

THE CRY FOR LAND



*Joint Pastoral Letter
by the Guatemalan Bishops' Conference*



0.0 Introduction

0.1 *The cry for land* is undoubtedly the strongest, most dramatic and most desperate cry heard in Guatemala. It bursts forth from millions of Guatemalan hearts yearning not only to possess the land, but to be possessed by it. It is a cry from the "People of Corn" who on the one hand identify with furrows, sowing, and harvest, and who on the other hand find themselves expelled from the land by an unjust and punitive system. They are like strangers in the land which belonged to them for thousands of years; they are considered second-class citizens in the nation forged by their extraordinary ancestors.

0.2 Perhaps there is no subject which awakens more fierce passion and gives rise to more radical and irreconcilable positions than does the subject of land owner-

ship. But it is a subject which must be dealt with in an attempt to begin to solve the great problems troubling us.

0.3 Through this Pastoral Letter, we wish to invite all Guatemalans, especially those who profess to be Catholics, to reflect sincerely and in depth on this most difficult problem, letting ourselves be enlightened by the Word of God and establishing solid foundations on which we can build a better homeland.

0.4 Our letter is made up of three large sections:

—The Agrarian Problem in Guatemala

—Theological Insights

—Pastoral Conclusions

1.0 **The Agrarian Problem in Guatemala**

1.1 In fulfillment of our pastoral mission, we want to point out once again the critical situation of the majority of Guatemalans in rural areas. Like the Latin American Bishops at Puebla, we too feel and observe that “the most devastating and humiliating scourge” (no. 29) in Guatemala is the situation of dehumanizing poverty suffered by the campesinos (Guatemalan peasants) who painfully bring forth from Guatemalan soil a daily sustenance for themselves and their families. Rightfully called dehumanizing, this poverty is expressed by a high rate of illiteracy, by the mortality rate, by the lack of housing adequate to the dignity of the family, by unemployment and underemployment, by malnutrition and by other ills which we have carried with us for years.

1.1.1 The pitiable conditions lead us to question a system that produces inequities between those who enjoy possession of the goods of the earth even unto excess, and those who possess nothing or almost nothing. This breach between classes continues to widen, even amidst a people who profess to be Christian.

1.1.2 This is not the first time that we Guatemalan Bishops have denounced this injustice and labeled it as contrary to the Salvific Plan of God, our Father. Nor is this the first time that we have declared this the great challenge of our time in history, and that this marginalization endured by so many human beings is an appeal to us as people and as Christians. In our pastoral letters, we have already pointed out in the light of the Gospel that such an abysmal situation is not an accidental stage but rather the product of a sinful situation which is preventing a viable solution to the problem.

1.1.3 Gravity of the Agricultural Problem

1.1.3.1 We seriously want to invite faithful Christians and people of good will to reflect upon the critical nature of the poverty and misery endured by campesinos, because we are convinced that no situation is so painful and calls more urgently for resolution. There are many problems afflicting our brothers and sisters in the rural areas in their long calvary of suffering. However, their dispossession of the land should be considered the nucleus of the social problem in Guatemala.

1.1.3.2 It is a fact that the majority of arable land is in the hands of a privileged few, while the majority of campesinos own no plot of land on which to sow their crops. This situation, far from pointing toward a solution, becomes day by day more harsh and painful. Certainly the critical problem of land ownership is at the very heart of the propagation of injustice.

1.2 *Political System of Land Ownership from Colonial Times to Present*

1.2.1 To attempt to get to the bottom of the social problem and its roots, we must recognize that the present situation has its origins in the system of land ownership imposed in colonial times. This is preserved with many of its flaws, vices, and structures of unequal and unjust distribution even to our own times.

1.2.2 During the colonial period, the policy of land ownership was determined by a two-pronged principle. On the one hand, giving over of large land extensions to a group of colonizers favored by the Spanish crown with "encomiendas" and "royal possessions" and on the other hand by exploiting the unpaid Indian labor force for the sake of production, the people could cultivate land for themselves.

1.2.3 The period of independence, far from actually resolving these problems, accentuated by its arbitrary laws the concentration of land in the hands of the privileged few.

1.2.4 The situation was aggravated by the liberal reform of 1871 which, in order to promote coffee production, discouraged communal lands and the distributing of vast land extensions among a middle class, giving origin to a powerful class of agricultural exporters.

