

## LOVE, LAW OF THE NEW COVENANT

**Holy Thursday**  
**The celebration of the Lord's Supper**  
**April 12, 1979**

*Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14*  
*1 Corinthians 11:23-26*  
*John 13:1-15*

My dear brothers and sisters.

If we want to summarize the thoughts expressed in the Word of God today, I would say this: Love, the law of the New Covenant! Holy Week is a celebration of this New Covenant that God announced through the prophets: *they shall be my people, and I will be their God* (1). This Covenant establishes a relationship of love between God and humankind who ought to respond by loving one another. If one does not know how to love, then one does not live this New Covenant.

In today's readings, we can break down this message in the following three points: first, Easter, a celebration of the New Covenant; second, The commandment of the New Covenant; third, Humility and service, the paths of true Christian love

### **Easter, a celebration of the New Covenant**

The first reading presents us with an account of the Passover as it was celebrated year after year in Israel. Like a good Israelite, Jesus with his disciples prepared to celebrate the Passover. It was a religious-national celebration in Israel.

The feast of Passover commemorated the passing over of God with his merciful liberation. It commemorated the night when God passed over the territory of Egypt and freed the people of Israel who marked the lintel and the two door posts with the blood of the lamb. (2) At the same time, weeping was heard in the homes of the Egyptians, for their first-born sons had been killed. (3) As we have just heard, God decreed that each year the people should celebrate this passing over of God with the Passover meal. The Passover of the Lord is a celebration, a feast in which the Jews renewed the law and the covenant with God. In the covenant that was established on Mount Sinai, the people responded by saying: *We will do everything that the Lord has told us* (4). They gathered together, as we are gathered together this evening, and ate the Passover lamb. When the children and the young people asked their parents and grandparents *what does this rite of yours mean?* (5), then from generation to generation the following history was retold: *This is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt; when he struck down the Egyptians, he spared our houses.*

It was a feast of thanksgiving, a feast that had its own characteristics of a covenant of love. Renounce your idolatries, *for I the Lord, your God, am a jealous God* (6) and will not tolerate other gods. On this day, the people renewed their faith in the one God. In today's

readings, the Passover feast appears as a feast that was held in honor of the Lord. The only Lord, before whom there were no others. Thus God punished the Egyptians and the idolaters because they adored creatures and despised the true God.

The Passover is a sacrificial celebration and the lamb is the symbol of innocence that is offered to the Creator in reparation for the sins of the people.

The Passover is a feast, a meal, a dinner and thus around every family table the covenant of family love is lived. What is marriage? What is a parent's or a child's love? Are they not a reflection of the New Covenant between God and humankind? Thus, every table where the family gathers to eat becomes a reflection of the love of God who shares bread and life with all people.

The Passover is a national feast of unity. All the homes were focused on the one Israel. Moses, who had given a national significance to the people journeying in the desert, was able to give a patriotic meaning to the annual Passover celebration. Thus, the Passover became a national feast for Israel. The people of Israel recognized the sovereignty of God and saw the hand of God in Moses and others who led them. The people were convinced that God walked with them in their history. What a beautiful meaning is seen in the Israelite celebration of the Passover!

All the burdens of history, religion, love, family, country, returning to God, and obedience to the merciful love that brings about freedom --- all of this weighed upon the heart of Jesus and, as we heard in the gospel, Jesus said: *I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you* (7). This is not the Jewish Passover. That night Jesus gathered together the prophecies announced in the Passover of Israel and gave the Passover its true meaning: the New Covenant is here. This celebration is not about a prophecy or a leader of the people or a journey in the desert or the liberation of the people from slavery. We are dealing with true Christian liberation. This is the Eucharist!

In the second reading and the gospel, we listened to the meaning of this celebration for us as Christians. As Saint Paul said, it is a gathering in which we come together to embrace the precious inheritance: *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you* (8). My dear sisters and brothers, tonight, here in this Cathedral, we are like a link in that chain that has continued for twenty centuries. We have received a tradition that enables us to believe that Christ becomes present in the bread and we believe that in the chalice is Jesus' blood that is shed and establishes the New Covenant and is given to us as a sign of love and a sign of God's sacrifice. This tradition that we have received, we also transmit to future generations. How beautiful to see the children among us! They are learning from their parents the meaning of Holy Thursday. They are a link in this chain that has received the history of this tradition and they in turn will communicate this tradition to the children of a future generation. This tradition is a tradition of faith, a faith that Christ is present in the Eucharist, and we celebrate this evening the institution of this sacrament.

