

LENT, THE TRANSFIGURATION OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Second Sunday of Lent
March 11, 1979

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 15-18

Romans 8:31b-34

Mark 9:1-9

My dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience.

We hope that this morning the Electric Company will be able to give continuity to our message. I want to tell everyone that I do not believe that the blackout that occurred last Sunday was deliberate. I do not want to think in that way and I hope that my trust will receive a similar response and that an effort will be made to provide us with better service than last Sunday. I say this because this morning's message is very important --- the message begins with the figure of the transfigured Christ. We could say that for the Archdiocese, this Sunday in the Lenten season is an echo of August 6th. It is an honor to celebrate the patron feast of the Republic in honor of the Divine transfigured Lord and this morning, in the gospel, this celebration is repeated but placed in the context of Lent. Therefore before Holy Week we are able to reflect on the great message of the transfiguration.

The framework in which we view the Christ figure is even more important as we look at our situation here in El Salvador. A young deceased man was just carried from the Cathedral¹. He was killed yesterday during the strikes that have occurred as a result of the labor conflicts in La Constancia and La Tropical. This man was taken by his poor family to Cojutepeque where he will be buried. The Cathedral has had the motherly privilege of once again living in solidarity with pain and suffering. As a mother we placed in the arms of another mother this poor young man who was killed. This event makes us aware of the fact that we have a new victim as a result of our present situation.

This morning as we begin the celebration of the Mass here in the Cathedral, pilgrims have gathered together in Aguilares and will process to Paisnal. This is a procession of atonement, a procession of silence and prayer ---- a procession that defines us as a people of prayer and reflection as we honor the memory of Father Rutilio Grande who was assassinated two years ago. As we gather here in the Cathedral we unite ourselves with the beloved Catholic pilgrims as they process from Aguilares to Psisnal. We accompany them during this time of prayer and we give thanks for the life of Father Grande and for all the priests, religious and catechists who do not fear death but boldly proclaim a gospel that by its nature will cause conflicts. Nonetheless these ministers continue to try to awaken people's consciences.

Because of the message that Father Grande left us in Aguilares, the Church there is marked with the seal of authenticity. Jesus said: *if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you* (1). I want to tell all the people of Aguilares and the people from the communities that at this time are participating in this procession of faith, hope and love --- I want to tell them: *do not be afraid; persecution is a characteristic mark of the authentic*

Church. A Church that does not suffer persecution is not the true church of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that martyrdom and suffering and fear and persecution are normal but rather all of these realities ought to give meaning to the Christian spirit. It is not enough to walk with the Church when things are going well but we must also follow Jesus Christ with the same enthusiasm as the apostle who said: *Let us also go to die with him (2).*

There is another event that I place before you as part of the framework of our Archdiocese, events that I dare to say are being transfigured by Christ. The many difficult events of our Archdiocese cry out for the transfiguration, renewal and beautification of our Church and country. In this sense I believe our national pilgrimage that took place yesterday as all the bishops, the representative of the Holy Father, a great number of priests, religious and laity gathered at the Basilica of San Miguel and placed the document of Puebla at the feet of Our Lady of Peace, placed at the feet of Mary, the Star of Evangelization, these pastoral orientations for Latin America --- I believe that all of these gestures are saying that we commit ourselves to the teachings of the Church that have been given to our people.

I find great hope in the fact that all the bishops proclaim that Puebla is a document that we must commit ourselves to and that we have placed this document beneath the feet of our Patroness. Therefore, we must begin to study this document and not see this as something negative or judge it with our prejudices. We must study this document and see the elements that are offered to us for the liberation, the beautification, the freedom and the dignity of the people of El Salvador. It would be very regretful if the same thing were to happen to the document of Puebla as occurred with the documents of Medellin, namely, because of preconceived ideas and many times because of ignorance, the pastoral guidelines of Medellin were not put into practice. If our Archdiocese has become a diocese of conflict then there should be no doubt that this has occurred because of the desire of our diocese to be faithful to the new evangelization. As a result of the Second Vatican Council and the meetings of the Latin American bishops, we are being invited to carry out a fearless process of evangelization that leads us to make a commitment. It is for this reason that as we placed the document of Puebla beneath the feet of the Virgin of Peace we have also asked her that this ceremony not be seen as some romantic or superficial ceremony but rather that this be seen as a serious commitment of the bishops, priests, religious and parish communities to incarnate in our pastoral life this demanding evangelization that points out certain dangers and calls us to renounce all privileges. We should not fear conflict especially when this conflict leads us to fidelity to the Lord.

Therefore it is within this framework of a Church and a nation that experiences within herself and her surroundings so many things that must be transfigured that we reflect upon the message of the transfiguration. See how beautiful is the person of the transfigured Jesus! This morning's homily is titled: Lent, the transfiguration of the People of God. I will develop the following points: First, the covenant that gave origin to the people of God --- Abraham; Second, the transfigured Christ, the model and the cause of transfiguration; Third, the People of God that ought to be transfigured, here and now. I want the gospel that we reflect on today to become that which I have always strived for: a living word that speaks to you and me, to our families and our communities, to men and women who today in 1979 experience the harshness of our reality, who experience the poison of evil and the hope of that which is good.

