

LENT: A CALL TO TRUE RECONCILIATION

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 25, 1979

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21

My dear sisters and brothers and radio audience.

A well-lived Lent can be the salvation of our people. Therefore, we celebrate this fourth Sunday of Lent with a new hope. When it appears that everything is lost, the Spirit of God becomes present to us: present with his Word, calling us, and guiding us toward our true salvation. Let us remember that Lent is a journey toward Easter and the perspective of Lent is the Risen Christ who offers us the gift of new life. Through his passion and death Jesus paid for the sins of humankind and offers us a better life. Let us be appreciative of this gift! Let us be obedient to God as we journey toward Easter!

In the documents of Vatican II, the present day Church states: ... *the human person deserves to be preserved; human society deserves to be renewed. Hence the focal point of our total presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will* (1). Who here, as woman or man or family or people do not feel themselves wrapped with a great hope. In this Lenten Season God is offering us the gift of salvation. Last Sunday we did not simply mediate on some law, a form of morality, rather we were involved in a meditation on love. Who is not moved by love? The love of Jesus who offered up his life for us is the best motive to live holy lives and to be thankful to Christ. If only all people allowed themselves to be embraced by this love of Jesus who offered up his life for all of us!

In today's readings the love of God that for four Sundays has called us in ever new ways, is presented to us as a call to reconciliation. And this is what I shall call today's sermon on this fourth Sunday of Lent. *Lent: a call to true reconciliation*. I will develop the following three points: First, Babylon as a symbol of the Covenant that was broken and a symbol of reconciliation; Second, Reconciliation with God in Christ; Third, Baptism and Confession as the paths of reconciliation: a thought that is presented to us in the Gospel and the letter of Saint Paul: the great sacraments of Lent.

Babylon: a symbol of the Covenant that was broken but also a prophecy about reconciliation and hope.

My sisters and brothers, I would like us to see a connection between the reflections that we have made during these past Sundays. The Church has placed before us the milestones of the history of salvation.

Remember that on the first Sunday of Lent we reflected on Noah and the covenant that God established with him (2): the rainbow is a symbol of God's call to use well the natural

goods of this world, to preserve them and not abuse them. At the time of creation these goods were given to all people in order to provide happiness to everyone. Thus we stand before the mystery of cosmic reconciliation: the covenant of humankind with the universe as if the rainbow extended from one side of the universe to the other.

On the Second Sunday of Lent instead of speaking about the world of nature we referred to a specific people: the covenant of God with Abraham (3). This elderly and childless man was miraculously chosen by God to be the father of a people more numerous than the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. Abraham's faith is a model for all those who desire to enter into a covenant relationship with God because Abraham's faith enabled him to hand himself over and believe against every hope. (4) How many of us need to reflect on this chapter of our Lenten journey of 1979: faith like that of Abraham!

The third chapter of Lenten history involved us in a reflection on Moses. Last Sunday we saw Moses on Sinai as the fulfillment of the promise that had been made to Abraham, the promise of bringing forth a great people. Four centuries had passed and Abraham is represented in the vast crowd of people that marched to the Promised Land. As a people they must enter into a covenant with God and respond to the many privileges God bestowed upon them in the desert. Throughout their history their response must be the fulfillment of the Decalogue, the ten words, the Ten Commandments.(5) The covenant is now guided by Law and from this moment on a new phase in the history of salvation is begun: the era of the Mosaic Law or the era of Moses. This law guides and forms the people of whom Saint Paul wrote: *The law is not enough because the law can become a dead letter. The law, however, is valid because it bears with it the promise of a redeemer. Thus it is Christ who gives meaning to the law* (6).

During this era of the Mosaic Law which lasted for several centuries, many good and evil things occurred. Today the Scriptures situate us in the midst of another historical event: Babylon. What is Babylon? Babylon represents the breaking of the covenant. It represents a people who deserved the punishment of the desert because they had not been faithful to God; it represents a weary, almost depressed, people; it represents a people who appear to have no faith in God. Nevertheless the prophets proclaim hope and salvation to this broken and frightened people. Thus, even though Babylon represents a people who had abandoned their God and were punished, it also represents a people who will recover what had been lost.

This language is therefore very interesting to us because there are many here in El Salvador who say: *There is no remedy! Who can believe in love?* Thus we are led along paths of violence: abductions, hatred, crime, repression. It is as though God had made us in such a way that we can only come to an understanding of God by being beaten. Yet God has made us in the image of his love and even though the environment has become violent, this is not what God desires.

