry. This obligation arises from its service as sign and instrument of the truth and grace that, through the paschal mystery, redeem the world. The prophetic, priestly, and social functions that the church, in the name of the risen Christ, carries out among men and women ought to be in perfect harmony with the mind of Christ. This is more true today than ever before, when persons expect of the church an answer from the only Redeemer who can save them.

The World: The Beneficiary of Easter

The church does not exist for itself. Its *raison d'être* is the same as that of Jesus: service to God to save the world. Vatican II said as much when treating of the mission of the church in the modern world:

The council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems. The council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church itself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from its Founder.¹⁰

And when, in August and September 1968, the bishops of Latin America met together in Medellín under the authority of the pope to determine the form this noble service would take for our continent, they kept well in mind the fact that the Spirit of Easter urges the church to dialogue with, and to serve, our peoples. "We are," they said, "on the threshold of a new epoch in the history of our continent. It appears to be a time full of zeal for full emancipation, of liberation from every form of servitude, of personal maturity, and of collective integration."¹¹ The church cannot be indifferent, they proclaimed, when faced with "a muted cry [that] pours from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else."¹²

A Religious and Human Mission

These legitimate aspirations of our people here and now are directed toward the church in the form of a challenge or, better, an evangelical appeal. That is one side of the coin. The other side is a growing awareness that the church has of its own mission not to shrink from this appeal but to have the wisdom and fortitude to speak the words, and to adopt the attitude, that Christ requires of it in this complicated situation. This is typical of the difficult times in which we live. "It is a time," Cardinal Pironio says, "of the cross and of hope, of possibilities and of risks, of responsibility and of commitment."¹³ It is, above all, a time for prayer and contemplation so as to interpret, according to the heart of God, the signs of our times. They will help us to know how to offer the service that we, as church, owe to the just aspirations of our brothers and sisters.

The church cannot be defined simply in political or socio-economic terms. But neither can it be defined from a point of view which would make it indifferent to the temporal problems of the world. As Vatican II puts it: "the mission of the Church will show its religious, and by that very fact, its supremely human character."¹⁴ And this is how Paul VI explains the blending of the church's two aspects, the religious and the human:

Hence, when preaching liberation and associating herself with those who are working and suffering for it, the Church is certainly not willing to restrict her mission only to the religious field and dissociate herself from man's temporal problems. Nevertheless she reaffirms the primacy of her spiritual vocation and refuses to replace the proclamation of the Kingdom by the proclamation of forms of human liberation; she even states that her contribution to liberation is incomplete if she neglects to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ.¹⁵

While taking account of the supremacy of the church's spiritual vocation and the predominant role of salvation in Jesus Christ, Pope Paul defends the linkage of true evangelization and human advancement, both because anthropology, theology, and the gospel demand it, and because to dissociate evangelization from human advancement "would be to forget the lesson which comes to us from the Gospel concerning love of our neighbor who is suffering and in need."¹⁶ I very earnestly recommend that you study the whole of the third chapter of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. It will help you to have a clearer idea of the liberation that the church promotes.

Service That Demands Conversion

The service offered by an Easter church to the needs of its people ought to begin, as the bishops at Medellín said, "in a spirit of eagerness for conversion and service. We have seen that our most urgent commitment must be to purify ourselves, all of the members and institutions of the Catholic Church, in the spirit of the Gospel."¹⁷

In a sincere analysis of this confession, Cardinal Pironio thinks along three basic lines:

We Christians have not thoroughly assimilated ourselves to Jesus Christ (we may have known the gospel superficially, or have studied Christ technically, but we have not fully savored his mystery).

We divorce faith from life (we content ourselves with preaching the faith or celebrating it liturgically, but we do not put love and justice into practice).

By the same token, we have lost that Christian sensitivity to the anxieties of others, we no longer know how to brighten their hopes, and we have lost interest in the constructive molding of history.