The covenant that gave origin to the people of God --- Abraham

The first reading speaks to us about Abraham who experiences a tremendous test of faith. I want this catechesis of the Lenten season to take on the element that is pointed out by the Second Vatican Council: a review of the history of our salvation (3). Therefore I invite you to be mindful of the lesson of last Sunday because it is closely bound up with today's readings. Last Sunday we saw Noah at the end of the flood. A rainbow appeared in the sky and God pointed toward the rainbow as a sign of a covenant that had a cosmic nature. God promised that there would not be another flood that would destroy all of creation. Last Monday at 1:00pm I was very pleased to listen to Father José Luis and his commentary on my homily. He came to a conclusion that I had not made: the covenant of the rainbow is a covenant in which God gives humanity all of that which has now, as a result of the flood, been purified of sin. Therefore, this covenant demands that people respect nature. Father José Luis came to a very urgent and moving conclusion that involves us in the ecological problem.

You know that the air and water are being polluted, as is everything we touch and live with. We go on corrupting the nature that we need. We do not realize that we have a commitment to God to take care of nature. To cut down a tree, to waste water when there is such a great lack of it, to let buses poison our atmosphere with those noxious fumes from their exhausts, to burn garbage haphazardly --- all of this concerns our covenant with God. It is important to be mindful of the consequences of all of this since the population density in El Salvador is so high. My dear sisters and brothers in El Salvador, let us not continue to kill and make worse the things of created nature but let us give a religious meaning to our relationship with the cosmos. Our commitment to God demands our collaboration. Thus we see that there are two stages in the creation of the natural world, in the creation of nature that has been entrusted to humankind: Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham.

Now we begin the third chapter and the covenant with Abraham has a very special character because this covenant will give birth to the People of God. Thus I have entitled this section: the covenant that gave birth to the People of God. The bible presents us with the trials of faith that Abraham experienced. Today we are presented with the third trial that enables us see how this man, whom God had desired to constitute as the father of believers, trusted in God and as a consequence, his offspring would be a people of faith. When Saint Paul speaks about redemption in Christ, he compares this gift of redemption with the Law of Moses and says that in the person of Christ the faith that God demanded of Abraham reappears and thus men and women are not saved by the Law alone but by faith (4). This is very true especially when we want to base our human relationships on some legal foundation, as if the law were everything. We have repeated this phrase many times and we do not tire of saying these words: *the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (5). Saint Paul says that the law points out sinfulness but does not provide us with the strength to avoid sin. On the other hand, faith and redemption are the great works of Christ who asks us to believe in him because it is faith that will save us.

God entered into solidarity with this man who is going to be the model of faith for all people and appears to him when he is almost one hundred years old. The Bible describes this very graphically: *Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, and Sarah had stopped having her womanly periods* (6). They had no children and were now elderly. In this framework of the desert and death and withering branches, God presents himself and says: *Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will*

show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you (7). Such words could make one laugh but Abraham believed and said: *nothing is impossible for God* (8). Then without knowing where they are going, he and his sterile wife undertake a journey with the hope of forming a people.

Abraham, during his trials of faith, lifts up his voice and asks God for a sign that would confirm this promise that seems so impossible, laughable and ridiculous. God invites Abraham to look at the sky: *I will make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky ... in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing --- all of this because you obeyed my command* (9). Thus the covenant is realized in the form that we explained last week: an animal is cut in half (10). Abraham passes in the middle of this sacrifice, the Spirit of God moves over the sacrifice and the covenant is sealed. The animal that has been slain and cut in half is like a demand that is placed on the people: the people who enter into this covenant have to fulfill it and if not, may they be cursed and destroyed like the animals that have just been destroyed and cut in half.

Thus God draws closer to humanity and makes a covenant with Abraham. When the impossible becomes reality, when Sarah gives birth to a son, when Abraham is happy because he will not die without leaving a descendent (for indeed Isaac has been a gift from God), then God says: *Take your son Isaac, your only son whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you* (11). Dear parents, think of these words: what would you do if God asked you to sacrifice your child as a holocaust? This word *holocaust* is the ultimate expression of sacrifice: it meant to burn the victim so that no sign of its existence remained. As the Bible tells us today, Abraham, proven in faith, submits himself to this trial of faith and the figure of Isaac walking toward Moriah and carrying a pile of wood is a symbol of Christ who will die on a cross on Mount Calvary. I had the privilege of visiting Calvary where our Lord died and one of the paintings there depicts Isaac carrying a pile of wood and walking toward the place where he will be sacrificed and beside him is Jesus carrying his cross. Only for Christ, as St Paul tells us today (12), God did not pardon his life. But Abraham hears the voice of the Lord speak to him: *Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do the least thing to him, I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son* (13). Abraham offers God a lamb so that in his name a holocaust is offered and Isaac becomes one of the patriarchs whose name will be mentioned in the invocations of the people: *the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob*.(14) This is how the patriarchs experienced God.