During the first century of Christianity, Saint Paul said: *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you* (9). The Lord Jesus, on the night on which he was to be handed over, took bread, gave thanks, broke it and said: *This is my Body that is given up for you.... This cup is the New Covenant in my blood.* See how this Christian celebration, our Passover, is a celebration *par excellence*. Passover for the Israelites was the passing over of God to free his people. For ourselves as Christians, Passover is the passing over of Jesus

from painful death to glorious resurrection. This is a more difficult passage than forty years in the desert or passing through the Red Sea. It is a passage of pain and suffering and agony and the cross. It is the Passover of the Lord. The New Covenant is celebrated this evening on the altar of our Cathedral, on the Eucharistic altar. This is Jesus' love.

All of this has such a profound note of love that we can say: this evening, in the host and the chalice, as in the host and chalice of every Mass that is offered, the living blood is poured out --- the same blood that was poured out from Christ's heart and given to us. Love is to give of oneself. Love is to reserve nothing for oneself. Love is give completely of oneself, even death if that is necessary. Love is to be nailed to the cross speaking words of forgiveness to one's enemies. (10) Love is to root out all hatred and forgive, to return smiles of blessings in imitation of Christ on the cross.

The Christian Passover is also a meal. The body of the Lord is not the lamb with bitter herbs, but is the unleavened bread, the presence of Jesus Christ who was sacrificed for us, giving thanks to the Father for the ways in which the Father has blessed and loved us. Who better than Jesus Christ can give thanks in our name for all the benefits that we have received from God? Love is gratitude and Christ gathers together all of humanity's blessings and says to the Father: *thank you for you have blessed my sisters and brothers, you have blessed humanity.* (11) Yes, Jesus has a great heart! What a wonderful New Covenant has been established through the shedding of Jesus' blood! This New Covenant, that pact of love that God has made with humanity was sealed with the blood of love!

### **The Commandment of the New Covenant**

So, my sisters and brothers, my second point tonight from the readings is: the commandment of the new covenant is love.

When the Council wanted to define the true characteristics of the new People of God that were born as a result of the Covenant that God established with humankind, they said: *This messianic people has as its head Christ who was delivered up for our sins and rose again for our justification ... The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God* (12). Human dignity and human freedom are most profoundly lived in the Covenant of love between God and humankind.

No one defends human rights as God when he established the Covenant with humankind. Therefore, those who want to be truly free and those who want to live their lives with full human dignity must ratify tonight the Covenant with the Lord. No one can give you freedom like God. No one respects your freedom like God. The Council states: *Its [this messianic people's] law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. Its destiny is the Kingdom of God* (13). These are our commitments, but the commitment that anoints our hearts this evening is the commandment of love. In the environment of this New Covenant, Jesus has given us our motto: *I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another* (14).

In light of the divine Word, I would like to reflect on the ideas contained in the message that the bishops, gathered in Puebla, wrote to the people of Latin America. In this message they state: *We invite you....* I feel that my poor words are not the words of one single bishop, but are words that express the Episcopal teaching of Latin America that has now received the Pope's approval. Listen then to this call, not as a poor voice that the airwave pirates are interfering with on our radio station, but as the voice of the pastors

scattered throughout the continent, the voice of the Supreme Pastor of the Church. If people are interfering with our radio broadcast, it is not just the voice of the Archbishop of San Salvador that is being offended, but also the voices of all the pastors of America who from this Cathedral direct this call to the Dioceses of El Salvador: *We invite you to be self-sacrificing constructors of the civilization of love, ... inspired in the message, life, and full self-giving of Christ, and its basis in justice, truth and freedom*<sup>1</sup>. What beautiful words! *We invite you to be... constructors of the civilization of love*. This is true civilization. This is the civilization of the New Covenant. This is what truly makes us human, Christian, children of God, because God is love (15) and the civilization that God desires to see established among us is the civilization of love that also involves justice, truth and freedom.

We want to study with you the structure of this civilization of love. Christian love moves beyond the categories of all other regimes and systems. For this reason the Church does not identify herself with any political system. The Church cannot identify herself with any political organization. The Church cannot be a system but is a part of every system because she brings with her the insuperable power of the Paschal Mystery, that is, the death and resurrection of Christ. The message of the Church, the civilization that the Church preaches, bears within itself the value of the suffering of the cross and the signs of victory and resurrection. *Love begets the happiness of communion and inspires the criteria of participation*.

