

THE MEDIATOR OF THE NEW COVENANT

Palm Sunday¹
April 8, 1979

Isaiah 50:4-7
Philippians 2:6-11
Mark 14:1-15:47

[.....]² Today's liturgy is like the Lenten journey that has arrived at its final destination. Lent has enabled us to explore the history of God's covenant with humanity. Today we find ourselves before the new and eternal covenant that forms the context for the celebrations of Holy Week.

The title for our homily this Sunday is *Today the Mediator of the New Covenant comes*. The first point will be: The people are filled with joy and go out to meet the Mediator who arrives; Secondly: This Mediator identifies himself as the servant of the people; And thirdly: In the New Covenant, God shares his Son's glorification with the people.

The people are filled with joy and go out to meet the Mediator who arrives

In the first place, I look at all of you and then at myself, and I feel that I am part of this multitude that twenty centuries ago went out to meet this God who came to save the people in the course of history. Twenty centuries ago the people of Jerusalem, young men and women and children, cut branches from the trees and went out to meet the Lord. This was a people that had lost their unity and independence. They were poor and their religiosity had become distorted. Throughout the history of Israel there was, however, a small group that was always saved. The Bible refers to this group as the *remnant of Israel*. (1) This remnant reveals the mystery of the salvation that God offers and from this remnant comes forth the Son of David who today is acclaimed: *Blessed is he who comes! Hosanna to the Son of David* (2)

In our procession from the Church of El Calvario, we remembered that throughout human history there have always been people, like ourselves, protagonists, who go out to meet Jesus. In his recent encyclical, the Pope says that the problem of Jesus' redemption touches everyone: *We are not dealing with the "abstract" man, but the real, "concrete", "historical" man. We are dealing with "each" man, for each one is included in the mystery of the Redemption ...man [is a] unique [and] unrepeatably human reality* (3) Those who went to meet Jesus twenty centuries ago were people of their time; they brought with them the history of their people --- the frustrations and the hopes of Israel. Today, we the people of El Salvador have our own history and we are not just some people in general, but each one of us as an individual is this people. We know that Christ is 'my' Redeemer, as well as the Redeemer of all people. I feel that this procession highlights the words of the Puebla document, describing the face of the Latinamerican people.

They include the faces of the indigenous people, and frequently Afro-Americans, living marginalized lives in inhuman situations who can be considered the poorest of the poor (4). The faces of the peasants --- as a social group, they live in exile almost everywhere on our continent, deprived of land, caught in a situation of internal and external dependence, and subjected to systems of commercialization that exploit them (5). The faces of labourers, who frequently are ill-paid and who have difficulty in organizing themselves and defending their rights (6). The faces of marginalized and overcrowded urban dwellers, whose lack of material goods is matched by the ostentatious display of wealth by other segments of society (7). The faces of the underemployed and the unemployed, who are dismissed because of the harsh exigencies of economic crises, and often because of development models that subject workers and their families to cold economic calculations (8).

In this procession we can see the same reality as the bishops who gathered in Puebla to reflect on the situation in Latin America. *The faces of young people who are disorientated because they cannot find their place in society and who are frustrated, particularly in marginal rural and urban areas, by the lack of opportunity to obtain training and work (9). The faces of young children, struck down by poverty before they are born, their chance for self-development blocked by irreparable mental and physical deficiencies; and of the vagrant children in our cities who are so often exploited, products of poverty and the moral disorganization of the family (10). The faces of old people who are growing more numerous every day and who are frequently marginalized in a progress-oriented society that totally disregards people not engaged in production (11).* These are the faces in our Palm Sunday procession. We could continue to cite other realities of our present situation³.

The reality of the poor in our country has just been analyzed by CEPICIES⁴ of the Organization of American States. This Commission included three governmental ministers from El Salvador, the President of the Central Reserve Bank and the Salvadorian Ambassador to the United States. In their report they admitted that since 1974 the incidence of malnutrition has increased here in El Salvador. 16% of the population has protein deficiencies, that is, they do not receive the protein requirements of a normal human person. There is, however, an even more needy group who were measured to have a 44% protein deficiency. This tells us that the people of El Salvador, who now go out in pursuit of Christ, are greatly undernourished and because of this we note a high infant mortality rate in our society. At the same time, adults die because of a lack of food. This week, Don Portillo Alvarez died because of malnutrition.