1.2.5 During what has been called the second revolutionary government (1950 to 1954), a careful agrarian reform process was begun which, although flawed, has

been the only serious attempt to modify an unjust structure. We all know the reaction which this produced among its detractors and how it was abruptly ended.

1.3 *Unequal Distribution of the Land*

1.3.1 No one can deny the excessive inequality present today in regard to land ownership. The agrarian problem in Guatemala at the present time can be measured by merely considering the large landed estates and the small farms on the margin of which the great majority of campesinos who own no plot of land are situated.

1.3.2 Statistics drawn from the 1973 Agricultural Census demonstrate a dangerous concentration of land in a few hands with the majority of the population devoted to agriculture who are without adequate portions of land for tilling. The number of small landholders who own one block or less grew from 85,053 in 1964 to 247,090 in 1979. On the other hand, ever more land is concentrated in ever fewer hands, since the number of large landholders owning 855,800 acres (200 "caballerías") or more decreased from 9 to 4 between 1964 and 1979.

According to data from the Third National Agricultural Census of 1979, the distribution by number and area of farms in Guatemala is as presented in the following chart:

Number and Size of Farms in Guatemala - 1979				
Type of Farm	Number	Percent	Area (# of blocks)	Percent
Minifarms*	240,132	39.69	81,316	1.38
Subfamily farms	301,736	49.87	890,229	15.15
Family farms	79,509	8.19	1,115,739	18.98
Medium multifamily farms	13,179	2.18	2,596,551	44.18
Large multifamily farms	478	0.07	1,193,611	20.31
TOTAL	605,031	100.00	5,877,446	100.00

*Includes farms smaller than a plot of 625 square yards.

This chart shows that 39% of the mini-farms constitute but 1.38% of the total land area in farms. The situation is even more striking if it is taken into account that 89.56% of the farms (minifarms and subfamily farms) constitute but 16.53% of the

land area, while 2.25% of the farms (multifamily farms and large farms) constitute 64.51% of the area.

1.3.3 Such unequal land distribution results inevitably in grave socio-economic consequences and, above all, in a situation of violence among Guatemalan farmers.

1.4 *Socio-Economic Consequences of Inequity in Land Ownership and Distribution*

1.4.1 Breach Between Rich and Poor, Between Large Landowners and Small Landowners, Between Agricultural Exporters and Campesinos

1.4.1.1 The agricultural export sector, owning huge and fertile land areas, holds the best arable lands and the means of agricultural production. This elite in Guatemala produces and sells the goods which then receive the highest prices in the international market. These include coffee, cardamon, cotton, bananas, cattle, and other traditional exports. This sector's economic solvency permits it to mechanize its cultivation process and to encounter bank credits with great facility. It must be recognized that it is the agricultural export sector which contributes most to obtaining the foreign exchange so urgently needed by Guatemala and which creates large numbers of jobs.

1.4.1.2 In contrast, there are very few campesino landowners, since the majority own no land. Those who do are devoted to subsistence farming on mini-plots where they sow only corn and beans. Large numbers find themselves obliged to rent land and are the victims of unfair speculation or are compelled to go down to the coast in unacceptable conditions. The difficulty of obtaining bank credits and the lack of adequate technical preparation leads them to exploit the land according to archaic systems, some of which are very damaging to the ecology. The majority do not benefit from any insurance system, nor do they have any possibilities of saving, so that a drought or a bad winter brings them to the brink of starvation and death.

1.4.2 Margination of the Campesino

1.4.2.1 It is no secret that the Guatemalan campesino is caught in a situation of desperate margination. The goods and services which the State is obliged to provide to all Guatemalans never reach the majority: neither do elementary school nor informal education; neither sanitary assistance nor any social security; nor any housing that has a modicum of hygiene and dignity.

1.4.2.2 Campesinos have extreme difficulty in trying to move beyond their marginalization because of scant opportunities, lack of preparation, and due to the very structure of Guatemalan society which is organized for the benefit of a minority and with no regard for the vast majority of Guatemalans. It has come to seem natural for us to see the campesino or Indian dressed in rags, sick, dirty, and despised. We call the damp, unlivable, and unsanitary shacks "folklore" and tourist attractions. We are not shocked to see tiny children trudging off with their machete or hoe early in the morning beside the men, to carry out a hard and poorly paid day's work. We fail to react before the shameful spectacle of thousands of Indian peasants transported to the coastal plantations in trucks without security or even minimal comfort. This attitude on the part of those of us who are not campesinos toward our Guatemalan brothers and sisters is but a reflection of our Nation's social and economic structure. The constitutional precept which establishes the equality of all citizens is not honored. Public funds are principally aimed for the benefit of those of us who use the highways, airports, electric lights, universities, and hospitals. There are several million Guatemalans who don't benefit from these services, although they have contributed their share of taxes, have been obliged to do military service and to lose millions of work-hours in the Civil Defense Patrols. A huge social debt weighs upon the entire Nation.