A people have been born. God promised this and as a result this only son, proven in the act of offering of a holocaust, will be the first offspring of this great people that begins to grow, this people with whom God had made another incredible promise: they will leave for a foreign land and endure for four hundred years the yoke of the Egyptians, (15) but then will come the time when another covenant will be established with Moses (we will reflect on this next Sunday). Four centuries later, the people who looked for food in Egypt had become slaves and thus the book of Exodus describes the wonderful pilgrimage toward the Promised Land. Four hundred years later God fulfilled the promise he made to Abraham: *I will give you land and this land will be yours*. (16) Abraham believed even though he died without seeing many of the things that God had promised become a reality. Thus when Jesus refutes his enemies he said: *Abraham and many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it* (17). Abraham believed in Christ without knowing him. Abraham believed that from his people, his descendents, the Redeemer of all peoples would be born.

For this reason there is something wonderful about the People of God that arises from the descendants of Abraham. When the Vatican Council speaks about the People of God, we are reminded about the origins of this people that we are now reflecting upon. The Vatican Council states: *At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whomsoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased God to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness* (18). Thus God chose a people who would acknowledge him and serve him. *He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant. Step by step He taught and prepared this people, making known in its history both Himself and the decree of His will and making it holy unto Himself* (19).

I want to distinguish people in general from the People of God. Today this distinction is very necessary. Not every people is the People of God and the Council also makes a similar distinction between the Kingdom of God and human progress (20). If we confuse these two concepts we can fall into the danger that Pope John Paul II pointed out to the bishops in Mexico: do not confuse democracy with some unique understanding of people because there is also a people that is called and chosen by God, but this People of God also belong to other peoples of the earth. The Pope said: *The Church arises from the people's faith response to God*². But not all people respond with faith. Therefore in El Salvador, there are many individuals who are not part of the People of God even though they are Salvadorians. The Council has just reminded us that the People of God is God's possession and becomes a reality because God wants men and women to worship him, to confess his name, to pray to him and give him thanks. The People of God has a long history: the whole period of the Old Testament. There the People of God, who were cultivated by the patriarchs, the prophets and by the wonderful deeds of God, is seen as the chosen People of God who lived in the midst of other people. God spoke to Abraham and said: *All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you* (21). This is why Christ was born as a member of this people and this is why other people, who are not part of the people of Israel, were also established through faith as the people of God. What is most important is the fact that the People of God is being formed from the time that God made a covenant with Abraham.

We now focus on today's gospel which situates us on Mount Tabor where it is believed that all of these events occurred. There Elijah and Moses appear as distinguished persons among the People of God (22). Moses presented the Law to the people and led them toward liberation. He is the prophet announced by God as one who had to be listened to. These words are beautifully echoed today when the Father speaks of the transfigured Christ and says: *Listen to him!* (23). In the Old Testament the same words were used when referring to Moses: the new transfigured Moses is the Son who is the beloved of God, therefore he must be listened to (24). Moses is a distinguished figure in the Old Testament and therefore he had to be present on Mount Tabor where all the promises that had been made to Abraham are now being fulfilled. For centuries the prophets and kings announced: *The Savior of the nations will come! The God of our fathers has promised this!* The people of the Old Testament lived with this hope.

Elijah also appears on Mount Tabor as the distinguished prophet. Elijah was in a situation that is similar to that of our nation: crimes, distortions of the truth, political manipulations, bribes that supported injustice, abuse of wealth and money. Elijah flees to the desert: *This is enough, O Lord!* (25). Words that are very similar to the theme of the priests who are processing to the tomb of Father Grande: *Enough already!* Elijah, in a pessimistic

tone, laid down to die under a tree that provided him with little shade. He wanted to die but God awakens him and says: *Get up! You still have a long road to travel!* (26). Elijah was nourished by a piece of mysterious bread and then he walked for forty days and nights before arriving at the place that God had appointed, Mount Horeb. On Mount Horeb another revelation of God occurred. God revealed himself and filled Elijah with strength and comfort (similar to what occurred to Moses after he had walked through the desert for forty years). In the person of Moses and Elijah we have the classical Lenten figures who are the protagonists of the Christian Lent, Christ, our Lord. There is something wonderful about Lent and it is for this reason that I said that Lent is a time for the people to be renewed. Elijah is pessimistic because of the things that are occurring in his country and when he arrives at the mountain to confront the betrayals of the People of God against the law of God, he is encouraged by God: *there is no reason for you to die; you must continue to work* (27).

My dear sisters and brothers, this is the People of God. This is a people of faith because as the Bible tells us when speaking about Abraham: *He believed against all hope* (28). This is most necessary for us here in El Salvador: to believe in the impossible --- even when all the lights seem to be extinguished and all the roads closed. The faith of Abraham was passed on to the people who became believers and is now passed on to us. Let us imitate our ancestors! If Moses' courage made him willing to die in order to remain faithful to the plans that God had for him and if the fidelity of Elijah, even when he was pessimistic and thought of suicide, enabled him to lift himself up and continue to work, then what prevents us, my sisters and brothers of El Salvador, the People of God of 1979, from doing the same? Our desert, our Lent, our blood --- all of these can be changed into liberation, light, comfort and hope. Many times we have asked people not to sell things during Mass³

The transfigured Christ, model and cause of the transfiguration of our people

The Old People of God flow into Christ and the New People of God are brought into existence by Christ. This is my second point: the transfigured Christ is the origin, model, cause and hope of all us who have put our faith in him. Together with the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah there appear three men who are members of our Christian faith: Peter, James and John (29). The first Pope, the first bishops, the first Christians. They rejoice in this new epiphany to the point that Peter says: *Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah* (30). Jesus knew that this was not the time for such enthusiasm because they still had to continue to work and so he told them to be quiet: *He charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead* (31).

