

**Third Pastoral Letter of
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Church**

“I Saw a New Heaven and a New Earth”

To the ecclesial communities that form the Renewed Ecumenical Catholic Church throughout the world, their presbyters, deacons, seminarians, and members of religious orders: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ pour grace and peace on all of you!

Introduction

“I saw and new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and earth had ceased to exist, and the sea had also vanished.”ⁱ With these words the apostle John in the book of Revelation describes the entirely new salvation that Jesus Christ has brought about. By Jesus Christ, the old heaven and earth, ruled by forces of evil, and the sea, which in apocalyptic symbolism is the seat of evil, have lost their power. Now, by Him the new Heaven—the power of the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God—has come to usⁱⁱ and the new earth, where “*tears will be dried and there will be no more death, nor weeping, nor grief, for all that existed before has ceased to exist,*”ⁱⁱⁱ has become manifest and become a historical reality to the extent that the Kingdom of God is permeating and transforming all the structures of the world and the relationships among human beings.

Up to now, we have not dealt in an explicit and direct way with questions related to the implications of promising to try to express the presence of the Kingdom of God, which has come to us, through our community, social, and political commitment as the People of God, forming a Church in this place and time.

Because the core of the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us requires us to accept the command that he gave to His apostles, “Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to all creation ... making them disciples, and teach them to obey all that I have commanded you,”^{iv} and because we are convinced that, in order to obey this command, it is necessary to rediscover, internalize and implement wholly the style of life, of worship, and of organization that characterized the first church, in accord with what the Holy Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition and Teaching of the Holy Fathers transmitted to us, our first two Pastoral Letters dealt with the identity and organization of the Church and the manner of fulfilling the responsibility that the Lord has entrusted to us.

In the present circumstances, the Presbytery of the People of God has agreed that, on the basis of the consensus that we have reached, the present Pastoral Letter should be published, offering criteria and perspectives that may guide the attitudes and positions that we are called to have in the sphere of social, political, cultural, and economic life both at the level of the Church and also of communities of people of faith. The basic contents of the Letter come from dialogues and meetings that we have had over the past months with the Presbytery and with community leaders, and meetings in the various deaneries into which the Church in Guatemala (ICERGUA) is structured.

Part One. The Context that Prompts This Letter

There are certain specific questions that have made us believe that it was opportune to publish this Letter. In setting these questions forth, we do not intend to make a detailed, global analysis of the current social, political, and economic situation in Guatemala. We shall simply lay out the main lines of the contexts that affect the lives of the communities and in face of which, as a Church and as believers, we feel called to take a position and to offer perspectives that may help us to adopt an attitude that is conscientious, responsible and coherent with our faith.

1. The Crisis vis-à-vis the Insecurity and Violence in Which We Live

Undoubtedly one of the most intensely disturbing factors in the lives of persons, families, and peoples is the general insecurity and violence.

The assassinations—which are committed in more and more brutal and repugnant ways—the extortions, kidnappings, robberies, and other crimes have everywhere generated pain, discouraged work, reduced productive capacity, slowed progress, and provoked anxiety, fear and tension.

In face of the vulnerability and the lack of protection for the populace, people often take justice into their own hands, even resorting to and multiplying violence. In many cases this has brought a temporary calm, but has left hidden wounds and has provoked deep resentment and lack of respect for life and basic values.

2. The General State of Conflict and Polarization vis-à-vis the Community Referenda

In many of the areas where the communities that make up part of our Church are located, there have recently been more and more community referenda on questions related to natural resources and development projects.

These referenda generally have been stimulated by social, ethnic, religious, or other type of organizations that, taking advantage of the lack of fair, objective and complete information for rural populations, have manipulated them so that many people have become determined to resist any kind of change.

The consequence has been confrontational and violent situations; the institutional order has been seen to have been altered; many communities have been polarized; forms of social terrorism have been promoted that violate basic human rights and have caused grave damages to social and economic life, not only for the populace directly involved, but also for the whole country.