We said that this civilization of love is not some sentimental concept, but is justice and truth. *Justice is a sacred right of all human beings that has been conferred by God himself. It is imbedded in the very essence of the gospel message*. A civilization of love that does not demand justice of people would not be a true civilization nor would it designate the true relationships between people. It is a caricature of love to try to cover over with alms what is lacking in justice, to patch over with the appearance of benevolence when social justice is lacking. True love begins by demanding what is just in the relations of those who love. But it is not enough to demand justice, for the civilization of love also demands truth. *Truth, illuminated by faith, is the perennial source of discernment for our ethical conduct*. If there is no truth in love, then we have hypocrisy. Often, fine words are spoken, handshakes given, perhaps even a kiss, but underneath, there is no truth. A civilization where trust of one another is lost, where there is so much lying and no truth, has no foundation of love. Love cannot exist where there is falsehood. Our environment lacks truth. And when the truth is spoken, it gives offense, and the voices that speak the truth are silenced. For this reason the airwaves are disturbed by the truth even though they say that they have described themselves by the truth that is spoken to the people. Thanks to God that in the midst of this environment of lies in which we live, the Church has been able to preserve this characteristic of love: the truth --- I do believe this. The Church is credible! I want to thank the people for this honor that enables the Church to preach this civilization of love. She is not afraid to unmask and denounce the injustices and abuses, for she must always speak of truth and justice.

*The civilization of love repudiates violence*. We have never preached violence. On this Holy Thursday, when the Lord says to us, *love one another*, he is speaking about the philosophy of the true Church. Love, not violence, is going to change the world. *The civilization of love repudiates violence, egotism, wastefulness, exploitation, and moral follies. At first glance it seems to be an expression lacking the strength needed to confront the grave problems of our age. But we can assure you that no stronger word exists in the Christian lexicon. It is one with the very force of Christ. If we do not believe in love, then neither do we believe in Him who says, "this is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you"*.

When the Church preaches non-violence, it is not because of cowardice. Pope Paul VI said: *Christians know how to struggle and Christians know that violence is not an effective remedy*<sup>2</sup>. Christ offers us non-violence, the power of love, and even though we have the ability to struggle, we struggle with non-violence and the power of love. *Love one another* (16) is more than conformity, more than tolerating situations with a passivity of the dead. The Church does not want passivity and therefore speaks to people and promotes their human dignity. She speaks about the equality of all people because she does not want men and women to become “a mob” but rather wants people to become “individual persons” who view themselves with dignity, but not with a pride that allows them to impose themselves violently and forcefully on others. The Church wants people to live with those characteristics that are proper to them as Christians.

Christ was strong and combative for when he was nailed to the cross he spoke to the Father: *forgive them, they know not what they do* (17). This is the power of forgiveness. *The civilization of love proposes to all the evangelical treasure of national and international reconciliation. There is no gesture more sublime than pardon. The person who does not know how to pardon will not be pardoned* (18). With the evangelical power of forgiveness and love we also have the potential of our own salvation and the liberation of humankind.

The message of the bishops continues but I do not want to tire you any more. I have said enough to enable you to understand the structure of this new command of the Christ that was reiterated by the Bishops of Latin America. They have sent out a call that I have repeat here this evening: Be constructors of the civilization of love! Let us know how to forgive. The civilization of love condemns absolute divisions and all forms of radicalism. I believe this is the great evil of our society. We have become polarized and radicalized in two extremes. Those on the extreme right see everything on the left as vile and some form of communism and terrorism that must be eliminated and repressed. My brothers and sisters, this is not true. There are many voices that cry out for justice and the necessary and urgent demands of the people and they must be heard. Not every demand for social justice is some form of communism or terrorism. Let us listen with an ethics that allows us to discern with love and hear in the voice of the *campesino* who is dying of hunger, the voice of a brother or sisters who needs the voice and help of those who are able to do so --- this is not the voice of a terrorist.

The same must be said to those who have aligned themselves with the left. Do not view the right as though they are all reactionaries and people who repress and hate others. There are also distinctions on the right. There are groups that are seeking a solution to our present situation. There are people who want to dialogue --- in fact there are people in every human sector of our nation who want and seek dialogue. This is the concrete civilization of love that is crying out to the opposite extreme.

On this night, when Christ visits the people of El Salvador with all their problems, seemingly at a dead end, we repeat what we have said many times: There is an exit to this dead end situation and the exit is love. Let us understand one another! There are fanatics on both extremes because on the right there are extremists who cry out for violence and want the government to continue the repression and beatings. On every side there are fanatics and they are the ones who cause great evil. Fanaticism is opposed to love. True love discovers the good in the sinner, the good that must be saved. As long as we are not in hell, - hopefully we never will be - then there is always something good, even in the most evil of persons. Let us imitate Christ, who loved and saved as he hung on the cross and thus let us save that which is good. *“I have not come for the just, but for sinners”*. (19) *In this we can recognize God’s*

love – says the apostle of love – *in having been ourselves sinners and before reconciliation with Him, He loved us* (20). When we were his enemies, He loved us.