1.4.3 Exploitation of Campesinos

1.4.3.1 In our society the campesino is frequently exploited in a ruthless and inhumane way. The campesino continues to be the cheapest and most cruelly exploited labor force. It is obvious that the legal minimum wage of Q4.50 (\$1.50) is insufficient nowadays, given the high cost of living. And, although there are some employers who pay more than the minimum legal wage and organize a system of loans and benefits, many still resist paying even the minimum wage. Then there are those who find a way to get around it, taking advantage of the extreme need in which the campesinos find themselves. To argue these cases for the law of supply and demand is, from every point of view, unjust and inhumane. Human work is not a marketable item!

1.4.3.2 Some people's attitudes toward campesinos are so harsh that in order to increase their profits, they go as far as eradicating the "mozo colono" tradition (one's right to work a given piece of land on a plantation or farm because one's family has served the plantation/farm for generations). This pre-capitalist, anachronistic and paternalistic relationship provides the campesino, who has lived for generations on a particular plantation, a certain statute guaranteeing him a kind of stability and right

to work on that property and to continue cultivating certain strips of land for his own use. Certainly this represents a burden to the employer or owner, because it carries with it some minimal social responsibilities and honors certain rights. Even this, miserable and imperfect as it is, they seek to wipe out. Many landowners exert pressures and resort to clever tricks, not excluding armed violence, to discourage the "mozos colonos" and to force these campesinos to leave the farm in which they and their parents and grandparents were born and where they have established their home. It just so happens that it is easier and less complicated to bring in work crews each year at harvest time in a system which adds to the impoverishment of campesinos.

Over the course of many decades, a grave problem has been generated in Guatemala by those who work as intermediaries and/or negotiators of legal-administrative matters before government institutions, as by middle-men in agricultural commerce, those who hire or bring in laborers. These, too, participate in the exploitation of campesinos and in their impoverishment. It can be said that this is an institutionalized problem, since it is commonly accepted by the society. It is sad to see that even liberal professionals, unscrupulous businessmen, and landowners participate in these schemes which deepen the wounds of their own people.

1.4.4 Dirth of Legal Help for Defending the Campesino's Rights to Land

1.4.4.1 We should not be surprised that this unjust social situation is one of the reasons why campesinos flee from their places of origin and migrate to the city, seeing it as a refuge from their misery and as a possible solution to their extreme poverty. The campesino thus arrives in town or city, swelling the ranks of the unemployed, multiplying the slum areas, and many times falling into the webs and vice of delinquency. It is not unusual that campesinos also lose the only possession they have left, their Catholic faith. In this way millions of campesino families have been violently forced to flee their lands to seek refuge beyond their own homeland. The grave problems which municipalities face in providing indispensable public services will continue to increase daily as campesinos abandon their "trabajaderos" (workplaces). Simultaneously hospital health service, educational service in government schools, and all public services generally will become more inadequate and insufficient.

1.4.5 Growing Violence in the Countryside

1.4.5.1 Violence in the rural area is common. The very situation of desperation is a source of many tensions that are a shout of protest and a cry of desperation from hundreds of thousands of people. Nothing is solved if we merely try to place blame

on agitators or leaders, since the root of the evil is in the social situation itself. All of us inhabitants of our country must open our eyes to the gravity of the problem.

1.4.5.2 We observe joyfully that the campesinos are daily reaching a greater awareness of their rights and of their own dignity. This is an irreversible move forward and, despite the continuing and brutal repression to which they have been subjected, theirs is a legitimate cry and action in defense of the land.

But we fear that without proper accommodation for these hopes and if mechanisms are not established for responding quickly and effectively to their request, an outburst of violence may result with unforeseen consequences. We have in mind the painful case of Panzos in Alta Verapaz. It is a tragedy and a crime which we still remember and condemn, since we know well that just ten years ago more than a hundred Kek'chi Indians were massacred over land problems. This could happen again in any place and at any moment. The multitudinous demonstrations held in many parts of Guatemala are an indication of the troublesome situation in the rural area. Because of it, we repeat again with Pope John Paul II: "To forestall any extremism and to consolidate an authentic peace, there is no better way than to return their dignity to those who suffer injustice, contempt and misery" (John Paul II, Homily at Campo de Marte, March 7, 1983, 6).