Hope and love shone above Babylon but, as we are told in the first reading, it is necessary to realize that sin breaks the covenant. How wonderful is the author of the book of Chronicles. This is a book that was written to fill in the gaps of the other historical books. This book narrates events that are not presented in the other books or are mentioned but little detail is given to them. Here the picture is described very vividly: the spiritual and civil leaders of the people have made religion a legalistic following of commands. Religion has become hypocritical and we will hear Jesus speak against all of this when he begins his public ministry. The first reading says: *All the princes of Judah, the priests and the people*

added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the Lord's house ... The Lord sent his messenger to them, for he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings. (7). This is the way in which the people, the chosen people of God, responded to the covenant of love: with sin and mockery.

Today's other readings show us the sad relationship that existed between the people and God. In the gospel Jesus tells us: *People preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil* (8). In the second reading Saint Paul states: *we were dead in our transgressions* (9). These are the black marks in the history of humankind. God gave us a law in order to save us, he sent prophets in order to guide us, he shared love with us and created us for love, he established a covenant of salvation and women and men turned their backs to God, broke the covenant, disobeyed God, preferred the darkness and repression, preferred their idols of wealth and politics, preferred everything but God --- there was no room for God in their lives. This is sin: to prefer to look for happiness in one's own way when God has pointed out the only way to find happiness.

My dear sisters and brothers, when are we --- and here I place myself because I am the first among you who must admit that I am a sinner --- when are we going to realize that our whims and fancies are not going to resolve our search for happiness? When are we going to understand that only the Lord has the words of eternal life? (10) It is never too late to love God, but in the first reading God says: *the anger of the Lord against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy* (11). God's revenge appears: what an incredible thing when God uses certain individuals in order to scourge people rather than bless them. Nebuchadnezzar is a figure who becomes God's instrument to humble and trample his bloody boot over the people. Do not think that repression, torture, the abuse of money, and the exploitation of one person by another is simply being done by human beings. God has chosen these people to be his instruments. How sad because these people believe they are triumphing --- as they scourge people they believe they are triumphing because they are punishing people. But as the Bible tells us the time will come when the scourge is also put into the fire. But what a sad role to play in history: a person who scourges others.

What did these people, who were God's instruments, do under the command of Nebuchadnezzar? What did they do to this sinful land of God? Listen to the passage that was read today: *They burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword he carried captive to Babylon, where they became his and his sons' servants until the kingdom of the Persians came to power* (12).

Let us focus on this incredible moment of punishment because it is the time that we are living here in El Salvador. This is the time of the foreman, the time of those who impose their whims, the time of those who form laws and believe that they are the owners of life and the land. How sad because they do not realize that they are God's instruments! This is the time when God is striking us down and from the hearts of those who have been crushed we can hear the complaint: *does God really exist?* To make matters worse we see that those who are happy do not worship the true God but bow down before false idols. They believe that money is more powerful than the true God. They believe that the power of despots is more powerful than the true God who loves us. Thus, as the Pope said when speaking about violence, one is confronted with the temptation of desperation, the temptation to violence. (13) Many people have fallen into this temptation: those who believe that they are going to

find the solution to the country's problems by the path of bloodshed and hatred. But the solution is not found there and in fact there is only more bloodshed and more people who are tortured and more families who cry because of the abuse of those who are powerful. God makes use of these events in order to punish and scourge us, but this is not the final word.

The final word appears and it is God who returns to speak. In the words of the first reading, redemption dawns --- a redemption that in the second reading and the gospel is presented to us as the sun at its zenith. What a wonderful reality! The non-believing king of Persia, Cyrus, the leader of the nation that was responsible for so many cruelties in Babylon, is called an instrument of God.(14) He is also called the anointed one. Can you imagine how the hypocritical Jews who did not obey God must have been scandalized when a non-Jew, a non-believer was called by the spirit of God, was called the anointed one. Here we are certainly involved in a mystery but the first reading speaks about Cyrus, the king of Persia and says: *In order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing* (15). Thus Cyrus, the King of Persia issued the following proclamation: *All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.* He then directs the following words to those who had been exiled: *Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him.* What an impressive and liberating statement when a pagan often shows greater pity than their fellow believers.

Today's responsorial psalm, Psalm 137, is the song of the Israelites who were exiled in Babylon. Our celebration of September 15th could include this psalm of liberation in our National Anthem. Here we are speaking about a freedom that is similar to the words that appear on the money of Guatemala and says that people cannot live as prisoners because when they are imprisoned they die. The Israelites, in chains on the shores of the River Babylon, hear their captors ask for the words of songs and their tormentors for a joyful song: *Sing for us a song of Zion!* (16). The Israelites responded: *But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land? ... May my tongue stick to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem beyond all my delights.* They longed for their homeland and awaited the time of their return. They wept for their sins --- sins that had caused them to be led away into exile. The time arrived when a non-believing king, inspired by God, issued the following edict: *The time of your exile has come to an end. Those who are subjects of this God may now go up to Jerusalem. The borders are now open. Go!* (17). The Persians even accompanied the Israelites and helped them rebuild the Temple that had been destroyed by God's scourge.