Today's second reading describes for us the Christ whom the Father called *my beloved Son* and who called himself the Son of Man. Saint Paul gives this a name which in modern days we would refer to as the Paschal mystery (32). The Paschal mystery refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus. I want to underline this word because Lent is a time of renewal for people precisely because Lent prepares us for the celebration of the Paschal mystery.

My dear sisters and brothers, it is time for us to approach Holy Week in a mature way. This is not the time to live Holy Week in a way that highlights processions that afterwards leave the heart incredulous, materialistic, and selfish. It is time to view Holy Week as an opportunity for people to become converted to the Passover event, to the death of the Lord in order to rise up with a greater maturity, with new vigor. Thus we imitate Elijah and Moses and so after walking through the desert of Lent we are able to experience God walking with

his people and instead of searching for solutions in hatred and violence and on other paths that simply impede the progress of our people we seek solutions that were pointed out to us in Puebla when the Pope invited us to open the doors to Christ⁴; to open the doors of politics and the economy and the social sciences --- to open all the doors that humankind controls. To open all those areas of life that men and women cultivate --- open these to the Lord. Christ has a right to this because he became one of us. As the Council Fathers stated in their closing address that was directed to government rulers: *Allow Christ to exercise His purifying action on society. Do not crucify Him anew. This would be a sacrilege for He is the Son of God. This would be suicide for He is the Son of man*⁵.

Let us open the doors to our Lord, Jesus Christ, for as Saint Paul tells us in the second reading: *God did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all* (33). Thus arises the great question: if this great Father, like Abraham, walks with his Son to Calvary, walks with his Son as he carries the cross and does not attempt to save him but hands him over to a painful death, then *how could he not also give us everything else along with him* (34). My sisters and brothers, what do you desire that cannot be given to you by God? God has already given us the greatest gift we could ever desire: the gift of Jesus, his Son: *this is my beloved Son* (35). Was he not given to us in order to die on the cross? How can he not give us everything with him ? (36) How could he not resolve the problems of the people of El Salvador? How could there not be paths and solutions to these problems especially in light in of the fact that all of this is of lesser importance than the reality of Jesus Christ, who gives the fullness of happiness to all the people of El Salvador. In today's second reading Saint Paul asks: *Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones?* (37). Indeed it is God who justifies them. Or as I have told you: the laws that are made by men should be viewed in the same way as Saint Paul who states: *Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? If God saves us then even though we might be condemned to prison, we are still free. Who will condemn? It is Christ [Jesus] who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God --- notice these last words --- who indeed intercedes for us* (38). It is as though Christ is always praying for us.

How beautiful would the faith of our hearts be if it were like that of Abraham and if we truly lived this question that Saint Paul poses, a question that should enable us to react with optimism when voices all around us proclaim that everything is doomed. God is eternal and we have barely begun to live our lives. If our Father can do everything, if he gave us our elder brother because he loved us so much, if we have been saved, if we have not been condemned, then how could we possibly condemn someone? It is for this reason that God exhorts us to love and forgive one another --- God related to all people with love and forgiveness, even the most evil of people.

As the Council continues to reflect on the People of God, we come to understand how this people comes into existence --- not simply as a result of the covenant that was made with Abraham in the Old Testament but as a result of the new covenant. After speaking about the fact that this people proceeds from Abraham, the Council states: *All these things, however, were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ, and of that fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God Himself made flesh ...* This new covenant was established by Jesus who called together Jews and Gentiles. No longer would there be a people geographically distinct, like Israel. Rather the new People of God would have spiritual characteristics and thus be united according to the Spirit and not in the flesh ... *Christ instituted this new covenant, the new testament, that is to say, in His Blood, calling together a people made up of Jew and gentile,*

making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new People of God (39).

My dear sisters and brothers, what are the characteristics of this people? It is the Church. In the Old Testament the people of Israel were called the Church of God (40), the people who journeyed in the desert. *The New Israel that journeys through the world at the present time, searching for the future and everlasting city, is designated as the Church of Christ. (41)*

The People of God that ought to be transfigured here and now

It is here that I want you to be attentive to this central theme of Lent because it is during this season that the Church seeks to become renewed and looks forward to the celebration of Holy Week so that we might be truly transformed. During this season of Lent may we experience the joy of leaving behind in the tomb the old person so that we might rise with Christ to new life! May the husband that was a torment to his family become a new person who brings joy to his family! May the wife who has not given warmth and love to her husband and children begin to experience that her home is the place where she has an opportunity to make love the supreme rule! May the young man and woman who sought joy and happiness in the banal realities of the world realize that true renewal and happiness is found only in Christ! May the family and all humankind, may the nation and government officials, the rich and the poor, bishops, priests, religious, may the whole Church and all people in the world return and rebuild these structures in love.