And, above all, the settlers have been deceived; they have been made to believe that their rights were being defended, while in reality they were being used to gain the personal interests of those who have misled them.

These circumstances doom the people to continue to live in deep poverty. As result, many people have felt obliged to seek their subsistence by emigrating to other places, which often puts their lives into mortal danger, breaks up families, forces them to live in secret, and confronts them with another set of risks that are even greater.

3. The Use of Public Resources to Stimulate Selective, Discriminatory Projects

Another factor that has affected the life of the populace in recent years is the implementation of certain projects that meet some immediate necessities, but do not really solve the problems they are supposedly addressing, and in fact create even greater difficulties.

On one side they make individuals dependent and indifferent instead of stimulating them to develop their capacity for self-sufficiency in meeting their own needs, making improvements, and progressing.

On the other side, the project directors almost invariably practice discrimination, for generally the selection the beneficiaries of the program is not based on fair and open criteria that are related to individuals' real necessities, but is tied to friendships or to people's acceptance of denigrating and even illegal conditions, such as affiliating with a certain political group, participating in populist demonstrations, carrying out dangerous trips, and waiting long periods to receive as charity something that ought to come as a right. In addition, corruption is irresistible, and it is not unusual for the costs of the received benefits to be as much as ten times greater than what they would be if they were awarded in an honest, fair, and transparent way.

Many of these programs are implemented in arbitrary or improvised ways, which results in development projects that would be sustainable, but in fact are not brought to completion for lack of resources and planning. Not only does an improved infrastructure, which the people urgently, not come about, but what infrastructure already exists deteriorates even faster. It is not unusual for a series of commitments to be made but not carried out.

4. The Political Conflict That Is Going On

The approach of political elections in Guatemala is also a cause of uncertainty and confusion.

Every citizen is called to vote in a free and responsible way; however, many times the information necessary to evaluate the candidates seriously and make truly mature decisions is not available.

The campaigns are characterized by demagoguery: candidates offer to give gifts and favors and to carry out projects, but they offer no serious plans for analyzing the problems and finding solutions and thus create options that offer the possibility of a better future. Frequently parties and candidates try to “buy” the will of the community leaders with offers and little incentives so that they will use whatever influence they have to gain support for parties and candidates who do not present viable programs but only make vague promises.

In the face of such a complex and sad situation, in harmony with the mission that we have received from the Lord, we publish this Pastoral Letter with the goals of:

- * Putting on record the characteristics and the limits of our mission as a Church and the responsibilities and obligations that the members of the Church have as citizens and members of their local communities;
- * Presenting from our perspective what is the nature and scope of the mission that God has entrusted to all human beings as part of His creation;
- * Offering certain criteria that may help the People of God to fulfill conscientiously and responsibly their community, social, and civic obligations.

Part Two. Our Mission as a Church and Civic Responsibilities

1. The Proclamation of the Good News

As mentioned in the introduction to this Letter, the mission of the Church is simply, “to Proclaim the Gospel.”

This brief sentence needs to be understood in its full meaning in order to grasp its implications and the concrete effects it produces.

First of all we should state what the core of the Good News is. St. John put it in a clear and simple form: The Good News is the announcement that “*to those who received him and believed in Jesus, the Word that came to the world, he gave the right to be children of God. And they are children of God not through nature or human desire, but because God has begotten them.*”^v

And the “proclamation” does not consist in a merely vague announcement or verbal preaching, but requires that what is announced become real, that it be converted into experience and life. The mission of the Church is therefore to announce to every human being that everyone is chosen to be a child of God and to offer each one through the ecclesial life, specifically the sacraments, the means by which that election becomes reality and grow into fullness.