Look at how God uses people to punish and then to free people. The God of history plays with history. It is not women and men who act according to their whims but rather it is God who uses evil events to inflict on people the punishments of hell. God uses even non-believers, people who do not share our Christian faith and makes these people his instruments in order to save us and share with us his love and to encourage us and give us hope!

My sisters and brothers, at this time what would we like to be for the people of El Salvador: instruments of God's punishment or signs of hope? The Church rejoices in being hope for the people and is saddened by and reproaches the acts of scourging that are inflicted on the people by despots. The Church is the voice of the prophet in the midst of exile and Babylon. Babylon is a symbol of all people for indeed what people have not sinned? Let us be humble and admit the reality of the words that were spoken to us in the first reading: *the*

princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity (18). There we have the explanation. It was for this reason that I said that Lent was a time for all of us, beginning with us the priests and then including all of you, all the people, a time to change our ways, Let us listen as a people who are in exile, let us listen to this call of the beloved motherland for then we will encounter the salvation that we so much desire.

Reconciliation with God in Christ

This is my second point: reconciliation with God in Christ. We appear to be involved in a three act drama. Everything begins in God's love. Everything is accomplished in the sacrifice of Jesus and becomes a part of us because of our faith. God, Christ and each one of us --- this is the path of true reconciliation.

Everything is rooted in the love of God. In the first reading we see how the Lord moved Cyrus. God is the one who inspires people to extend loving arms and does this even to people who are non-believers. My Christian sisters and brothers, how many times have we seen non-Christians show more mercy than ourselves? God inspired them with a sense of salvation and love. This inspiration was given to Cyrus, the king of Persia, in a mysterious and prophetic way (19) while today this same inspiration is given to us, face to face, through the revelation of the New Testament. Therefore we ought to receive with great tenderness the words that Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians: *God, who is rich in mercy because of the great love he had for us* (20). Everything begins from this starting point. We have not merited redemption and it is for this reason that Saint Paul says: *even though we were dead in our transgressions, God brought us to life with Christ* (21). Christ draws near to a dead person in order to raise up that person. The deceased one has not called out to God for indeed there is no life in that person and the dead experience nothing. The mercy of the Redeemer, however, restores that person to life. Thus we see God's relationship with a humanity that has died, insensitive, unjust, and sinful --- men and women no longer think about God. But God is always mindful of women and men for we read in the prophet Isaiah: *Can a mother forget her infant?* (22). It seems impossible but nevertheless the prophet goes on to say: *Even should she forget, I will never forget you.* Who does not experience the fact that their life, no matter how complex, is wrapped in great tenderness? We are not alone in this world for there is someone who thinks about us more intimately than we think of ourselves. God loves us!

In the gospel, Jesus has learned in the heart of eternity the thoughts of God and speaks to us today words that ought to enliven us during our celebration of Holy Week: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life* (23). Everything begins with the love of God. If Jesus came to be the Savior of all people, then this was the Father's initiative. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son: *Go my son, become a human person! Make yourself a companion of those who walk through history! Insert yourself in human misery and carry on your shoulders the sins of all people! Walk up with them to Calvary and at the time of your crucifixion I will see this as a reparation for the sins of all people.*

As Moses led the people through the desert there was a beautiful image and this image is recalled by Jesus in today's gospel. *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so too the Son of Man must be lifted up so that all who believe in him might have eternal life.*(24) What was the significance of this serpent? It is said that when Moses led the Israelites deeper into the desert, they murmured against him. How difficult it is to lead people! Many times the people prefer the slavery of Egypt: *Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this*

desert where there is no food or water. We are disgusted with this wretched food (25). How difficult it is for people to understand the paths of liberation! Many times it is the people with whom one has worked over an extended period of time who least understand the love that has inspired this sacrifice and the love that simply asks for the sacrifice of collaboration. The murmuring of the people in the desert was punished. Poisonous snakes appeared and those who were bitten by these serpents died. As this event was taking place the people ran to Moses and told him what was happening. As was his custom, Moses prayed to the Lord who gave him the following response: *Make a serpent and mount it on a pole and if anyone who has been bitten looks at it, he will recover (26).* This is also the image of Jesus crucified that Jesus calls to mind in this morning's reading, (27) an image that is realized in him because those who see the crucified Lord with faith will be freed because the Son of Man has come to give his life for the salvation of the world.