Sisters and brothers, today I have experienced the civilization of love when we sat at a table to dialogue, without sharing the same language, but with desires to search for solutions. Today a United States Congressman is with us, Mr Tom Harpin, with whom a group of Catholics has been meeting. And he has witnessed the repugnant action of those who have hijacked our wavelengths carrying our message to people waiting for it, but have not been able to justify their actions in blocking what they don't like other than through repression. They have tried to silence this voice. And the United States has seen this through one of its representatives and is aware of the serious situation in our country; but also, as a Christian, gives us a word of hope. On this Holy Thursday, the dialogue that I had with various people who are concerned about our present situation seems very significant. My dear sisters and brothers, I told these people that the construction of this civilization of love is very possible if we are willing to put aside our attitude of bitterness and sit down with one another and even smile. People are always able to smile. Only in hell is there no smile and perhaps because many people carry this hell in their hearts with their hatred and fanatical violence they are thus unable to smile. How ugly are the faces of those who hate! How beautiful the faces of those who smile and with love offer hope to others!

### **Humility and service: the paths of true Christian love**

My final thought this afternoon is: humility and service as paths towards love. The gesture of Christ that I am going to try to imitate in some form as I kneel down before those who represent the disciples and wash their feet is a gesture that we are invited to undertake as we walk the path of love. It is impossible to love if we are not humble. It is impossible to love if in our hearts we do not have a sense of service. It is impossible to construct the civilization of love if we do not have a foundation of humility and service toward our sisters and brothers. Let us open our hearts to our sisters and brothers! My sisters and brothers, what do you need and how can I help you?

As Jesus said when he rose from the table to wash the feet of his disciples: *Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me "teacher" and "master," and rightly so, for indeed I am....therefore you ought to wash one another's feet* (21), not in some worldly sense but rather from a sense of service. In Jesus' time, to wash the feet of another was the work of a slave. When a visitor or some invited guest arrived, the servant washed the person's feet. This was the work of the servant and Jesus teaches us that nothing is humiliating when it is done in love. Peter is scandalized. *How are you going to wash my feet since you are so great and I am so insignificant!* (22). Jesus responded: *unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.* Then Peter understood that this gesture was central to entering into communion with Jesus. My sisters and brothers, only with this key of humility and service can we enter into the civilization of love. Put aside pride, avarice and arrogance. Love humility and self-denial. One can possess material things and be happy and one can be holy when the heart is filled with love and humility.

Hopefully during this Holy Week --- and I have asked the Lord for this many times --- that my poor words that are used to interpret the Word of God and that I speak to you this evening, may these words not be filled with eloquence or human wisdom; may my person and accent be put aside and may the tender and gentle accent of Jesus, who this evening becomes present in this assembly, touch the heart of each listener. Listen to him! If my

person is repulsive to some, who would therefore silence my voice, let them not look at me, but at him who bids me to speak to you: *love one another*. It is not me they hear, but the Lord who is love and wants to make us his own by the sign of his love.

I ask the Lord, that in this Eucharist in which we celebrate the law of the New Covenant, may we ratify this Covenant with him. May we resolve to fulfill this law that marks the true allies of God. Only those who love can live this Covenant with the Lord. Those who do not love should not call themselves Christian. The Covenant places upon us a law that Jesus dictated tonight: *this is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (23). I hope that all who leave here this evening will carry with them the mark of the Lord: love. May we know how to forgive and how to love one another and on this Holy Thursday may we celebrate that great reconciliation that our nation so urgently needs. So be it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops (Puebla 1979). The texts in italics are quotations from this message.

<sup>2</sup> See Message of Paul VI for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1968 (The Vatican, 8 December 1967).

*Marginal References* (1) Lv 26,12; (2) Ex 12,13; (3) Ex 12,2; (4) Ex 19,8; (5) Ex 12,26-27; (6) Ex 20,4-5; (7) Lk 22,14; (8) 1Cor 11,23; (9) 1Cor 11,23-25; (10) Lk 23,34; (11) 1Cor 11,24a; (12) LG 9; (13) LG 9; (14) Jn 13,34; (15) 1Jn 4,8; (16) Jn 13,34; (17) Lk 23,24; (18) Mt 6,15; (19) Mk 2,17; (20) 1Jn 4,9-10; (21) Jn 13,13-15; (22) Jn 13,6-8; (23) Jn 13,35.