St. Paul in the second Letter to the Corinthians explains that process in the following way: “*When a person turns to the Lord, a veil is lifted. For the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. And because for us there is no veil over our faces, we all reflect, as in a mirror, the splendor the Lord. And we are transfigured into His likeness, from splendor to splendor; such is the influence of the Lord, who is Spirit.*”^{vi}

St. John teaches in his first Letter that by faith the children of God receive the Spirit, which consists in believing in the principle and guarantee of all knowledge: “*The initiation which you received from Him stays with you; you need no other teacher, but learn all you need to know from his initiation; his teachings are true and do not lie.*”^{vii} St. Cyril of Alexandria synthesized these perspectives beautifully: “*The only begotten Word of God the Father gives to the saints—referring to all those who believe in Jesus Christ—a kind of relationship with him and with the Father on giving them a share in his own nature; and he grants his Spirit to those who are united with him by faith: thus he conveys to them a profound sanctity, nourishes them in piety and raises them to knowing the truth and practicing virtue.*”^{viii}

If the Church effectively completes its mission, then it becomes an instrument by which each of its members acquire the capacity to know the truth, to practice virtue and the discern the roads that lead to true justice and liberty.^{ix}

The believer who has believed in the faith and illumination of the Spirit has the capacity to act freely, maturely and responsibly, most obviously in building up the Church, but also in building a just and peaceful society that shows forth the new earth where tears are wiped away and justice and peace prevail.^x

2. Two Planes on Which the Mission of the Church Is Carried Out

It is in this context that we can speak of the two clearly different planes on which the ecclesial mission is to be carried out.

On one level, the Church as the repository of Divine Revelation and the instrument for the communication of divine life, particularly through the celebration of the sacraments, is called to announce the Good News and to make it available to all; by this Good News the new heaven becomes manifest^{xi} as the presence of the Kingdom of God, because believers are united to Christ they are changing into new persons.^{xii} Precisely to guarantee that this dimension of the Church's mission is carried out in a vibrant way, and that it is continuously accessible and productive, the Lord instituted the Ordained Ministry. Composed of bishops and presbyters, the ordained ministry has the specific responsibility of proclaiming the whole Gospel by preaching and the sacramental life.

On the other level, believers upon being changed into new persons and receiving the light of the Holy Spirit that instructs them in all matters and having the ability to know the truth and practice virtue, receive along with these gifts the mission of molding this new reality, which knowledge and liberty has given them, so that the "new Earth" initiated by Christ may be manifest in the historical experience of all the people. This molding is to take place within each believer and on all levels of family, social and political life.

The first plane of the mission is carried out by the Church as the Body of Christ in its totality, and those who exercise the ordained ministry are specifically but not exclusively charged to carry it out, for in accord with the gifts received and the concrete possibilities all the People of God must also participate actively in this phase of ecclesial commitment.

The second plane of the mission is exercised by believers as individuals, but still as members of the Body of Christ. The first level is exercised wholly and completely from the light of faith in accord with the content of Divine Revelation expressed in the Holy Scripture and in the living Tradition. The believers enact the second level with the liberty and responsibility that they enjoy as children of God and with the autonomy necessary to enter into open dialogue with the realities of the world to stimulate its growth and transformation.

An appropriate comprehension of the difference between these two planes is indispensable especially when people live in an open and pluralist society such as ours. On the one hand, clericalism and pseudo-theocracies are avoided. Clericalism occurs when the religious hierarchy tries to impose on the people specific social, political, and economic models that are based on a mistaken understanding of Revelation. In many cases they even presume to manage these aspects of social life. Pseudo-theocracies are established when clerics pretend to

base on Holy Scripture the moral, political or economic systems that they are trying to impose on society, thereby closing off pluralism and suppressing the rights of minorities.