Among the people who today go out to meet the Redeemer, 48% who live in the rural areas do not have running water; 66% of all the people in El Salvador have no electricity and in the rural areas 93% of the homes have no electricity. There is a 35% illiteracy rate in the nation. Their report outlines other deficiencies that describe the sad situation of this people that awaits the great liberation of Christ.

The words of the Minister of Justice give us hope because he stated: *social justice is the only force that is able to conquer the enemies of democracy and those opposed to the supreme values of humanity*⁵. Has not the Church of Jesus Christ cried out these same words as she reflected on the frightening reality of our people? It is the same people that asks the Lord: *Lord, inspire in our midst the establishment of more human and fraternal structures that seek a true liberation for all our people.*

This is the people that now goes forth to meet the Divine Messiah who brings redemption, a people that lives in an increasing spiral of violence. This week there have been twenty-six victims of violence. In Cinquera the Gámaz family has suffered the assassination of five men one of whom, though mentally handicapped, was tortured⁶.

We have received news of abuses in other places. Prisoners will spend this Holy Week awaiting their court appearance, even though they were captured on March 30th. This is a violation of their dignity and freedom. We bring to your attention the following cases: Cecilio Antonio Murillo, 40 years old with four young children; Antonio de Jesús García, 41 years old with three small children; Fermín Landaverde, 40 years old with six young children; Tranquilino Pocasangre, 30 years old with two small children; Ricardo Hernández and Francisco Rosa, both married who now leave their families orphaned. These people will spend this Holy Week awaiting that justice that we beg the Lord to give to our people.

Thanks to God the abductors of the man from Japan⁷ have let him go free; from his homeland he was inspired to send a telegram expressing his gratitude to the Church of El Salvador. Yet we are saddened at the fact that FARN (Armed Forces of National Resistance) has closed the case on our two brothers from England⁸. So on this Sunday of hope, we open our hearts and place hope in the Commission on Human Rights⁹. The Church, together with Jesus Christ, brings liberty to all people, freedom to all those who suffer and cries out so that her voice is heard by those who cause people to be separated from their families --- more specifically, we refer to these two Englishmen. The father of one of these men is severely ill, in agony in his homeland where he awaits his son. An English reporter from the *Daily Record* has come here to see if something can be done to save these two men. The Church extends her hand, the hand of Christ the Liberator and raises her voice and says: *there is still time to save these two lives*. On this Palm Sunday I want to give echo to the words of the Holy Father who said: *this violence has caused great pain to me and to all those who bear within themselves Christian sentiments with regard to respect for human life that is a sacred gift of God*¹⁰. The Pope invites us to pray during this Holy Week so that people might open their minds and understand the divine command of mutual love that is the only foundation for a just and peaceful society.

This is the people that goes out today to meet the Divine Messiah. My dear sisters and brothers, we go out to this encounter and say, *Blessed is he who comes*, because we know that the redemption of humanity must come from God --- this is the invitation of Holy Week. Let us pray that God will not deny us the liberating power that becomes present in Jesus Christ. Christ is God, the One who comes. Christ is the Redeemer who restores people to their lost freedom and dignity. Christ comes, and in accord with the gesture of this morning's liturgy, let us go out and meet him. Let us be there to greet him! Let us fulfill our obligation and listen to his word, a word of great hope.

My dear sisters and brothers, I have the impression that different sectors of our country are seeking to resolve our national situation. These are sane voices, noble hearts, who are exploring what can be done at the present time. The Church is willing to extend her hand in support of these efforts as long as they continue to seek this true freedom for all the people. The Church longs for this to become a reality.

This Mediator identifies himself as the servant of the people

My second reflection is centered on this Mediator who comes, God all-powerful. Yet as the reading tell us today, he wanted to identify himself as a servant who humbles himself *even unto death*, thus he embraces human misery and gives a divine meaning to the just demands of the people who are bowed down. He also wanted to instill in people a hope that moves beyond the powers of this earth. The Bible says: *unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build* (12).

In today's first reading, a mysterious man called the Servant of Yahweh, despite his good will, is spat upon and beaten.(13) Yet this Servant is obedient to the will of God who commanded him to save the people. This mysterious person, who was foretold centuries before, is now understood and even clarified in this morning's reading of the gospel account of the passion. This mysterious person is seen as a reference to our Lord, Jesus Christ. What a moving account! This Servant of Yahweh, this Son of God, sets aside his divine dignity to become a man like us and allows our miseries to be placed on his shoulders.