This morning I would like to take up this mystery that is called the Paschal Mystery, that is, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for during Lent we walk along these paths in order to celebrate the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord. Holy Saturday is the night, the great night when we celebrate the Paschal Mystery. I would like all of us who have undertaken this spiritual pilgrimage of the history of God with his people --- I would like us to be able to complete our journey during this celebration when the light of life breaks the chains of the darkness of death. I call upon all people, especially young women and men, to join in this celebration when with faith we behold the risen Christ, raised up on high --- higher than the serpent was lifted up in the desert. Through the merits of Jesus' death on the cross we have been given the gift of salvation and new life --- these gifts have been given to all the people of El Salvador.

This is the mystery of reconciliation. The past is not important: it does not matter that we are submerged in our economic, social or political situation; it does not matter that we have hated; it does not matter that we have acted violently; it does not matter that our hands are stained because of abductions and bloodshed and torture. I hope this voice is being heard in all those places where God is using this scourge and making use of people who have no heart or conscience. We pray that the Lord will be merciful with them and that they will change so that they can become words of hope rather than instruments of God's punishment.

Yes my dear sisters and brothers, the President and the police and all those people who constitute this order beneath which the people experience so much fear --- I call upon you not to continue to be instruments of God's punishment. Be government officials of hope, be people who provide security to our people, be men and women of order, be instruments of God who bring liberation to our people. My beloved capitalists, do not use the idolatry of money to exploit those who are most poor. You are able to make our people happy if you would have a little love in your hearts. Look at the kind of instruments of God that you can be with your vaults filled with money, your bank accounts, your land --- instead of using all of this for your own selfish interest you can make our people happy --- our people who are hungry and malnourished and in so much need!

This is not some form of demagoguery that seeks your applause but this is what the people experience and love. This is also loved by those who exploit and punish. The people of El Salvador have not been created to hate but rather have been created to collaborate and to love and to find fraternity in all the areas that constitute this people that has been greatly blessed by God, this people that has received abundant material goods that have become the cause of

great sadness because these goods are not distributed justly because of the sins of men and women.

Life of the Church

In this context and before concluding this homily with the third thought that will make reference to Baptism and Penance as the two Lenten sacraments, I want to extend a call to all those who have been baptized and to all who are in need of the sacrament of forgiveness to use the season of Lent as a time to become reconciled with God. So that you might see the great need for this I make a parenthesis here or perhaps it is better to say that I reflect on the incarnation of the Word of God in the events of this past week.

The Church was instituted by Jesus Christ to be the presence of God --- more present than Cyrus was to those who were exiled, more present than Moses was to those people whom he led through the desert. Indeed, it is Christ who is forgiving us and giving us hope. My sisters and brothers, this is the Church that I attempt to serve when I give you news of an ecclesial nature. These are the primary things that concern me because they are concerns of my Church, my People of God with whom I am also joined because I am one of them and I serve them as Pastor. I am not a politician or sociologist or economist. I am not the one responsible for solving the country's political and economic problems. There are other lay people who have that tremendous responsibility. From my position as Pastor, I only call upon them to use those talents that God has given them. As Pastor I have the task --- and this is what I try to do --- I try to build up the true Church of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Thus, I experience the joy of all those faithful people who have filled this Cathedral and I want all those who are listening to me on the radio, listening not as politicians or people who are curious, but listening as true Catholics and attempting to learn the message of their Pastor so that they can be guided in the construction of the true Church --- I want all of you, my beloved Catholics, to make our Church the true People of God, a luminous torch that enlightens the paths of the nations and that becomes the source of salvation for all our people. Let us be Church!

My primary focus when speaking about these ecclesial events is the Pope, the center of unity of the People of God. How pleased I am to be able to point out each week a gesture or a word of orientation to the Church that I try to follow. I am the person who most needs the Pope and I cannot live apart from the Pope. I give thanks to God that my whole priestly life has been characterized by solidarity and fidelity to the Holy Father, the representative of Christ. My eyes are fixed on him and I never think of betraying him.