On the other hand, false spiritualities and dualisms are avoided. Dualism occurs when believers' faith is completely separated and cut off from moral, social and political decisions. I believe that in this context we can understand the significance of the dialogue that, according to the Gospel, the Pharisees and Herodians had with Jesus about taxes. They said to Jesus, *"Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor?"* Jesus was aware of their malicious intention and said to them, *"You hypocrites! Why are you trying to catch me out? Show me the money in which the tax is paid."* They handed him a silver piece. Jesus asked, *"Whose head is this, and whose inscription?"* 'Caesar's,' they replied. He said to them, *"Then pay Caesar what is due to Caesar, and pay to God what is due to God."*^{xiii}

Jesus's answer stands against dualism. It also stands against a spiritualism that does not distinguish the two planes from each other. Applying the same logic of his answer to the individual human being, we can affirm that if, *"when God created man, he created him in his image,"*^{xiv} the latter belongs to God totally and unconditionally. And, this same human being who, as creature and believer belongs to God, as a member of a society and as a citizen has to give to the emperor what is the emperor's; that is to say, that without renouncing the illumination that faith gives, he has to act in social, political and economic spheres in accord with their logic and with the specific context of the society and the conditions and concrete standards that govern the various processes where he lives.

3. Practical Difficulties in Carrying out the Mission of the Church

The practical problem to be confronted is that the road by which the believer arrives at spiritual maturity and transformation is a long process, and one that requires the Church's pastoral work to be particularly effective. However, regardless of the point to which his or her faith has grown, the believer has to accept social and political responsibilities, often without having the knowledge and experience required, and being influenced by a series of pressures and manipulations coming from people around. In such circumstances and in face of these limitations, it is easy for pastors to yield to the temptation to manipulate the conscience of the faithful, and provide partial, one-sided, tendentious self-interested information that, instead of helping to make free, responsible and mature decisions possible, may foster ignorance and dependence. In order to avoid falling into that temptation, full cognizance must be taken both of the concrete situation and also of the external manipulations carried out by various groups on members of our communities.

4. Help that Ought to be Provided

When the spiritual growth and the capacity of discernment of the members of the communities has not reached an appropriate maturity, the Church's obligation may be to help each of its members to become aware of the rights and responsibilities that he or she has as a child of God, as a member of society, and as a citizen. Likewise, it can be necessary that mechanisms be sought by which the People of God may acquire information about the various social options that exist.

If it becomes appropriate to be involved in this work of raising awareness and imparting information, however, it is indispensable that certain standards be carefully observed, so that the two planes are in no way confused and that every form of manipulation is avoided.

* The information that is provided must be the most complete, fair, and objective possible.

* An effort must be made that the information not be filtered, but as much as possible let the people who hold a certain position present their in their own words.

* It must be clear that when questions of faith are involved, everyone must be subject to what is in the sources of Revelation; but when social, civic, or political questions are involved, each one has the responsibility to make mature decisions and enjoy the liberty of choosing the alternatives that in his or her judgment are most appropriate, free of anyone's pressure or influence.

Part Three. The Human Being's Mission in Creation

1. The Vision in Holy Scripture

Unlike mythic visions that see man as simply a part of nature and subject to natural forces, if he wants to maintain and achieve harmony, the biblical vision is fundamentally historical, that is, it considers the human being to have a creative and transformative role in the world, and in carrying it out one actualizes oneself as a person.

Holy Scripture enjoins us to believe that the world and all that is in it is the creation of God.^{xv} Furthermore, the human being, created in the image and likeness of God, participates in His creative power, and therefore is entrusted with the mission to dominate all creation.^{xvi}

The narrative of the second chapter of Genesis makes clear the capacity that the Lord transmits to man: *“God the Lord formed from the earth all the animals and all the birds and brought them to man so he might name them. Man gave a name to all the domestic animals, to all the birds and all the wild beasts, and that was its name.”*^{xvii}

In the biblical mentality, name indicates the identity, the significance, the meaning, that which something is. Therefore, in saying that the Lord decided that man might name all the created things, Scripture is indicating that the human being is the one who determines the meaning, the identity and the significance of everything that exists in the world.