I have already told you that this world is not the place for the People of God, but in this world, where there are so many people who walk along sinful paths, it is here that the People of God must travel. The Council states that this is the characteristic of the People of God and at the same time is the way in which we bring about our own renewal. *That messianic people has Christ for its head ... and now, having won a name which is above all names, reigns in glory in heaven (42).* Notice that Jesus is the head of the People of God. The head of the pilgrim Church on earth is now in heaven and we journey toward this place where the head of the Church now dwells. Each one of us, the whole Church is on pilgrimage until we constitute the definitive Church of glory. The young man whose funeral rites we just celebrated, if he died faithful to this covenant of the People of God, is now a living member of the Church triumphant.

Therefore, my dear sisters and brothers, my dear workers and *campesinos*, dear leaders of political and popular movements, in the just struggles of our people the Church cannot identify herself with you but I understand you because the good and the just things that you demand the Church also demands and she does so because these realities reflect the Kingdom of God which will gather together all of these realities in eternity. The Council states: *whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God (43).* The Church must preach transcendence because its head is Christ who has penetrated the heavens and demands that the whole body that is pursuing heaven must also work on this earth and not become lazy. To simply direct ones eyes toward heaven would be an inauthentic spirituality because one must fill oneself with merit on this earth and do this with the hope of possessing these merits for all eternity. We do not work just to better things on earth, but to better things with the great hope of Abraham and the People of God: Christ is the head!

What other conditions can we speak about? *The state of the people of God is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple* (44). Therefore the Church cannot be conformist. The Church must awaken the conscience to dignity, but this is called subversion. The Christian awareness that our communities are awakening in light of the gospel, the fact that every person, even the most humble worker, is an image of God --- this is not communism or subversion, rather it is the Word of God which illuminates the human person and so people must promote this idea. I do not want people to be a mob. It is for this reason that I told you that you must distinguish between those things that do and do not make people a true people. It is true that besides the People of God there are other people who are very advanced but are still not the People of God. At the same time there are a great number of people on the margins of society who can not be called people but perhaps could be labeled as a mob.

We do not want a mob but we want an education system that makes people aware of their dignity as persons. We want a gospel that, as Pope John Paul has said, enables people to experience themselves as unrepeatable prodigies of God⁶, no two people being equal. Therefore we have to put aside the idea of copying from other people what we ought to be and seek what God wants us to be. I am what I am and you are what you are, nothing more and nothing less. This is a spontaneous revelation. When people are manipulated, when their votes are tampered with, when their dignity is disrespected ---many times this occurs because people are not aware of what it means to take their proper place in society. So we speak about all these matters but this does not mean that we are bring subversive but rather I simply want to tell everyone who is listening to me that they are worthy and precious because they are members of the People of God: *this is the dignity and the freedom of the children of God in whose hearts dwell the Holy Spirit as in a temple.* (45)

What is the law of this people? The Council states: *Its law is the new commandment, to love as Christ loved us* (46). Many people have forgotten this law of Christ but Christianity cannot exchange her power for other ambiguous powers or even more, demonstrate a form of great weakness because violence and hatred are truly weaknesses. True power is found in love and there the People of God are distinguished by their love.

Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time, when Christ, our life, shall appear, and "creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God" (47). This is the renewal that must take place during this time of Lent, the renewal that must occur in our Church in El Salvador, a Church that is composed of all those people who have been baptized. Unfortunately, people are often unaware of the meaning of baptism because it is often received as part of some social custom or folklore and who knows if the economic and commercial aspects do not enter into all of this. Many times we look for godparents who will give gifts to the child that is baptized or help the parents of the child. These are some of the reasons why people baptize their children. But baptism means that one is initiated and incorporated into the Kingdom of God. For this reason today we are demanding that all the parishes, I repeat all the parishes, provide a preparation for this sacrament (and if a parish is not doing this then they are not fulfilling the law). We do this so that people who present their children for baptism understand the commitment that they are about to make. If people are not willing to make this commitment, that is, if people are not willing to become Christian in the way we have defined today, becoming members of the People of God, then it would be better that they not present their children for baptism. Perhaps they can advance better without baptism. If we truly want to be the People of God then this season of Lent provides us with wonderful opportunities so that we who have been baptized can move forward in our

baptismal commitment and move forward as the People of God. The Council says that the People of God, those who have been baptized and incorporated into the death and resurrection of Jesus *are nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, charity and truth, it is also used by Him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth* (48). Everything that Jesus came to do, continues to be done by his people. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I call upon all of you: Lent, this season of renewal for the People of God, presents a call to each one of us, to you and me, who are members of the People of God, not only to live our Christian commitment but also to be light to others, to save others, to become united with those who are scattered about, to be signs of forgiveness to those who walk on the path of sin and to bring together those who have become lost. There is much to do in our country and for this reason when we speak about renewal here and now, when as usual we speak about the concrete events that occurred during this past week, we see that these realities are not outside the framework of our preaching. Here we reflect on the responsibility of the People of God in our Archdiocese and we look at how, during the past week, the People of God have built up the Kingdom of God.