An Easter church, a Pentecost church, ought to be a church of conversion, of a fundamental turning back to Christ—whose mirror we should be—and to the radical demands of the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁸

Sincere Cooperation

From the perspective of our identity as church, we also realize that our service to the people, precisely because it does not as such have a political or a socio-economic character, must seek sincere dialogue and cooperation with whoever holds political and socio-economic responsibility. The church does not do this because it has some technical competence or because it wants temporal privileges, but because the political com-

munity and other elements of society need to be reminded that they are at the service of the personal and social vocation of men and women. As Vatican II teaches:

[The church] is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person. . . . [Therefore] it is only right . . . that at all times and in all places, the church should have true freedom to preach the faith, to teach its social doctrine, to exercise its role freely among men, and also to pass moral judgment on those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it. In this, it should make use of all the means . . . which accord with the Gospel and which correspond to the general good.¹⁹

Vatican II, while advocating this sincere cooperation, which in no way compromises the freedom and the autonomy of the church, is ready to renounce any kind of privilege when there is danger of tarnishing the purity of the church's testimony. The church in El Salvador, out of its concern for the welfare of its people, and because of its love for them, is always ready to enter into dialogue with civil authorities and with those Salvadorans who are economically or socially powerful. It has been grateful when it could count upon them, just as it suffers when relationships have deteriorated—to the detriment and confusion of the people—by misunderstandings or a lack of comprehension of its difficult responsibility to defend the rights of God and of humanity. The search for this understanding is one of the church's Easter hopes, the object of its prayers, and one of the aims of its apostolic work, so that it may be able to live out in its fullness the peace that the Risen One came to give us, and for which El Salvador has always dreamed.

Conclusion

Beloved brothers, sisters, friends. We have together lived through a Lent that was a way of the cross, and a Good Friday that has come to full flower in this bright and hopeful hour of the Easter of resurrection. Those of us—bishops, priests, religious, and laity—who are aware of what it means to be a church, the depository of all the energies working for the salvation of humanity in Christ, also understand the challenges and the risks of these difficult times. The major challenge arises from the hope placed in the church by the world. Let us be worthy of this hour. Let us know how to give reason for this hope by the witness of unity,

of communion, of Christian authenticity, and of apostolic work. While carefully honoring the supremacy of the church's religious mission and of salvation in Jesus Christ, this apostolic work should also take into account the human dimension of the gospel message, and the demands that the religious and eternal spheres make upon history.

Our divine Savior will not cheat us of our hope. Let us appeal to the queen of peace, the heavenly patroness of our people, to intercede with him for us. May the mother of the Risen One defend our church, the sacrament of Easter. Like Mary, may the church live out this happy balance of the Easter of Jesus, which ought to characterize the true salvation of men and women in Christ—namely, to feel oneself already glorified in heaven as the image and first flowering of the future life, and at the same time to be, here on earth, the light for God's pilgrim people "as a sign of sure hope and solace until the day of the Lord come."²⁰

I beg my beloved priests, religious, catechists, the Catholic colleges and schools and other agencies of our apostolate to study throughout the whole of Eastertide—that is, until Pentecost—the theme of this pastoral letter: Easter, the church, and the world.

Notes

¹*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §5.

²See *Gaudium et Spes*, §§22, 38.

³Medellín, "Youth," §15.

⁴See *Lumen Gentium*, §4; cf. Eph. 2:18.

⁵*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §5.

⁶*Lumen Gentium*, §48.

⁷*Ibid.*, §8.

⁸*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §23.

⁹*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §61.

¹⁰*Gaudium et Spes*, §3.

¹¹Medellín, "Introduction," §4.

¹²Medellín, "Poverty," §2.

¹³*Escritos pastorales*, p. 206.

¹⁴*Gaudium et Spes*, §11.

¹⁵*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §34.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, §31.

¹⁷Medellín, "Message to the Peoples of Latin America."

¹⁸*Escritos pastorales*, p. 211.

¹⁹*Gaudium et Spes*, §76.

²⁰*Ibid.*