It is from this awareness that the Psalmist sings, marveling at the grandeur of the human being: *“When I see the heavens that you made, and the moon and the stars that you put in it, I think, What is man? What is the human being? Why did you remember and care for him? For you made him almost like a god; you surround him with honor and dignity; you give him authority over your works; you put him above everything.”*^{xviii}

And a short time before the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus ben Sirac, speaking from the experience of the elect people, expresses the mission of being a human being in the world in the following way: *“So the Lord formed man out of the ground, ... and gave him power over all that is on the earth. He gave him authority like his own, he made him in His own image! He made all the other creatures fear him and gave him dominion over wild beasts and birds. He gave him intelligence, speech, eyes, ears and a mind for understanding. He endowed men with reason and judgment, and showed them good and evil.”*^{xix}

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ offered humanity the means to fulfill this mission completely. Speaking in the broadest context possible, St. Paul recalls this offer when he affirms, *“You ... have received ... the Spirit that makes you children of God. ... And this same Spirit joins our Spirit to give witness that we are children of God. And since we are his children, we also share in the inheritance that God has promised us.”*^{xx}

2. Scientific and Technological Advances and the Mission of Being Human

Participants in life and in divine attributes, human beings are therefore called to transform the creation so that it may be fruitful and productive and serve to satisfy everyone's needs, making it possible for each person to lead a dignified and prosperous life.

When we see the strides taken in the last century in the fields of science, health, technology, industrial production, and many other aspects of the life, we have to recognize that these advances do indeed reflect precisely the capacity and

resources that God has provided in order that human beings carry out the mission in the world that He has entrusted to them.

Progress, of course, inevitably involves risks, and one has to regret that in many cases the use of scientific and technological advances and of natural resources has been irresponsible and, far from dignifying humanity and serving life and progress, has instead brought about destruction and death.

But these risks and tragic mistakes do not change the fact that if science, technology and other means available for human progress are used in a responsible, rational, respectful, and inclusive way, they may be a marvelous instrument for accomplishing the mission humans received in creation.

3. Possibilities and Responsibilities vis-à-vis Natural Resources

If from the perspective of Holy Scripture we reflect on life in most parts of rural Guatemala, we see huge challenges and contradictions.

It is shameful that often, instead of making natural resources generate progress and satisfy fully the needs of those who count on them, they are exhausted, become sterile or are progressively destroyed because the poor people, in their struggle for daily subsistence, use them in an irrational and disorderly way.

There are alternatives of appropriate management, however, that offer a promising future.

Although the rural populations are often not the legal proprietors of natural resources, they are at least their guardians. Nevertheless, they do not have the technology or economic resources to make them productive, and instead they often destroy or use them up. They lack the wherewithal to use them in a rational way, as conservators who establish mechanisms of production and sources of work. Such mechanisms would permit the inhabitants to meet their needs and live a dignified life without having to leave their homes to find work.

This reality can be confronted appropriately only if, through dialogue, accords can be established whereby the populace, as proprietors or guardians of the natural resources, have access to the technological and economic resources which bring mutual benefits.

The people have to take care that on entering these dialogues they do not resort to using intermediaries who are seeking to use them to gain power and economic, social or personal political benefits, as has frequently happened with certain religious, social or ethnic leaders who have become involved in these processes.

4. Objectives for the Use of Natural Resources

Often the benefits that are offered to the rural people in negotiating the use of natural resources are limited to special favors that may help meet immediate necessities or to infrastructure projects that are never used for lack of resources for maintaining them.

Without necessarily giving up immediate benefits, they should seek guarantees that stable sources of work in which fair salaries may be earned will be established. In this way the people can stay in the areas they inhabit and will have the means to lead a dignified and prosperous life.

It is also indispensable that there be assurances that the environment will be effectively protected and that in the production processes all possible technological resources be used to keep to an absolute minimum the risks that unfortunately are inevitable in carrying out any human activity.