In the gospel account this morning, Christ, represented by one of the seminarians, exclaimed, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (14), and so the humiliation of the Son of God reached its climax and he feels abandoned by God. How wonderfully does God identify himself with the suffering of our people! Many people displaced from their land, many people in our prisons, many people who suffer and hunger for justice and peace also cry out today: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* God has not abandoned us. This is the hour when the Son of God obediently accepts the burden of our sins so that the sins of humanity might be forgiven, those sins that are the source of all forms of injustice and selfishness.

A political liberation, the hope of many of Jesus' contemporaries who went out to meet him on that first Palm Sunday, would have been useless. Liberation from the oppression of the Roman Empire would not have been a true liberation because other oppressions would have followed. Yet people do not seem to learn this lesson and continue to dominate and exploit others. There is only one true liberator: God, who has brought us liberation from sin which is the root of all that goes against the well-being of humanity. For this reason we must understand why Jesus identifies himself with the suffering of humanity. Let us feel great empathy for him, and as we accompany him up the mountain with his cross, sweating blood, crying with tears of sorrow and having lost almost all hope in all things human, let us remember our own situation; let us remember this with a divine hope like that which Jesus inspires in us.

In the New Covenant, God shares his Son's glorification with the people

Lastly, my dear sisters and brothers, this heroic obedience unto death that identifies Christ like the very sin of the world that must be punished on the cross, is the New Covenant. This is the blood that is shed: thus the new and everlasting covenant established with all those who want forgiveness for their sins. It is the glorification that awaits him after heroically giving his life for us.

We have just listened to the first two readings and seen that after the humbling kenosis of the servant and his death on the cross, *God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in*

heaven and on earth and under the earth (15). In the reading from the gospel of Saint Mark that was proclaimed in a solemn manner, we heard the testimony of a non-believer. A soldier had to announce Jesus' death and so the centurion spoke to Pontius Pilate, to all the people, and to the world: *truly this man was the Son of God!* (16).

Christ has conquered his humiliation and has not failed. The cross is the way to glorification and this is the hope that I place before you for your reflection during this Holy Week. In her ministry, the Church wants to make the hearts of all people monuments of hope. For this reason the Church cannot support those forces that place all their trust in violence. The Church does not want the liberation that she preaches to be confused with liberations that are merely political and worldly. Yes, the Church is concerned about worldly liberation and is pained by the fact that people suffer and are illiterate and do not have a roof over the heads or a room. Yet she knows that human misfortune is not the only disgraceful situation that confronts humanity. Deep within the hearts of men and women is the reality of sin. Thus the Church supports all the just demands of humankind, especially those that will allow people to free themselves from the chains of sin and death and hell. The Church also encourages people to work for that true freedom that begins within the heart of the person --- the freedom of the children of God, that which makes us children of God and destroys the chains of sin. This will enable us to celebrate together the joy of our Easter.

Events of the Week

The Church that I refer to is a specific, concrete Church: our Church. The Church is those communities that I visited last Sunday at the Oratorio Festivo Ricaldone where a wonderful catechetical program is being developed or yesterday when I visited the village of El Pepeto or San Antonio Abad. The Church is that gathering of 200 teachers from our Catholic schools who met to reflect on the meaning of Holy Week and the role of the teacher here in El Salvador. They spoke of the need to provide a liberating education. The Church is the community of merchants in the Central Market who celebrated their fourth anniversary with a Mass of Thanksgiving to God.

As Church we are united in pain and we weep over the death of so many sisters and brothers. Today we pray in a special way for the mother of one of our priests, Father Próspero Díaz, the pastor of Candelaria. His mother, Doña Mercedes Díaz, died during the week. Other friends of ours have also asked for prayers for their loved ones who have died.

The Church is those priests, religious and catechists who are giving witness as they promote a Holy Week that will draw us closer to God. I want to greet and encourage those groups of missionaries who highlight our campaign to communicate the message of the cross and the resurrection. In a special way I want to communicate to the village of Mizata in Teotepeque that three sisters will arrive tomorrow to celebrate the liturgy with you during this Holy Week. I ask the leader of this community and the faithful to give them a warm welcome.

We will celebrate the mysteries of Holy Week here in the Cathedral. We hope that the radio will serve us better than it has today. On Holy Thursday, at 9:30am, we will celebrate the Eucharist and bless the oils that will be used in the administration of the sacraments throughout the Diocese. All the priests from the Diocese will gather together and we will give them a copy of the message that the Pope has prepared for all the priests in the

world¹¹. Also, during the celebration in which we remember the institution of our priesthood, we will renew our priestly commitment.