The Pope has made a wonderful gesture toward Latin America: he has approved the Puebla Document. In the letter that he wrote to the bishops of Latin America he states that this document will certainly stimulate authentic evangelization in the present and the future: *... The Latin American Church has been fortified in its vigorous unity, its own particular identity and its will to respond to the needs and challenges that were given such close consideration during your meetings*¹ (John Paul II, Letter to the Latin American Bishops, March 23, 1979). It is amazing to see how the Pope, as universal teacher, directs his words to one area and gives the impression that he is just thinking about this particular region. He referred to the particular identity of Latin America and it is as if he were saying to us: *You have a way that is very Latin American and you are very special because your Church has a way of being Church that is different from the Church in Europe and Africa and all other parts of the world. More and more try to discover the Latin American identity of the Church*

*and live as this Church with all her problems, needs, and challenges. To this end, all your Episcopal Conferences and local Churches should put forward plans that have concrete goals, and are on the appropriate levels, and are in harmony with CELAM on the continental level. God grant that in a short time all your ecclesial communities will be informed and suffused with the spirit of Puebla.*² My sisters and brothers, God desires that the Document of Puebla will not make us forget about the Documents of Medellin: there are still people who suspect that these documents are communist. Puebla is nothing more than another step forward from Medellin. Those who have not taken the step and accepted Medellin or who think that the documents of Medellin are going to be declared null and void are mistaken. These individuals must advance toward Medellin and walk on the paths of Puebla. There is no other way to find the identity and resolve the problems of the Church that journeys here in Latin America because these are our problems. It is natural that those who feel scourged by God and who in turn desire to scourge our people do not want God to exist and do not want to hear God say to them: *Be careful!* The scourge will be thrown into the fire when people look for more just solutions to their problems.

Another beautiful characteristic of Pope John Paul II is revealed in the discourse that he directed to the ambassador of Bolivia. The Pope ratified the Church's election *for the most needy, arousing in them well grounded hopes for the betterment of their conditions of religious, social and cultural life ... I express at the same time the desire that this evangelical commitment should be appreciated and supported by all those who feel the imperatives of an improving society, which is a guarantee of active peace and of real Christian progress.*³ See, the Church of the poor is not a Church of demagoguery but is a Church that from the standpoint of the Pope and the gospel identifies her preferences and ministry and stands with those most in need. She does so because from this position she has more strength to demand the conversion of all people who will not be saved unless they change and act according to those words that we have heard when speaking about the last judgment: *whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me* (28). Those who do not act in this way will hear these other tremendous words: *Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink* (29). You separated yourself from this Church that called out to you from the perspective of the poor and demanded the conversion of all people.

Some other news about our continent and news which I ask all of you to keep in your prayers. This week in Caracas, Venezuela two representatives from each episcopal conference are going to meet with the present governing board of CELAM, that is, the Episcopal Conference of Latin America, which is a coordinating structure at the service of the Latin American bishops and a structure that was set up by the bishops in order to make effective the words that the Pope spoke: *the vigorous unity of the Latin American Church.*⁴ Thanks to this organization the bishops of all of Latin America feel more united as they confront the great problems of these twenty nations that appear to be so similar and that at the same time are so different. In order that we might have effective programs and elect a president that is in agreement with the concerns of Latin America, we must all call upon the Holy Spirit so that the electors choose a good president and governing body of this collegial body of the bishops.

Also on a Latin American level we have other news which gives us great honor here in El Salvador. La CLAR, that is, the Latin American Conference of Men and Women Religious, (thousands of men and women religious who minister in the different countries of the Americas have an organization that is called CLAR), met last week in the Dominican

Republic to change their governing body, to evaluate their work and to put forth some new programs. What brings honor to El Salvador is the following: a religious woman from El Salvador, Mother Juana Venegas, an Oblate of the Sacred Heart, has been elected Vice-President of the Latin American Council of Men and Women Religious. While they were meeting in Santo Domingo the religious wrote a letter that you are able to read today on the first page of *Orientación*.⁵ In the name of thousands of religious men and women they expressed their solidarity with the Archdiocese and with the Archbishop of San Salvador. I want to cordially thank them...

Some further news and here again I ask for your prayers of thanksgiving because today el Seminario Menor de Santa Anna is celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary. Msgr. Barrera was kind to invite me and I will have the pleasure of accompanying him on this festive occasion. Therefore we offer our prayers to the Lord so that this seminary might always form priests in accord with the desires of the present world.

I also want you to unite your prayers to those of the new priest of our Archdiocese. Yesterday afternoon in Suchitoto, in a beautiful ceremony that took place outdoors, we imposed hands on Ezequiel de Jesús Gámez who at this time is celebrating his first Mass in the parish church of Suchitoto. We pray that he might live a holy priestly life and that he will be a good pastor to our people here in El Salvador.

Greetings to two new pastors of the Archdiocese: Father Benjamín Rodríguez in Monte San Juan, Cuzcatlán and Father Rafael Palacios in the parish of San Francisco Mejicanos. May this change be beneficial to both parishes.