If accords are established that include steps that assure the protection of nature, that will make the natural world productive, and that guarantee that work and prosperity will come to the people, the mission that God entrusted to human beings in creation would be carried forward. In addition, these steps would allow personal, family, and community life to be solidified, and for life on all these levels to progress and to reflect the harmony, joy and liberty that God wants for each of His children.

Part Four

Some Criteria for the Conscientious and Responsible Execution of Community, Social and Political Tasks

1. Active Participation in Community and Social Life

Anyone who authentically and deeply lives his or her faith cannot be indifferent or apathetic vis-à-vis social problems.

We all know that the fundamental law that Jesus gave us is that of love: *“I give you this new commandment: That you love one another. As I love you, so ought you to love each other. If you love one another, all the world will know that you are my disciples.”*^{xxi}

And James in his letter ties the authenticity of faith to the fruits that it inevitably produces: *“My brothers, what use is it for a man to say he has faith when he does nothing to show it? Can that faith save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is in rags with not enough food for the day, and one of you says, ‘Good luck to you; keep yourselves warm and have plenty to eat,’ but does nothing to supply*

their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So it is with faith; if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing.^{xxii}

It follows from this that it is essential for Christians to realize that the authenticity of the new life in the Holy Spirit has to be demonstrated by concrete actions. Therefore, sensitivity to problems and commitment to face difficulties in social life necessarily constitute dimensions of living the new life in the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we have not always insisted sufficiently on the practical implications of our faith on all levels of life. If that has been the case, it is time that we insist on them and that we commit ourselves to making everyone fully aware that active, enthusiastic, and unstinting participation in projects that benefit the community, in activities that tend toward the attainment of the common good, in helping and protecting those who are pushed into the margins and are most needy, and in initiatives or whatever kind that leads toward constructing a more just, respectful, and inclusive society, is part of the life of faith and one of the signs that it is authentic.

2. To Gain and Disseminate Information

As we mentioned in the second part of the letter,^{xxiii} in certain circumstances it can be necessary to develop mechanisms whereby the People of God can be informed appropriately and adequately concerning the various alternative, opportunities, commitments and projects on which they have to take a position.

The information ought to be offered—as also already mentioned—in the most objective form possible. That implies using all available resources in gaining and spreading information and taking steps to provide them directly and in their original form to the people.

To disseminate information, forums, debates, seminars, meetings, dialogues and other activities in which all the parties can equally put forward their points of view, may offer the space in which to formulate questions. Possibly, there can also be debates among those who have information to share, so that the People of God may get the complete and impartial information that they need.

When the situation warrants it, in addition to offering information, questions related to participation in certain public programs can be addressed. In these cases, it is necessary to urge members of our communities who need these programs to fulfill all the requirements asked of them in order that they can receive the benefits, for generally they are financed with public funds. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to help them be aware that participation in such programs does not create an obligation to vote for a certain party even if, in order to be able to receive the benefits, one may be obliged to be affiliated with some political organization.

3. To Stimulate and Support Proposals that Are Conducive to the Community Dialogue

Perhaps the greatest sources of conflicts that have been generated among the rural populations have been the social, religious or ethnic organizations that, pursuing their own interests, have manipulated community feeling by giving incomplete information, creating false fears, or even threatening those who do not participate in the programs that they are developing and do not ally themselves with them and support their proposals.

In spite of this risk, it is necessary to recognize the need for proposals that lead to dialogue and that, when it is a matter of starting community projects, help to channel them, and that in a generous, wise and prudent way seek the people's prosperity through the use of natural resources and the implementation of initiatives of common benefit.

We think that in many cases it can also be part of our mission to stimulate the creation of these proposals and when they already exist to give them appropriate support.

In these proposals the Ancestral Authorities or Indigenous Mayors have a privileged place, for they represent the wisdom and the deep feeling of the people. Where these proposals or similar ones exist, it can be fitting to give them necessary support so that alternatives can be sought and dialogues established that promote the prosperity of the peoples, the solution of conflicts, harmony and reconciliation.