In the light of God's Word and the Church Magisterium, we want to offer to the faithful and to all people of good will a word of guidance regarding the Christian meaning of land ownership.

2.0 **Theological Insights**

2.1 *Sacred Scripture*

2.1.1 The Earth, a Gift of God

In the Bible the subject of land is important, because from the dawn of creation to the Apocalypse the human person develops in a particular land, God's gift and the habitation of God with people.

Scripture describes for us the origin of humanity, saying that it was created in the image of God (Gn 1:26). This is the theological basis for human dignity. God also blessed that humanity created as man and woman (Gn 1:27) that it might multiply, filling and submitting the earth. The fruits of the earth were given them as food (Gn 1:27). The earth is, then, according to God's plan, humanity's world.

Man and woman belong to the earth (Gn 2:7) and it belongs to them because right after creating them God charges them with tilling and caring for the earth (Gn 2:15). Thus farmwork appears as the essential task defining and situating the human person in the world and before God.

2.1.2 Shared Joy

Many Scripture texts express humanity's joy at the fruit of their labors on the earth and their gratitude to God for the divine blessing. When the earth gives its harvest, men and women know that God is blessing them (Ps 67:7; 85:13).

The joy with which people gather up the first fruits and conclude the harvest was in the ancient people of God an occasion for the family to make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Lord and to celebrate there a fiesta in God's honor (Dt 16:1-15).

These agricultural feasts, continued now in the completely new light of our Christian Easter and Pentecost feasts, teach us to rejoice before the Lord for the goods of the earth, and show us that we should share with those who have less the abundance with which God has blessed us.

2.1.3 The Earth a Sign of Covenant Between God and Humanity

The Lord promises his oppressed people in Egypt that God will guide them to a good and spacious land yielding milk and honey (Ex 3:8). Thus the promise made to Abraham is gathered up again (Gn 12:1).

When the Israelite offered the first fruits of the earth, he remembered that the earth and those fruits were a gift from God (Dt 26:9-10). When the people came into possession of the earth, each tribe was assigned its territory according to its inhabitants: "You shall increase the legacy of the numerous and reduce that of the meager" (Nm 26:54). In this way no individual nor tribe will come into possession of the land by depriving others of their livelihood.

The earth does not belong to men but to the Lord, and what each one calls his property is in reality the portion to which he is entitled in order to make a living. The earth is the Lord's and the bounty thereof, the world and those who inhabit therein (Ps 24:1).

2.1.4 A Prophetic Denouncing of Sin

The voice of the prophets was raised to denounce those who hoarded the earth with greed to the detriment of the poor and destitute: "Woe unto you who gather house upon house and field upon field, annexing until you occupy the whole place and are the sole inhabitants of the country! Thus has the Lord of hosts sworn to my ears: "Many great and beautiful homes shall be left abandoned, without inhabitants" (Is 5:8-9). "Woe unto those who meditate upon evil. They covet fields and steal them, homes and usurp them, they do violence to a man and to his house, to an individual and his inheritance. Behold I am preparing an hour of misfortune against you who do this from which you shall never escape" (Mi 2:1-2).

The prophet's voice was also raised against those who did not pay or who gave unjust wages to their workers: "Woe unto the one who builds his house without jus-

tice and his foundations without righteousness! He takes advantage of his neighbor and does not pay the neighbor for his work” (Jer 22:13). These are those who, “resting upon marble beds, lounging upon their couches, drink wine from large cups, anoint themselves with the best of perfumes, but care nothing for the ruin of my people” (Am 6:4-6).

This denunciation of avarice and of the excessive wealth attained by the hoarding of land and by the paying of unjust wages is also repeated in the New Testament writings. “You rich, weep and cry out over the disgraces which are about to fall upon you! Look, the salary you have not paid to the workers who harvested your fields is shouting, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived in luxury upon the earth and given yourselves over to pleasures” (Jas 5:1, 4-5).

2.1.5 Jesus the Poor Points Out to the Wealthy Their Responsibility

Jesus, the Son of God, Lord of heaven and earth, has nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58). He being rich, became poor for our sake. This poverty freed him to carry out his mission: “To evangelize the poor” (Lk 4:18).