I want to express my gratitude and greetings to the parish of San Jose Villanueva, the community of San José Cortés, San Francisco Mejicanos, and Suchitoto for the warm reception that was given to us.

Though I was unable to be present in the country during this past week this was not because I was trying to escape the problems of our country. I was invited by El Instituto Internacional del Corazón de Jesús to participate in a theological and pastoral seminar in Santo Domingo that dealt with devotion to the Sacred Heart⁶. From there I bring back with me an enriched theology and pastoral practice for our communities. I want to tell you that our people are very devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and when dealing with this devotion there is a need to renew this in accord with the present demands of the Church but there is no reason to put this devotion aside or forget about it. Rather we must try to give to this devotion to the Sacred Heart its present theological meaning. There will be other opportunities to develop this theme more profoundly but I want you to know that this week in Santo Domingo has given me strength to continue to develop the pastoral ministry that I try to carry on among you.

I want to send my greetings to the people of Honduras who are listening to our homilies: to Father Luis Alonso Díaz and the members of his parish of Cucuyagua in Copán, Honduras. May the Lord continue to bless this communion that unites you, my dear sisters and brothers in Honduras, with the community of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

I also want to express my gratitude for the invitation that was extended to me to participate in a Round Table discussion at the National University. Father Jesús Delgado and

Father Octavio Cruz will join me on Tuesday at 5:00pm in this dialogue that will focus on the theme: *The Role of the Church in Latin America*.

Events of the week

From the perspective of our Church community I invite everyone to live more intensely in communion with the bishop and with the Pope. We are the light that Christ has enkindled in the world in order to illuminate the realities of our environment. During my absence from the country during this past week (while I was traveling to the Dominican Republic) serious events occurred here. I invite you --- I do not say this because I like to hear myself speak --- to reflect on the following three events: 1) labor conflicts, 2) the assassination of Mr. Ernesto Liebes, 3) the occupation of the Cathedral.

First of all I speak about the labor conflicts that have provoked a series of strikes. Without a doubt the strike at CEL (the electric company) has had great consequences for the whole country. The workers suspended the supply of electricity to the country for twenty-three hours. This action resulted in great losses for the country and affected all those citizens who rejoice in the benefits of electricity. People were obliged to live for twenty-three hours in the same way that our *campesinos* live because they do not receive this benefit of electrical energy.

I believe we ought to ask first of all: why has the relationship between labor and management become so strained and tense? I do not believe that this tension is simply the result of events that have occurred during the past few days nor do I believe that this strike has been provoked by some irresponsible desire to disturb the nation's tranquility and even less do I believe that the Archbishop is the cause of all these strikes.

Look at this carefully --- I believe there exists an unjust social structure in El Salvador. This reality ought to disturb everyone. This is the root cause of all these problems. The present legal system does not allow the workers to present their interests before any entity where they will obtain a hearing because the Work Code and other labor laws give priority to the rights of management. The Labor Minister has admitted that the present laws are not adequate in face of the present situation⁷. The conditions (as stipulated in these laws) make it impossible for the workers to organize a legal strike. In the majority of cases, recourse to an inspection by the Labor Minister in order to assure that no injustice is inflicted on the workers in their workplace is ineffective. It is an embarrassment to see that persons who have been sent by the Labor Ministry show no respect for the workers and many times allow themselves to be bribed by management. The fact that we were without electric energy for twenty-three hours ought to lead us to the conclusion that both our labor laws and the situation of the workers are untenable. Therefore both of these realities need to be urgently reviewed and made better.

The shutting down of our electrical supply for twenty-three hours has made the private sector aware of *the incredible pain and true anguish that people had to endure throughout the country because of the lack of electricity*⁸. These are the words of ANEP. I hope that this solidarity is sincere and leads to an effective concern to resolve the serious permanent situation of so many people who every day lack the benefits of electricity and other vital resources. Otherwise, the declarations made during these days will be seen as once again using the pain of people who are poor in order to protect personal interests and preserve a situation of domination and privilege over the workers.

I want to speak about the deaths that are said to have occurred as a result of the blackout⁹. I am saddened by the fact that innocent lives have been added to the long list of victims caused by the current situation. The fact that serious situations have occurred in our hospitals as a result of this strike are clear indications of another reality, namely, that there is a lack of adequate equipment for emergency situations such as this. Thus I express my agreement with the Medical College of El Salvador which has pointed out the failure of the High Council on Public Health and the Watchdog Committee of the Medical Profession to fulfill their functions.¹⁰

The protagonists of the labor conflict at CEL ought to reflect on their own responsibility to resolve this conflict in a peaceful and just way before having recourse to such a serious step as that of cutting off the electrical power to the country for twenty-three hours. In accord with the agreed upon resolutions, the members of the management team of this company should not take reprisals against the Union and its leaders. At the same time the Union, now aware of the power that they have as an organization and aware of the support of other Unions, they should not abuse this power but use it for the common good which of course cannot be foreign to the interests of the majority of the workers. At the same time the workers must also take into consideration the needs of management. When I say this I do not mean that management has a right to impede the legitimate right of the workers to organize themselves or that the workers should be brutally repressed or persecuted because management fears that the workers might abuse their power. To act in this way is also an abuse of power by management and the government.