In exceptional circumstances it can happen that it may even be necessary for the servants in our communities to become involved more directly in the organization and functioning of the dialogue. In these cases steps should be taken to make these as representative as possible and ensure that all the processes are carried out in an honest and transparent way. Care must also be taken that the common good and the moral, social, and economic progress of all the members of the society are sought with absolute sincerity and that the protection and improvement of the environment is guaranteed.

4. To Accept Community Assignments and Carry Them Out in an Exemplary Way

Towns and villages have a series of community services such as Auxiliary Mayors, Community Councils for Development, Committees that promote specific improvement projects, organized groups of women, and so on.

Since many servants and members of our communities are recognized as honorable and responsible citizens, it is not uncommon for them to be called upon to exercise some of these community services.

In these cases, it is important that some of the faithful be consulted and the illumination of the Lord be sought. If at the end of this process it is discovered that one is able to exercise the responsibility, one has the moral obligation to accept it.

When a responsibility is accepted, it must be exercised in an honest way, with dedication, impartiality and justice. One must not favor anyone to the disadvantage of another. One must not accept any kind of bribe. Independently of people's religious convictions or ideas, everyone must be treated equally, for, according to the Gospel, Christian perfection is thereby shown forth.^{xxiv}

In this respect the book of Deuteronomy gives us a perspective that can summarize what ought to be the community servant's attitude: *"You shall not pervert the course of justice or show favor, nor shall you accept a bribe; for bribery makes the wise man blind and the just man give a crooked answer. Justice and justice alone, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land which the Lord your God is giving you."*^{xxv} To carry out a responsibility in an exemplary way is an effective way to evangelize and to give witness to your faith before the whole population.

If, in carrying out a community responsibility, a servant cannot exercise with the same dedication the responsibilities that he or she has in one of our communities, it is important that this be understood and that a way be sought to give the community the help it needs to continue in its normal way.

5. To Participate by Voting in the Elections

The election of those who are charged to govern is also a responsibility of the believers, as part of their faith. The Lord delegates to the people that responsibility and gives them clear training: *"You shall appoint for yourselves judges and officials ... in every settlement which the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall dispense true justice to the people."*^{xxvi}

Participation in the election process leads to showing up at the polls to vote when elections are held. Members of our communities can not separate conscientious and responsible participation in the elections from their life of faith.

In order to vote responsibly and conscientiously, it is important not to be swayed by interests that matter to you and not the community, nor by promises that bring advantages to individuals, nor by mere personal sympathy.

Before voting, one needs to take into consideration the government's programs, the nature of the people who are proposing new programs, the possible members of their cabinets, and their ability to carry them out.

If a candidate approaches the leaders of our communities with material offers in exchange for support, it is very important that the temptation be resisted to influence the exercise of liberty and political responsibility of others. To anyone who approaches a leader in the community, one can offer spiritual help through prayer so that, if it is the will of God for him to win, he may exercise his functions with honesty and competence. Nevertheless, political help must never be offered to anyone, because that would confuse and betray the very mission that we have received as the Church and would violate the liberty that the faithful have in this dimension of life.

In our communities, therefore, it is very important for all our members to be aware of their responsibility to participate in elections by voting and for them to receive whatever help is necessary to be able to vote conscientiously, freely, and maturely.

6. If One Is Called by the Lord to Participate in Partisan Politics

It is possible that in some specific cases some servant or other member of one of our communities is invited to participate actively in partisan politics, presenting him- or herself as a candidate for a political office.

In these cases, there ought to be consultation with other faithful as well as prayer to discern if the Lord is in fact calling the person to participate in this way and if he or she has the ability to carry out aptly and effectively the office that he or she intends to run for.