During the afternoon, on Maundy Thursday, we will celebrate the institution of the Eucharist. And, one of our traditions, a Procession of Silence will take place. Many don't respect this or give it its true meaning, but we wish to use it as a means for evangelization. So from 10.00 pm till 12.00 we will be broadcasting reflections on the radio for those who wish to carry their radios or organize meetings in their districts or homes on this night so rich in mystery, the night on which Christ was humiliated and offered himself silently for us in his passion.

At 11:00am on Good Friday we will transmit the Way of the Cross from the Cathedral and the Liturgy of Good Friday will be transmitted at 4:30pm. From 1:30pm until 9:00pm we will broadcast the Burial Procession that will leave from the Church El Calvario. We invite everyone to dedicate the afternoon to reflection on this Christ who died so that like Saint Paul, we might cry out: *He loved me, he emptied himself and humbled himself. Becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross* (17).

My sisters and brothers, above all else I want to invite you to collaborate in the celebration of Easter in a very enthusiastic way. Let us not leave Jesus as the humiliated servant who hands himself over to death, a seeming failure on the cross on Calvary, rather let us accompany him and celebrate the joy of his resurrection. We will sing the Easter *Alleluia* in this Cathedral on Saturday at 7:00pm. This will be the celebration of the solemn Easter Vigil and we extend a special invitation to all the young women and men to participate in this celebration.

When we conclude Holy Week with the celebration of the Easter Vigil at 7:00pm, we want to offer our country the Church's gift, the gift that will enable us to renew the life of our country. We cannot continue along the same path, for there will be no new nation unless the people of El Salvador are renewed within by the power of the redeeming Christ. This is the Church's contribution.

I call upon all those organizations that struggle for the liberation of our country, but do so in ways that are distinct from the ways of the Church, to spend some time in reflection during these days. But do not confuse our language and the words that I have spoken so clearly concerning the freedom from sin. Do not confuse these words or try to manipulate them for some objective that seeks simply a worldly liberation. Do not take advantage of the processions during Holy Week to announce other liberations that the Church does not preach or announce. We invite everyone to try to understand one another. We also ask that you try to understand us. Try to understand the language of the Church that during this Holy Week is very clear --- we speak of a Christ, humiliated on the cross. A violent death, yes --- but a death that he freely accepted. He gave his life for others and did not take the life of anyone. This Christ, who hands himself over to death, leads us to reflect on the road that will lead us out of this dead-end where we now find ourselves as a country. The only way is the way of Christ's love, the salvation of the world.

My dear sisters and brothers, let us imitate this Christ. On this Palm Sunday, as we wave our palms before the triumphant Jesus as he enters El Salvador, may our action be a sign of hope that we, the people of El Salvador, have placed all our trust in Christ: *In you O Lord, I trust, do not let me be disgraced* (18).

¹ Mons. Romero's homilies were transmitted by the Archdiocesan radio *Vox Panamericana*, *YSAX*. This homily was blocked without the Government doing anything to prevent such an illegal action. See "Nuevas formas de persecución a la Iglesia", *Orientación*, 22 April 1979.

² The greeting and opening words were not recorded on the tape.

³ Here Mons. Romero includes in his opening point his usual section on "Events of the Week".

⁴ Comisión Ejecutiva Permanente del Consejo Interamericano Económico y Social.

⁵ *La Prensa Gráfica*, 5 April 1979.

⁶ Angel Gámez Artiaga. See "Solidaridad", *Orientación*, 8 April 1979.

⁷ Mr Takakazu Suzuki was freed on 31 March 1979 after being kidnapped for four months by members of FARN. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 2 April 1979.

⁸ Ian Cameron Massie and Michael Stanislaus Chatterton kidnapped on 30 November 1978. See *ibid.*

⁹ See Boletín de prensa de la Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (2 April 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 3 April 1979.

¹⁰ Sunday allocution of John Paul II (1 April 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 8 April 1979.

¹¹ See Letter of John Paul II to all priests (8 April 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 15 April 1979.

Marginal References (1) Jr 31,7; (2) Mk 11,9; (3) RH 13; (4) P 34; (5) P 35; (6) P 36; (7) P 38; (8) P 37; (9) P 33; (10) P 32; (11) P 39; (12) Ps 127,1; (13) Is 50,4-7; (14) Mk 15,34; (15) Ph 2,9-10; (16) Mk 15,39; (17) Gal 2,20; (18) Ps 31,2.