In this situation both sides must be guided by just laws. Therefore, on this occasion I invite the lawyers and others who are competent in these matters, union members and management, to collaborate with the country in proposing labor laws that take into consideration the different interests and laws that at the same time will defend these interests in an impartial way. I want to affirm here that thanks to God the government has not reacted in the brutal way that they have on other occasions. I hope that the government will continue to rise above the strong pressure of individuals who want them to have recourse to unjust repressive means and use these unjust means against the union members. I believe the government ought to provide the way for an open dialogue between the different groups involved in these conflicts and also create effective and just channels for the resolution of these conflicts.

A very serious conflict has taken place in the factory Delicia. I beg both sides to adopt constructive attitudes and thus make it possible for the negotiations to come to a just solution to this conflict. My beloved workers, I have here a request for all of you who are at strike at Delicia. Hopefully you will listen to me! Napoleón Mina, a worker at Delicia is being held as a hostage by the strikers who will not allow him to leave the premises even though his mother died yesterday. At the present time he is in deep mourning because he was unable to see her for one last time. I ask you to come to some agreement so that Mr. Mina is able to give the final respect of a loving son to his beloved mother. Do not do to others that which you would not want to be done to you. (30) Speaking for myself I want to tell Mr. Mina that during this Mass in the Cathedral we are going to offer special prayers for the eternal rest of your mother and if it is possible I will pay my respects to your mother and will also do this in your name in case you are unable to do this yourself.

Let us speak briefly about some other things. Among the events this week has been the tragic outcome that surrounds the four people who have been abducted. I am saddened by the fact the FARN has assassinated Mr. Ernesto Liebes.¹¹ I am pained that there is still another family that is now the victim of violence. I want to express my condolences to the family of Mr. Liebes and I offer my prayers for the deceased. I am moved by the violent death of every person and so I was moved by the death of the two policemen who died as the result of bombs. As I said when I was in Puebla and able to have a dialogue over the telephone --- a dialogue that was ultimately broadcast over our radio station YSAX: I continue to believe the words that I said at the burial of Mr. Borgonovo and Father Navarro, namely, the life of every person is sacred and it does not matter if that person is rich or poor. So I repeat once again: one cannot make an idol of violence and change it into the only source of justice. Pope John Paul II said this past week: *no one can be sacrificed on the altars of political interest even when these interests might be just.*¹² I hope that the other persons who have been abducted will not meet with the same fate. With this hope I unite myself with the petitions of the families of these persons, with those of the International Red Cross, Amnesty International and the Human Rights Commission. I call anew to the members of FARN and ask them to seek for solutions that will not involve the sacrifice of human life. Enough already!

I believe that I have an obligation to enter into solidarity with the mothers and the family members of the one-hundred and thirteen persons who have disappeared and once again must ask the government to put aside their attitude of secrecy in this matter. Here I could add many names to the list of mothers and wives who continue to cry, tears coming down their faces as they denounce the abuses of the Security Forces. This is especially true in so many villages.

I call upon the government to free those persons who have disappeared, those persons who are presently under their authority or at least inform us what has happened to these people. This ought to be done from a sense of honesty and is certainly not a sign of weakness. This ought to be done from a sense of justice and is certainly not a sign of compromising with terrorists. The government cannot continue to deny that they have captured these persons because there is clear evidence that these persons have been detained. This proof has been affirmed by international organizations such as the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (a committee of the Organization of American States), Amnesty International and others.

I am told that the majority of the family members of these persons who have disappeared have used all possible means to obtain information concerning the whereabouts of their loved ones: they have written letters to the President, they have sought international support, they have organized protests, engaged in hunger strikes, etc. It is time that they be heard and thus the root cause of violence can be eliminated --- the violence that is used in order to obtain information or the confinement of these persons who have disappeared. Unfortunately, at the present time the government has not put aside its attitude of secrecy and people who are arrested continue to disappear. Between February 15th and March 11th, that is, in less than a month, five people have disappeared and you can read the names of these individuals in the present edition of *Orientación*.¹³

Lastly I want to make some brief comments about the occupation of the Cathedral. During these past few days different organizations have utilized this method in order to have their voice heard and in order to protest against some event.¹⁴ Do you realize that with this

type of action you are impeding and upsetting the prophetic-pastoral ministry of the Archdiocese? Thanks to God the Church is fulfilling her mission, a mission that the Pope spoke about when he said: *call the injustices by name*.¹⁵ Therefore I ask all Christians and people of good will to abstain from participating in these types of action. Occupying the Cathedral is not an effective recourse.