Life of the Church

Here I want to remind you about the recent words of the Pope who praised humanity for the practice of the virtue of humility, a virtue that is necessary during this time of Lent.⁷ This virtue also provides us with a method that enables us to free humanity and expresses our spirituality. We have a typical example. Someone who has problems with alcohol really knows the way to salvation: the groups of Alcoholics Anonymous. There would be no drunkards if people were humble. Who are the people who enter Alcoholics Anonymous? ... those who recognize that they cannot care for themselves alone and who then seek the therapy, friendship and support of a group. I congratulate those persons who have made this gesture of humility and who walk with this humility because they understand that they need to be supported by other people. We can hear them speak about their joy: so many years of sobriety but twenty-four hours at a time! And the years pass! Look at the change that can be brought about with humility! The same could be said about people who are involved in any other vice or any other difficult situation: my home life is falling apart --- a lack of humility. Why do we blame other people and do not admit our own responsibility? Again it is because of a lack of humility. Why are there divisions in the Church? Again, my sisters and brothers, I have to tell you that these divisions arise because of a lack of humility. The Pope has said that humility is the virtue that truly frees us.

During these days we are saddened by the death of Cardinal Villot. He was seventy-three years old and held the position of Secretary of State in the Vatican and was also Camerlengo. These are two positions of great honor. The Secretary of State is the one who is second to the Pope, the Pope's other self, like the Prime Minister or in our form of government we would call such a person the Minister of the President. This position of trust was given to Cardinal Villot by Pope Paul VI and the next two Popes confirmed him in this position. This shows that he was a very responsible and very intelligent man. The position of Camerlengo means that he is the person who does those things that are necessary when a Pope dies. Thus he organizes the election of the next Pope. Cardinal Villot undertook this delicate task on two occasions. We can say that he governed the Church by convoking the Cardinals and tending to many other matters. I ask you to pray for his eternal rest and we should also be grateful for the ways in which he served and honored the Church.

I have already mentioned the fact that, in the community of Aguilares, at this time people are processing to the tomb of Father Grande. We accompany them spiritually. During this Mass we remember the young man whose funeral rites we celebrated earlier today in the Cathedral and whose family is bringing his body to Cojutepeque where he will be buried. We remember him and all those who have died and we entrust them to the Lord.

I want to express my gratitude to the people who so warmly greeted me yesterday in San Miguel where together with the other bishops we honored Our Lady of Peace. May the Virgin continue to bless our people who are so hospitable and worthy of a better situation than that which they presently endure. The document of Puebla was the main point of discussion during the clergy meeting which took place last week. This document was also very much on the mind of the priests who participated in the retreat last week. This retreat was directed by the Redemptorist priest, Fermín Aranguren and by Father Fabián Amaya, a priest of the Archdiocese. I am thankful for the enlightenment and guidance that was shared with us during those days in Los Planes de Renderos.

As we look at the communities of our Archdiocese, we see that the People of God is growing. I visited the parish of San Antonio Abad in order to reaffirm the guidelines in my Pastoral Letter⁸, especially in light of the events that occurred in the center called El Despertar. I helped them to understand --- and now I take the opportunity to do the same for all the communities --- that I was happy to have the opportunity to guide them in the matter of the relationship between faith and politics, between the Christian community and other political organizations because these realities should never be confused. When there are doubts then seek some advice since we should never act so imprudently that it would result in harmful consequences. I am happy to be able to say to you that in San Antonio Abad this concept is very clear and the people are attempting to make these ideas part of their pastoral ministry.

In the Vicariate of Asunción, in the parish of Corazón de María, El Centro de Formación de la Fe was inaugurated. During this ceremony I made use of the Document of Puebla and as a synthesis of the work and study I presented to them the three truths that the Pope entrusted to us: the truth about Christ, the truth about the Church and the truth about the human person⁹.

Today at 10:30am we will celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation in San Pedro Perupalán.

In the Minor Seminary of Chalatenango I will have the pleasure of knowing and spending some time with the minor seminarians who are being formed there. I am happy that our vocational ministry has been undertaken very seriously by our beloved priests. In a very short time they will make known a program that will involve all of the People of God.

In San José de las Flores in Chalatenango, Father Eduardo Alex Poprawa sent me a telegram and told me that the parish is now celebrating their sixteenth anniversary. I took the opportunity to congratulate Father Poprawa and told the parishioners that they would be remembered in our prayers.

There are many other things that are occurring in our communities and all of this enables us to create the Church. My sisters and brothers, I want to be very clear about this because what I am attempting to do (if the Lord allows me) is to create the Church. I ask the same

thing of all of our beloved priests and communities: create the Church in the midst of the world and invite other people to do the same but do it in the way that we have spoken about. If people misunderstand us, if they slander us, if they think we are something else, then I tell you: *do not be afraid!* Our intention and desire, the clearest sign of our work, is to create and provide growth to the communities of faith and hope and love so that among all these communities we might be constituted as the beautiful spouse of Christ: the Church community.