* If they arrive at the conclusion that this participation is acceptable in the eyes of the Lord, it may be appropriate that one who has an active ministry in the community ask permission not to exercise it during the time in which he or she is involved in politics. The reason for this is that the active implication of a servant in the political party can generate mistrust among the faithful who do not have the same ideas or make the same choices; he or she is open to exercise inappropriate influence and pressures; and it can even cause some of the faithful to marginalize themselves or exclude themselves from community life. This requirement does not mean, however, that one who is involved in politics ought not to be encouraged to continue participating as an active member in the community.

* If one of our members wins the election, he or she is called to exercise the office with the attitude and characteristics laid out for those who discharge a responsibility within the community.^{xxvii} Public work, exercised in an exemplary

way, witnesses to the faith, and at the same time a more just and brotherly society can be built.

CONCLUSION

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I think that in the reflections above I have not done more than to give shape to the sense of our Church concerning the position that we share with respect to community, social, and political questions. The Pastoral Letter, as we said in the Introduction, is simply presenting those fundamentals on which consensus was achieved in our dialogues and meetings.

We hope that the reflections and criteria laid out here help each of the faithful who make up the Church to be aware of the social and political implications that a profound and embodied faith involves. In addition, we trust that models are offered here that are needed in order to take on the attitudes, positions, and commitments that will make manifest the new life in the Holy Spirit by promoting and involving ourselves in the construction of more human and humane societies. In this way we hope that soon love, reconciliation and peace may take the place of violence, confrontations, and crime, and that prosperity, progress, and justice may replace poverty, resignation, and injustice; so that, step by step all human beings, seeing ourselves as true children of God, created in His image and likeness and redeemed by the precious blood of his Son, we may reach harmony and unity while giving deep respect to pluralism and diversity.

We ask the Lord that He may illumine the minds and guide the hearts of those persons presenting themselves for an elective office in such a way that during the campaign confrontation may be avoided, parties and candidates will abstain from attacking their opponents, and focus on presenting before the populace concrete proposals that are capable of giving long-term solutions to the challenges that exist today.

Finally, we pray to Saint Mary, in whose womb began the new heaven and the new earth when she unconditionally accepted the call of the Lord, that she, as our Mother, may intercede for all, so that we, taking on her attitude, may be valid instruments through which the new heaven may become present among us and the new earth may be manifest in justice, reconciliation and peace among all human beings.

San Lucas Sacatepéquez, June twelve, Solemnity of Pentecost of the year of our Lord 2011.

With my pastoral blessing.

+Eduardo Aguirre Oestmann
Primate Bishop of ICERGUA

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- i Revelation 21:1. The translations are those in the New English Bible.
- ii Luke 17:21
- iii Revelation 21:4
- iv Mark 16:16; Matthew 28:19-20
- v John 1:12-13
- vi 2 Corinthians 3:16-18
- vii I John 2:27
- viii St. Cyril de Alexandria, *Commentaries on the Gospel of John*, 10:2
- ix See John 2:27
- x See Psalm 85:10-11
- xi See Revelation 21:1
- xii See 2 Corinthians 7:17
- xiii Matthew 22:17-21
- xiv Genesis 1:27
- xv Genesis 1:1; 2:1
- xvi See Genesis 1:27-29
- xvii Genesis 2:19-20
- xviii Psalm 8
- xix Ecclesiasticus 17:1-7
- xx Romans 8:15-17
- xxi John 13: 34-35
- xxii James 2:14-17
- xxiii Third Pastoral Letter, Part Two, item 4
- xxiv "I say to you: Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. Thus you will children of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes the sun shine on the bad and the good, and sends rain for the just and the unjust. Because if you love only those who love you, what reward do you expect? Even those who collect taxes for the Romans do that. And if you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly father's goodness knows no bounds."
- xxv Deuteronomy 16:19-20
- xxvi Deuteronomy 16:18
- xxvii See Third Pastoral Letter, Part 4, item 4.