Jesus does not present himself as a judge or arbiter in the distribution of legacies. On one occasion he rejects such a request in order to make evident that earthly goods do not guarantee one’s existence.

Then he tells the parable of the man whose fields gave forth such an abundant harvest that he had to put up new, much larger grain bins in order to store it. He thought that with this he would have enough to live for many years, but that night he died (Lk 12:13-21). This is why Jesus also calls down woe upon the rich and upon those who are full (Lk 6:24-25). And he describes money as “unjust” (Lk 16:9) when there is at the origin of great wealth the exploitation of the weak. That is why Jesus commands the rich who want to follow him to place their wealth at the service of the needy: “*Sell what you have and give alms*” (Lk 12:33).

The concept of “alms,” so frequent in the New Testament, should be correctly understood. It was an ancient practice by which the most powerful members of a population took charge of the neediest in the community—the orphans, widows, strangers—providing for them a means of subsistence. The concept, then, expresses the moral responsibility of one who has more toward those without possessions (Dt 15:7-8; 10, 11).

2.1.6 The Paschal Mystery of Christ Transforms Creation

The New Testament affirms that the world was created by the One who is the Word of God and that without Him nothing of what exists was created (Jn 1:3). This Word of God became flesh, truly a human being in Jesus (Jn 1:14). In such a way Jesus can be called the “first-born of all creation.” It is not that He was the first of creatures, but

that all that exists finds its meaning in Him, “because in Him were created all things and everything was created by Him and for Him” (Col 1:15, 16).

Because of this, Christ’s redeeming work affects not only the group of believers of humanity alone; but rather by his death and resurrection, Christ reconciled all things with God, “pacifying, by the blood of His cross, everything on earth and in the heavens” (Col 1:20). Christ’s Paschal Mystery has transformed human beings from sinners to the just who live for God (Rom 6:11). But creation has been redeemed, too, together with people, and groans in “the hope of being freed from its servitude to corruption in order to participate in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:20-21). This liberation begins for creation when the goods of the earth cease to be instruments of human rivalry and exploitation in order to become a means of friendship and communion.

2.1.7 The Earth and Wealth at the Service of Friendship

The effect of the transformation brought about by Christ’s Paschal Mystery is palpable in the first Christian community called together by the Risen Lord in the power of the Spirit. It is true that in this community there is deceit and sin, as in the case of Ananias and Safira (Acts 5:1-11); however, the testimony of friendship prevails, a friendship which unites all the believers: “the multitude of believers had but one heart and a single soul. No one called their belongings their own, but rather everything was held in common among them. . . . There was in their midst no one in need, because all those who had fields or homes sold them, brought in the money from the sale and set it at the feet of the apostles, and they distributed it to each one according to their need” (Acts 4:32-35).

Faith in the Risen Lord and the friendship which thus results lead to a new earth in which justice is at home (2 Pt 3:13). “At that time there will be a new heaven and a new earth where there shall be no death nor tears, nor cries nor fatigue, because the old world shall have passed away” (Apoc 21:1-4).

That hope should encourage our awareness today so that in the meantime we may make of this earth a place of togetherness in justice and equity.

2.2 *Fathers of the Church and the Magisterium*

2.2.1 The Social Purpose of Property

The biblical teaching concerning land ownership has been studied and reflected upon in depth since the Church began. The Holy Fathers have left us an impressive wealth of thought and examples of action on topics such as the meaning of property, the role of earthly goods, and the demands of social justice.

The Church has always recognized the right of all people to own property sufficient for themselves and for their family (PP 22). However, this right to property

“constitutes for no one an unconditional and absolute right. There is no reason to reserve for one’s own exclusive use that goes beyond our need while others are lacking essentials” (PP 23).

This is the teaching which, like a river of pure water, flows through the history of the Church and which, in the recent period of Vatican Council II and under recent popes in their social encyclicals has been repeated tirelessly. “God has destined the earth and everything she contains for the use of all human beings and all people” (GS 69).

There is special vigor in the thought expressed by John Paul II during his inaugural address at the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops: “Upon all private property there is a grave *social responsibility*” (literally, a social *mortgage*) (III, 4). Because of this, the right to private property is not an absolute right, but rather a conditional one, limited by a broader and more universal principle: God has created all things for the use and benefit of all human beings, with no distinction whatsoever.