Thus from the perspective of this clearly defined and evangelical Church we look out toward the world and we do so because the Church is not built to remain hidden in some closet, to be a Church that is confined to the sacristy. Indeed the Church is established to be firm and to enlighten and serve and shine forth upon the world. Therefore we have to illuminate the realities that surround us. We should not be surprised that after we have spoken about the Church that we then direct our eyes toward the realities that surround us in order to affirm that which is good and at the same time to denounce and reject all that is evil and sinful in our present situation.

Events of the week

We rejoice with the *campesino* families in San Antonio Silva who were favored in the repartition of land. This has led us to much reflection. Today there are three hundred fifty-six *campesino* families and at the same time there are seven persons who are in possession of 37,561 parcels of land¹⁰. What does this say? A simple glance at the agrarian reforms leads one to the discovery of the great injustice that exists among us as land is redistributed. This incredible social contrast is what predominates in our country. It is for this reason that the Church must point out this institutionalized injustice and we refer to the words of Pope who said: *Each day the large number of those who have little or nothing increases and at the same time the few people who have much obtain even more*¹¹.

We also rejoice with the workers in the mines of San Sebastián. You will remember that for a long time we have been speaking about those families who have had no work. In light of the fact that the company did not fulfill its obligation, a court procedure has given collective ownership of the mines to the workers. We now hope that the Ministry of Economy will authorize this decree so that people can once again return to work in that area. We praise all these efforts on behalf of justice.

We rejoice with the workers in the glove factory who, according to the information that was published in the newspapers¹², have resolved their labor conflict.

At the same time we are disturbed by certain statements and reflections of people who have been paid to publish certain articles¹³, people whom we hoped were more intelligent and more understanding of the Church's ministry and yet now seem to be confused as they speak about *the activity of certain prelates in the Church*. This is naturally a reference to me and I am listed among those persons who foment class struggle.

We lament the fact that Jaime Baires, whom we spoke about last week, has died and so now we mourn. His parents have stated that Jaime, before dying, spoke about being tortured by the Guardia Nacional. The Guardia have issued statements about their innocence¹⁴ but statements and words are not enough. Since a trial has been petitioned to bring this case before the courts because his parents, who have spoken about the way in which they have

been offended, have a right to have this petition heard in court. Not only his parents but all people have a right to know: what are those who wear uniforms doing?

We are also saddened by the abduction of a child in San Miguel, Carlos Villatoro Fuentes. We state: this is inhuman and we enter into solidarity with the National Association on Behalf of Children and the long list of children who are asking that this child be returned to his family.

We lament the fire in the sock factory, El Fuentes. We are saddened by the death of four *campesinos* and the wounding of three Guardia which according to official information occurred during a confrontation in San Vicente¹⁵. We experience as our own the uncertainty of the family members of the *campesinos* Marciano Meléndez Dueñas and Oscar Jiménez. These men were arrested during the month of February and their whereabouts is still unknown. And the grief of the family of Oscar Armando Interiano, presumably the trade union leader whose body, bound and blindfolded, was found in the lake of Güija.

I have also been very impressed by two letters that I received from mothers. One mother states that her son has been a prisoner in Gotera since August and she has no hope that he will leave there alive. She is unable to visit her son there because she is very poor and the prison is very distant from her house. The family of Professor Hipólito Rolando Martínez asks for mercy because their son is in the same situation as that which has just been described by the other mother.

Labor conflicts have still not been resolved. In a special way I must refer to that which is on everyone's mind at the present time¹⁶. Last night when I returned from San Miguel I discovered that during the day I had been called several times to mediate the labor conflict so that the shedding of more blood might be avoided. For Christian and human reasons I accepted the petition and last night I invited both sides to dialogue in my presence. So last night we met: a representative of the owners and a committee of the unions that represent the negotiating commission that is based on the premises of the businesses involved in this conflict and that alone has the right to make decisions. The workers asked to reinstate the negotiations before leaving the premises and the owners took the opposite position, that is, the workers had to leave the premises before negotiations could be started up again. They guaranteed the safety of the workers who were presently occupying the premises of La Tropical y Constanca. Despite the powerful pressure that resulted from being surrounded by the military, the workers did not want to abandon the premises before reinstating direct conversations with the owners. They stated that this decision was based on the fact that they did not believe that negotiations would take place after they left the premises nor did they believe that a reasonable solution could be found once they abandoned the premises.

Since an agreement could not be reached, I proposed that in light of the fact that the union committee did not have the faculty to decide this matter, therefore this morning they should discuss the conditions that would lead to the initiation of direct negotiations with the negotiating commission. I asked the owners to guarantee the safety of this commission. Again today, with the desire to save the lives of the workers and the owners who are still on the premises, I invited both sides in this conflict to come together and discuss first of all the conditions for negotiations. I hope that security measures will be taken to guarantee the departure of the negotiating commission and that a positive agreement will make possible the initiation of negotiations. I fear that if an agreement is not reached, greater harm will result.

