

## LENT, GOD'S SAVING PLAN IN HISTORY

**First Sunday of Lent  
February 24, 1980**

*Deuteronomy 26:4-10*

*Romans 10:8-13*

*Luke 4:1-13*

My dear sisters and brothers.

The holy season of Lent has begun. The liturgy has a profound message for all of us who call ourselves Christian. The Second Vatican Council summarizes the content of the Lenten season when it states: *The season of Lent has a twofold character: primarily by recalling or preparing for baptism and by penance, it disposes the faithful, who more diligently hear the word of God and devote themselves to prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery. This twofold character is to be brought into greater prominence both in the liturgy and by liturgical catechesis* (1).

Today we see that Lent is a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter which is a celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ, the feast of our redemption. In order to celebrate Easter worthily we have a long period of spiritual preparation: the season of Lent. What are the means that are helpful during this time of preparation? The Council has told us that Baptism and Reconciliation are the two great Lenten sacraments.

Baptism: those who have not received Baptism prepare themselves at this time to receive this sacrament at the Easter Vigil and those who have experienced the joy of having received this sacrament use the season of Lent to renew the serious commitment of their Baptism. In this way when we celebrate the resurrection of Christ we can truly experience that because of Baptism Jesus' death and resurrection has become our death and resurrection.

The other sacrament that ought to play an important role in our preparation for Easter is that of Penance, the sacrament of repentance of sin. In this sacrament the priest tells that that in the name are God we are absolved from our sins.

This is the great preparation that we undertake and that the Council invites us to become involved in: intense prayer and reflection on the Word of God. (2) In other words, Lent is a time for much prayer and a time to reflect on the Scriptures, a time to reflect on the Word of God. We are especially sorry today, when we most need it, to be without our radio station YSAX, the instrument that carried God's word forth from our Sunday Mass.

As you all know, last Monday the transmitter was destroyed by a bomb set by an ultra-rightist group<sup>1</sup>. This new attack is a serious violation of freedom of expression.\* This attack is an attempt to silence the prophetic and pastoral voice of the Archdiocese simply because it is trying to be the voice of the voiceless\*, because it has reported the systematic violation of human rights, because it has tried to tell the truth, defend justice and spread the Christian message. From of time of Jesus, that message has shocked the powerful. It shocked the powerful of his time, but as now, was listened to and accepted by the poor and the simple.

I take advantage of this time on the First Sunday of Lent when the Church encourages us to listen to the Word of God to strongly protest this new act of repression which is not only an action against the Church but is also an act that is directed against the people\*. The authors of this attack want to prevent people from knowing the truth. They do not want people to acquire criteria that will enable them to judge what is happening in the country. They do not want people to unite and cry out: *Enough! Put an end to the exploitation and domination of the Salvadoran oligarchy!*\*

The intended desire of those who desired to silence us and the absence of our radio station at this time have only given greater moral strength to the word of the Church\*. It is wonderful to see the many expressions of solidarity that have been expressed in our favor as a result of the attack ... and at this time I want to express my gratitude to all of you. I never imagined that on this first Sunday of Lent that I would have here in my hands the support of a very well known group of bishops who sent me the following telegram:

*Bishop Romero. With great sorrow we have just read about the criminal destruction of the Archdiocesan radio station. We see this as another sign of the persecution that is directed against you and the priests and women religious and the poor and oppressed people of El Salvador. We express our solidarity with your courageous and prophetic homily of February 17<sup>th</sup>. We are grateful to you and to your Church for having faithfully lived the preferential option for the poor. Your brothers in the Episcopate. Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, Brazil\*; Jose Maria Pires, Archbishop of Soa, Brazil; Samuel Ruiz, Bishop of Chiapas, Mexico; Jesus Calderon, Bishop of Puno, Peru; Pedro Casadaliga, Bishop of San Felix, Brazil; Jose A. Yaguno, Apostolic Vicar of Tarahumara, Mexico; Jorge Hurton, Bishop in Chile; Tomas Balduino, Bishop of Goyas, Brazil; Marcelo Caballera, Bishop of Guarabira, Brazil; Mauro Morelli, Auxiliary Bishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil; Alfredo Nowok, Auxiliary Bishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil.\**

The feelings that prompted the sending of this telegram were communicated to us in a telephone conversation in which we were told that this action against our radio station caused great indignation among the bishops who were meeting in Brazil. They were most kind in redacting and sending us this telegram. In response to this expression of solidarity, I gather up the applause of the people gathered here this morning and want to tell the bishops about the profound gratitude that their message has produced at this time when it is necessary that our voice, which cannot now be transmitted over the air waves, find the support of the continent, a support which perhaps we would not have had if our radio station had not been bombed.\*