2.2.2 Land for All

The Holy Fathers have also referred directly to land distribution. Thus, for example, St. Ambrose declares: “It is not part of your (own) goods that you give to the poor, but rather what belongs to them. Because you have appropriated to yourself what was given for the use of everyone. The earth has been given for the whole world and not merely for the wealthy” (From Nabuthe, ch. 12, no. 53: P1 14, 747, cit. PP 23). St. John Chrysostom is even more explicit: “God never made some rich and others poor. God gave the earth to everyone. The whole earth belongs to the Lord, and the fruits of the earth should be available (lit. “common”) to all. “The ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ are motive and cause for discord. Community of goods is therefore a form of existence more adequate to our nature than is private property itself.

During his apostolic trips to Latin America, Pope John Paul II has been able to see and touch our reality and, since having this direct experience, he has strengthened Church doctrine on the subject of land.

When he experienced personally that a timid application of doctrinal principles resulted in conflictive social situations in which a large number of people had no access to the goods necessary for their human fulfillment, he expressed to the campesinos in Cuilapan, Mexico, the need for profound reforms: “As for you who are responsible for (whole) peoples, you powerful classes who sometimes hold uncultivated the land that hides a daily bread needed by so many: the human conscience, the conscience of nations, the cry of the destitute, and above all the Voice of God, the voice of the Church repeat with me: It is not just, nor is it human, nor Christian to continue on with certain situations which are clearly unjust” (no. 9).

In Recife, Brazil, John Paul II said to the farmers: "The earth is a gift from God, a gift God makes to every human being, men and women, whom God wants gathered together in a single family and related to one another with a spirit of friendship. It is not right, therefore, because it is not in harmony with God's plan, to use this gift in such a way that the earth's benefits favor just a few, leaving others, the immense majority, excluded" (Homily at the Mass celebrated for farmers, no. 4).

Today Guatemalan campesinos have an ever clearer awareness that they live in what Leo XIII and Paul VI called *undeserved misery* (9, 67). Because of this, they are raising their voices from all over the country, urging those responsible for the nation to "put into effect daring and profoundly innovative transformations . . . to bring about, without further delay, urgent reforms" (John Paul II to the campesinos in Cuilapan, no. 6) so that the goods created by God may reach everyone with equity, according to the rule of justice, inseparable from charity.

3.1 Pastoral Conclusions

3.1.1 Throughout these reflections we have reviewed the injustices the unequal land ownership in Guatemala engenders. We also have tried to sketch in the light of scriptural reflection and Church teaching, the divine plan for God's children. As shepherds of the Church in Guatemala, we have the grave obligation given us by our ministry to denounce the situation which is at the root of our dehumanizing poverty. We Christians should not only concern ourselves with the problems of our nation, but above all "involve ourselves" in them. The first step will be to become aware of the situation suffered by our campesino brothers and sisters.

3.1.2 Repetition of a Pastoral Denunciation

As we pointed out in 1984: "An evil distribution of property, immense extensions of uncultivated or insufficiently cultivated land make of our people a hungry, sickly people with a high mortality rate" (Message of the Guatemalan Episcopate, May 9, 1984).

3.1.3 In Pope John Paul II's Encyclical "Laborem Exercens," we read a description/denunciation which finds in Guatemala a desperate case in point: "In some developing countries, millions of people find themselves obliged to cultivate others' land and are exploited by large landowners, with no hope of managing to own some day even a tiny plot of land of their own. Long working days of heavy physical labor are paid miserably. Cultivated lands are abandoned by their owners, legal titles for possession of a small plot, cultivated over many years are not taken into account or are without defense in the face of the 'hunger for land' of more powerful individuals and groups" (LE 21).

3.1.4 Futile Cry of the Campesino

All these situations naturally provoke the outcry of the campesinos for their rights; but we know (because we have such recent experience that we cannot forget it) that the campesinos' cry has been stifled by the power of arms. Thousands of campesinos have been killed in Guatemala merely for having attempted a change of structure. Since then, as a result of this terrible repression suffered by Guatemalans, campesino organizations of whatever type are viewed with suspicion and there are no lack of coercive measures to suppress them. At this level there should be mentioned the role—forced (compliance) in practice—of the Civil Defense Patrols which enormously limit the campesinos' right of association. It is not unusual to learn that campesinos have been hunted down or “disappeared.” This list has become by now one of the most shameful and tragic in our history.