At the last minute I have received news that the Security Forces want to enter the premises of La Constancia and that the workers have threatened to set fire to the premises with the flammable substances that are stored on the premises. Here again I extend to you the following call: yesterday I told you that there seems to be three interests in play here: the interest of the owners, the interests of the workers and the interests of the Church. I ask you again to negotiate and come together and to be mindful of the interest of the Church, namely, human life. This is what motivates me: human life. We do not seek recourse to legalisms or any other form of human reasoning. Rather we simply see that in emergency situations emergency means must be used. Since yesterday the people on the premises have not eaten anything. One person has already died and we have been told that others have died and that many have been wounded. I do not know any more about this but I hope this situation does not continue.

To the three interested sectors that I have already mentioned I extend the following invitation to the Security Forces: do not provoke this situation and if you are provoked, be wise and do not allow yourselves to be provoked in this situation. Be aware of the fact that human life is of greater value than any other form of honor or any other reality. I believe that negotiations can be achieved. If you are listening to me then please understand that I am speaking as one who is in front of you --- the security forces, the owners and the workers --- and I unite my voice to the voices of all the people who do not want to see massacres or bloodshed. Enough! Come to some agreement and save that which is the greatest: human life.

This is the transformation that our country needs! This is the transfiguration of Jesus today. This is Jesus on the mountain top who, not wishing to separate himself from humankind, wants to give us an example and tells us that the happiness of heaven is the most important reality: *You are my beloved son* (49). It does not matter if one is rich or poor but it is most important to be a child of God, especially a child who is pleasing to the Father. Therefore, I call out all of you, my sisters and brothers, and invite you to take advantage of this Lenten season and to rise above the miseries and pain that surround us. Even though we walk in poverty and tribulation, let us not live in conformity with these realities, but rather with our hearts raised up to God let us bring about a great transfiguration in the life of each person in El Salvador and in the whole society of El Salvador.

¹ His name Rafael Larín,. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 12 March 1979.

² Discourse of John Paul II in the inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (29 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 February 1979.

³ Mons. Romero interrupted his homily to make this observation.

⁴ Homily of John Paul II on the inauguration of his pontificate (22 October 1978), *Osservatore Romano*, 29 October 1978.

⁵ See Vatican Council II, Messages of the Council to Humanity (8 December 1965), *To Rulers*, 5.

⁶ See Discourse of John Paul II on the inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (28 January 1979), *op.cit.*

⁷ See Sunday allocution of John Paul II (4 March 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 11 March 1979.

⁸ *La Iglesia y las organizaciones políticas populares*, (6 August 1978).

⁹ See Discourse of John Paul II on the inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (28 January 1979), *op.cit.*

¹⁰ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 5 March 1979.

¹¹ The actual words of John Paul II are: "the growing wealth of a few runs parallel to the growing misery of the masses". Discourse on the inauguration of the Third General Assembly of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (28 January 1979), *op.cit.* The Bishops in Puebla said: "The truth is that the distance between the many who

have little and the few who have much goes on growing greater and greater". See *Message to the People of Latin America, 2*.

¹² See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 9 March 1979.

¹³ Under the title "A call to reflection", the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP) published a statement which declared among other things: "The Church hierarchy should examine with great care the public interventions of some of its prelates who, abandoning their spiritual mission and contravening the constitutional and papal prohibition to engage in politics, have contributed through their preaching to nourish the opinion that class struggle is the only solution to our social and economic problems, without considering that such preaching will lead us into civil war and anarchy.", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 6 March 1979.

¹⁴ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 10 March 1979.

¹⁵ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 6 March 1979.

¹⁶ On 23 February 1979, the Workers' Union of the Industria de Bebidas, Gaseosas, Cerveza, Hielo, Agua Potable, Conexos y Similares, declared a strike to demand fulfilment of several requests. The workers remain in the installations of La Constancia SA. and Embotelladora Tropical, where they held several managers of the firm. The Ministry of Works declared the strike illegal and security forces blocaded the access to both factories.

Marginal References (1) Jn 15,20; (2) Jn 11,6; (3) SC 109; (4) Rm 4,13-17; (5) Mk 2,27; (6) Gn 17,17; (7) Gn 12,1-2; (8) Gn 12,4-5; (9) Gn 15,5-6; (10) Gn 15,9-18; (11) Gn 22,2; (12) Rm 8,32; (13) Gn 22,12; (14) Ex 3,15; (15) Gn 15,13; (16) Gn 12,1; (17) Jn 8,56; (18) LG 9; (19) LG 9; (20) GS 29; (21) Gn 15,18; (22) Mk 9,4; (23) Mk 9,7; (24) Ex 19,9; (25) 1K 19,4; (26) 1K 19,5-8; (27) 1K 19,9ff; (28) Rm 4,18; (29) Mk 9,2; (30) Mk 9,5; (31) Mk 9,9; (32) Rm 8,24; (33) Rm 8,32a; (34) Rm 8,32b; (35) Mk 9,7; (36) Rm 8,32b; (37) Rm 8,33; (38) Rm 8,33-34; (39) LG 9; (40) Nb 20,4; (41) LG 9; (42) LG 9; (43) LG 17; (44) LG 9; (45) LG 9; (46) LG 9; (47) LG 9; (48) LG 9; (49) Mk 9,7.