Among the expressions of solidarity that we have received I want to highlight the telegram from the Revolutionary Government Junta: *We deplore and condemn the attack with dynamite that yesterday destroyed the radio station YSAX, the Pan American Voice, the station of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. Through means of this telegram we express to your Excellency, and through you to the Catholic Church of El Salvador, our deepest sentiments for this senseless terrorist act directed against an important means of communication. Sincerely, the Revolutionary Government Junta.\**

The expression of people's feelings encompasses a wide range of emotions. We have received letters of protest, like the following: *This radio station speaks for the people. But Herod and Cephas, (who did not want people to know what they should know because it was not beneficial to the cause of the powers that be) have been and will always be present in the world. My contribution is small, but if 20,000 Catholic made the decision to donate to this campaign that has been initiated with the donation of 5.00 colones that I am sending, then it would not be long before radio YSAX were transmitting its programs once again. If people again destroy the radio station,*

*you can be assured that we will rebuild it again\**. The letter concludes with these beautiful words: *the people can do all of this because they are the people who belong to God.\**

We find expressions of pain and sorrow in this wide range of emotions. Many people have experienced anguish and have cried because they miss the voice of our radio station in their homes, as if a family member has been taken from them\*. A beautiful letter from the Committee on Health-Care Pastoral Ministry states: *We want to make you aware of the sadness that we have experienced as a result of the attack on our Catholic radio station YSAX which until now has been the voice of the Church and the voice of all people who seek the establishment of the kingdom of peace and love. We believe that this attack, however, will not silence the denunciation of all the injustices that our people endure. We express our solidarity with the pain of all those Christians who will not have the opportunity to hear the truth that is transmitted by our radio station.\**

We have also received gestures of assistance. Yesterday I was in a village in the parish of Colón, Botoncillal, and I admired the spontaneity of a young person who called upon the people to take up a collection among the poor *campesinos*, a collection which not only has value for the amount of money received but more important is the attitude of the people who donated so generously. I remember yesterday when I entered San Salvador and we were stopped at a red light, a man shouted out: *for the radio station!* I was surprised when I saw a taxi driver with five colones in his hand and as he gave me the money he said: *the voice of the streets ... the voice of the people! I want to assist our radio station!\** The young people who, with the permission of the bishop of Santa Ana, invited me to Sonsonate: what spontaneity and kindness to ask for donations from those participating in the Eucharist. They offered me their collection yesterday as an offering from the people of the Diocese of Santa Ana.

In a special way I want to thank the media. All of them published the bulletin of the Archbishop and as a protest some of them have given commentaries and even further others have published editorials in honor of our radio station<sup>2</sup>.

I also want to thank the technicians from the UCA (University of Central America) who have offered to restore our radio transmission as soon as possible. I have personally accepted the responsibility of restoring our antennas while relying on the wonderful support that I have placed in these technicians: we will raise up YSAX so that it will be even more powerful than before it was destroyed.\*

Another wonderful gesture of solidarity is seen in that which is occurring now: a number of our sisters and brothers have come here with tape recorders in order to bring our message to those areas where we are unable to communicate by radio. While this silence continues your tape recorders provide a wonderful service to our ministry.\*

Something has occurred that surprises me and also makes me extremely grateful. Today, as I entered to celebrate Mass, a representative of Radio Noticias del Continente, located in Costa Rica\*, told me that he was going to record our celebration so that immediately after the conclusion of our Eucharist it could be transmitted from Costa Rica on 31 meters on the short wave band. In other words, this transmission will not only cover the area which we are able to reach with YSAX but through the short wave transmission our humble message, spoken in this homily, will reach all of Central America and the world\*. Next Sunday, if we are still in the same situation, the radio station from Costa Rica has generously offered to transmit our celebration live\*. Thus today, when we conclude our celebration of the Eucharist, you will be able to hear our message, if you have a short wave band, on 31 meters. There you will be able to hear, as the people are now hearing, our

humble message\*. Indeed, before the bombing incident we never imagined our words would reach so many people in so many different parts of the world. As you can see, my sisters and brothers, no one can destroy the plans of God\*.

Therefore as the third point in this introduction I want to invite everyone to take seriously this time of Lent because, thanks to God, not even the material means that enable us to communicate our message, not even these can be destroyed. We see that it is not only the extreme right that has technical power but that many Catholics are experts in these matters and not even bombs can silence us.\* Yes, these material things concern us because we know the great good that is done by our radio station. Nevertheless, we say once again that these words that echo and are received into your homes are unless they are incarnated into the life of Christian women and men. Jesus was very concerned that his followers become a living word, light of the world and salt of the earth.(3) May the life of our communities and our individual lives give witness to the gospel that the Church preaches. In other words, even though we may not have radios or any other technical apparatus, may all Christians proclaim throughout the world the great liberating message of Christianity!