3.1.5 Dirth of Legal Backing

Unfortunately, as we pointed out above, there is a painful lack of legislation when it comes to defending the campesino and his rights or to really promoting them effectively. On the contrary, Guatemalan legislation seems designed to maintain a system of land ownership which benefits the large landowner and those who control economic and military power to the detriment of the campesinos and Indians. This legislation forms the basis and the legal framework for the unjust situation experienced in Guatemala, as we already stated several years ago in our Pastoral Letter, “United in Hope.”

3.2 *Episcopal Guidelines*

3.2.1 This entire list of negative circumstances cannot cause us as Christians to remain passive out of disappointment or discouragement. Our response must be a positive one. Evil and all its consequences have been overcome by Christ, who triumphed over sin and death. It is up to us to take this redemption to the sinful structures of our national situation.

3.2.2 Invitation to Solidarity

3.2.2.1 But this is a task that can only be carried out effectively if all of us do our part generously. Because of this, the first requirement is *solidarity*. Only insofar as we feel ourselves brothers and sisters in solidarity with one another can such a critical problem as the ownership and exploitation of land in Guatemala find channels for solution. Solidarity is the opposite of egotistical individualism, since it makes us think

of others at the same time as we think of our own needs. It makes us seek a solution to the problems of our neighbors. It has its basis in the Christian meaning of friendship, since solidarity is based precisely on a fundamental truth of Christianity: we are all brothers and sisters because we are children of the same God, we are gifted with the same dignity, we enjoy the same rights, and we are called to the same glorification with God.

3.2.2.2 At times of crisis, such as the one we are living in Guatemala, there is a tendency to forget everyone else and just try to save ourselves ("salvese quien pueda") which kills all sense of solidarity and throws people into a frenetic search for egotistical satisfactions leading to extremes of consumerism. We must react against such an orientation in our life and action, appealing to the great principles of our faith.

3.2.3 Integral Development

3.2.3.1 Another important aspect in the search for genuine and adequate solutions to the grave problems of land ownership is the effort to reach a high degree of development. But this will be not merely an economic development. Rather, it should be an authentic integral human and social development as expressed by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical "The Progress of Peoples," no. 35.

We should struggle so that this development may reach everyone, not just a privileged group. Development should reach the entire people.

3.2.3.2 If any sector should be privileged, let it be the campesino or Indian people, not simply because it is the majority of the Guatemalan population, but also because of a basic sense of justice, in order to compensate in some way for the centuries of abandonment they have endured, as if they were citizens of a second or inferior class. Guatemala will not progress as it should as long as, with inconceivable myopia, it tries to keep marginated the campesino and worker sectors, "the dynamizing force in the building up of a more participative society" (Puebla, 1245).

In effect, this has been one of the causes of Guatemala's greatest tragedy; preventing, out of egotism and irrational fear, the full use of the campesino potential to make the land produce abundantly.

If this sleeping giant is not invited and prepared to participate in the building up of a better Guatemala, it will awaken embittered by the contempt heaped upon it over many centuries and may become a source of even more painful and violent conflict.

3.2.4 Justice, Change of Social Structure

3.2.4.1 The Need and Urgency of Social Change

Nothing we have spoken of can come about unless we accept the idea that a change of sinful and obsolete social structures is necessary and urgent in Guatemala. We want to make our own the strong words of John Paul II in his historic message at Oaxaca, Mexico in 1979: "Real, efficacious measures must be put in practice at the local, national, and international levels along the broad lines set out in the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*."

3.2.4.2 The pope invites us to follow the broad guidelines set out by John XXI-II's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* which has been called the campesinos' "Magna Carta." This encyclical, in effect, highlights the emphasis that should be given to the agricultural sector when it says: "Now in order to attain a proportionate development among the different sectors of the economy, it is also absolutely essential [that there be] an economic policy in regard to farming, followed by public, political, and economic authorities, who must deal with the following areas: fiscal responsibility (taxation), credits, social security, prices, publicity, and complementary industries and, finally, the perfecting of the farming enterprise structure" (MM 131).

3.2.4.3 In harmony with Church doctrine and with the needs of Guatemala, the following measures, urgently needed to improve the situation, may be highlighted:

1. To legislate in view of an equitable land distribution, beginning with the vast government properties and "properties insufficiently cultivated, in favor of those able to make them fruitful" (GS 71).
2. To facilitate the presenting of additional titles for lands which the campesinos have been cultivating for years.
3. To guarantee legally the defense of campesinos and refugees so that they will not be stripped of their lands.
4. To defend the campesinos against speculation in the renting of lands to be cultivated.
5. To assure that campesinos receive a just and equitable price, protecting them from voracious and unscrupulous middlemen.