I hope that from now on we will not have to endure the loss of electricity for twenty-three hours or the assassination of those people who have been abducted in order to become aware of the evil structures that afflict our country. There is only one effective path and that path is pointed out to us in today's readings: the call to reconciliation.

Baptism and Penance: paths to reconciliation

At the beginning of Lent I told you that during this season three groups of Christians walk together: those who are preparing to receive the sacrament of Baptism, that is, those who are called catechumens; those who have been unfaithful to their baptism, that is, those who are called penitents and cover themselves with ashes as they continue their journey and ask for God's mercy; all the faithful, who thanks to God, do not have to lament betraying the Law of God. These three groups, however, experience themselves as one people who are in need of mercy and for this reason the Council invites us to make this season of Lent a type of fraternity in which all people, sinners and those who are justified, are joined together as one. Those who have been baptized, penitents, and sinners are all sisters and brothers and all are sinners. As the Israelites experienced the voice of Lord drawing near to them during the Babylonian captivity and speak to them of freedom, let us now accept our role in this process. Let us be people of faith!

Today's gospel says that *God so loved the world that he gave his own Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life* (31). This is the condition: to believe, to have faith, to place one's trust in the Lord. May all the people of El Salvador participate in this journey during the Lenten season and place their hope in Jesus so that as they await Easter Sunday they might not only be reminded of the resurrection of Jesus that occurred twenty centuries ago but might be able to celebrate a true resurrection of this people that has been so humbled but that has also been called by the voice of the Lord to participate in an effective resurrection. So be it.

¹ Message of John Paul II to the Bishops of Latin America (23 March 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 1 April 1979.

² *Ibid.*

³ Disciourse of John Paul II to the new ambassador of Bolivia to the Holy See (17 March 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 25 March 1979.

⁴ Message of John Paul II to the Bishops of Latin America (23 March 1979), *op.cit.*

⁵ See *Orientación*, 25 March 1979.

⁶ Mons Romero left for the Dominican Republic on Monday 19 March and returned Friday 23 March 1979. See *Monseñor Oscar A. Romero, Su diario*, San Salvador, 2000, p. 127.

⁷ See *La Crónica del Pueblo*, 15 March 1979.

⁸ *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 March 1979.

⁹ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 March 1979.

¹⁰ See Statement of the Medical College of El Salvador, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 24 March 1979.

¹¹ The body of Ernesto Liebes was found on the night of March 21 in a car in the Montserrat district of San Salvador. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 22 March 1979.

¹² See Allocation of John Paul II to the Committee of the International Institution of Human Rights (22 March 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 23 March 1979.

¹³ The disappeared are: Daniel Coello Flores, Oscar Jiménez Ruiz, Eleuterio Hernández, Marciano Meléndez Dueñas and Atilio César Franco. See “¿Dónde están?, *Orientación*, 25 March 1979.

¹⁴ On 11 March 1979 the Cathedral was occupied by the Bloque Popular Revolucionario and on 21 March 1979 by the Comité de Madres y Familiares de Reos y Desaparecidos Políticos de El Salvador. See *La Crónica del Pueblo*, 12 + 21 March 1979.

¹⁵ See Discourse of John Paul II to youth in the General Audience (21 February 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 25 February 1979.

Marginal References (1) GS 3; (2) Gn 9,8-15; (3) Gn 22,15-18; (4) Rm 4,18; (5) Ex 20,1-17; (6) Rm 4,13-17; (7) 2Ch 36,14-16; (8) Jn 3,19; (9) Ep 2,15; (10) Jn 6,68; (11) 2Ch 36,16; (12) 2Ch 36,19-20; (13) PP 30; (14) Is 45,1; (15) 2Ch 36,22-23; (16) Ps 137,3b-6; (17) 2Ch 36,23b; (18) 2Ch 36,14; (19) 2Ch 36,22; (20) Ep 2,4; (21) Ep 2,5; (22) Is 49,15; (23) Jn 3,16; (24) Jn 3,14-15; (25) Nb 21,4-5; (26) Nb 21,6-9; (27) Jn 3,14-15; (28) Mt 25,40; (29) Mt 25,41-42; (30) Tb 4,15; (31) Jn 3,16.