6. To give an adequate farming education to the greatest possible number of campesinos, so that they may improve their methods of cultivating and may be able to diversify their crops.
7. To grant the greatest possible facilities for bank credits and for acquiring seeds, fertilizers, and other materials and farming tools needed.
8. To increase the salary of the campesinos in accord with human dignity and their family responsibilities.
9. To open up channels and to create mechanisms so that the campesino can participate actively and directly in the local, regional, national, and even international marketplace.
10. To diminish the indirect taxes on the purchasing of products for farmwork.
11. To create direct taxes for large land extensions proportionate to the size of the lands.
12. To organize some kind of protective measures for campesinos against poor harvests and work accidents.
13. To stimulate and protect campesino organizations in defense of their rights and to increase their farm production.

3.2.5 Christian Characteristics in the Change of Structures

3.2.5.1 Nonviolence

We cannot resort to violence because it is neither evangelical nor Christian, but rather generates further violence in an endless spiral. As Christians, we have more confidence in the power of those who are nonviolent than in the brute force of those who place all their trust in armed homicides.

3.2.5.2 Legal Framework

A second characteristic is that the change of structures should be brought about legally. We advocate an adequate legislation which takes as its goal the common welfare and defense of the campesino who, as we have pointed out repeatedly, is in practice the weakest, poorest, and most defenseless sector in our society. We are convinced that measures which are in fact outside the law aggravate the problem (like

invading land—far from solving the agrarian problem, increase it) and lead to explosions which are impossible to control.

3.2.5.3 The Urgency of Change

We Christians are peaceful and builders of peace. We trust in the foundation of the law, in the value of what is reasonable, and above all, in the transforming power of love. And based upon this conviction, we demand that the changes which are indispensable for seeking adequate solutions to such an enormous problem be carried out urgently though without the haste which might diminish the reasonableness, efficacy, and credibility of the measures. We are aware that something which has been structured over the course of many centuries cannot be changed overnight. However, it is essential to delay no longer than necessary, as delay might aggravate the agrarian problem even further.

4.0 Conclusions

4.1 We have tried to promote a reflection which is deep, serene, sincere, and constructive on one of the most serious and complex problems in our Guatemalan panorama. In our judgment, this is the fundamental problem in the social structure of Guatemala. To solve it will mean having achieved, through a difficult but patriotic process, a basic change in Guatemalan history.

4.2 We have thus shed light on this reality with the Word of God and the teaching of the Church, demonstrating that it is not something foreign to our pastoral mission, but rather something that falls within the lines of our work as shepherds of the Church. Neither the sufferings nor the errors of the people entrusted to us can be beyond our concern.

For all these reasons, we have the hope that our faithful will read this Pastoral Letter attentively and will study it, trying to discover the very positive perspective that it offers for the future of our Guatemala. We also have the hope that everyone will commit themselves with a fraternal spirit to carrying out the tremendous task implied in finding an adequate and peaceful solution to such a grave problem.

Our pastoral invitation is sent with great hope to the government, to political parties, to Guatemala's productive forces, to the means of social communication, and to the private sector; also to Catholic lay movements and to the Indians and campesinos, inviting them to join forces fraternally and peacefully in an effort which calls for the commitment of every Guatemalan.

4.3 We recognize that in the final analysis the most difficult thing is personal conversion. Conversion means a "turning around," a radical change. As long as one's

only goal is profit, to grow rich, ambition for money or power, it is impossible to understand these truths which we have desired to bring to mind, and to see with Christian eyes the reality which must be transformed.

4.4 We have presented the human and moral aspects of the problem rather than delving more deeply into the technical and practical aspects which go beyond our mission. Our pastoral service is limited to a posing of the problem in the light of human dignity, the common good, and Christian love.

4.5 In concluding this letter, we ask God, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, mother of all people, who moves our hearts and illumines our understanding, that setting aside every violent, revengeful, and biased attitude, we may give a worthy, courageous, and Christian response to the tremendous "*cry for land.*"

Guatemala de la Asuncion, February 29, 1988

(Followed by the signatures of **Próspero Penados del Barrio**, Archbishop of Guatemala, **Rodolfo Quezada Toruño**, President of the Guatemalan Episcopal Conference, and the Bishops of Guatemala.)