Therefore I beg you to live intense lives during this Lenten season. Let us walk together toward Easter so that our celebration of the resurrection might gift us with new life. In this way we will be able to live in the midst of El Salvador and be the women and men that our country needs ... new women and men. For this reason, when we conclude our Lenten celebration we want to have the satisfaction of being able to offer our country a new people, a Church alive with the risen Lord, a Church rooted in the cross of Jesus who gives us God's plan, a plan that can save our country. This is the theme of our homily.\*

Yes, I entitle the theme of our reflection: *Lent, the triumph of the saving plan in history*. In other words, God has a plan to save history, to save women and men. Lent speaks to us about the triumph of God's plan, a triumph that occurred despite the temptations of the evil one. I am going to present this theme with three points: First, the victory of the saving plan of God over the enemy; Second, the action of the Spirit as the power of God's saving plan; Third, through faith we become participants in the victory of God's saving plan.

### **The victory of Christ over the enemy, the saving plan of God**

First of all, this Sunday speaks to us about a victory: the victory of the saving plan of God over the enemy. Today's gospel presents us with the confrontation between two powerful forces: Jesus and the devil. Jesus is presented to us as a man who will learn from personal experience that which everyone must learn, namely, the value of temptations and the fact that temptations deepen the convictions of the human person. Jesus present in the desert reminds us of the forty years that Israel traveled through the desert under the guidance of God's plan. Jesus experiences the same temptations and difficulties, the temptations of the devil, and the same adversities as the people of Israel. Today's scripture reading brings us back to the book of Deuteronomy where Moses speaks to the people and reminds them of the wonderful things that God had done for them during the Exodus and how God wanted the people to be faithful. It is as though Jesus synthesizes the wonderful position of people in the desert: Jesus prays and fasts, and confronts the temptations of evil. Jesus is perfected as a man through the trials and his victory over evil is so resplendent that throughout the three years of his public ministry this victory will shine forth on those principles which enabled him to overcome the temptations that attempted to destroy the plan of God.

For those who lived during the time of these events, the desert, an uninhabited area, was a place where wild beasts and demons dwelt. As Jesus enters into this solitary place he becomes the new

Adam who will not taste the delights of Paradise without first creating the desert into Paradise. Jesus is the second Adam, the redeemer of humanity who will give us, if we follow his path, the desert that has now been changed into Paradise.

The temptations occur: *If you are the Son of man and hungry, then why not command this stone to become bread* (4). Jesus responds: *One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.* Here we have two plans: the plan of God and the plan of the devil, the plan of evil. We must be very careful at this time and reflect on the following: in which plan do we find ourselves situated? The devil promises Christ an easy solution to the problem: a miracle, simply change the stones into bread. This is an immediate solution like the solution of many politicians who want to be able “to fix” all situations and do that which is impossible. This adolescent way of acting, changing stones into bread and resolving the problem of hunger, is much like the way of the devil.

God’s plan wants to give meaning to the act of fasting, wants to give a sense of the cross to the desert and to all forms of sacrifice. The Word of God is justice and bread is not made only from stones. The bread that must nourish all people has to be the just distribution of property. It has to be when the rich give up what they have in order to share with the poor. It has to be a society arranged according to the heart and the justice of God. This is the redemption that Jesus brings.\* It is not necessary to resolve all these things now with easy and quick solutions, easy and quick miracles. If we can do this then certainly it must be done. Jesus on some occasions acts this way. For example with five loaves of bread he fed five thousand people.(5) For Christ it is not difficult to multiply the loaves and give bread and good salaries and create a good situation for all those people who are marginalized. But the world does not understand this way of acting. The rich continue to be selfish and many persons have not repented and been converted. Therefore let us build the society that God desires, a society or nation in which intelligent people are content with the goods they have received, content because there is enough bread for everyone.

As Pope Paul VI said when he spoke about artificial methods of birth-control: *How sad the fate of human beings to have to deprive people of participating in the banquet of life because they do not know how to share. It is not a question of depriving people from entering the banquet of life but rather one of serving the tables in a way that everyone receives some bread.*<sup>3</sup> Today we exhort people: do not look for easy solutions. Do not try to reorganize in an instant a society that has been unjustly organized for so many years. Yes we must organize, but let us first seek a change of heart. May people learn how to live the austerity of the desert and learn how to savor the powerful redemption of the cross. There is no greater joy than to gain a living through the sweat of one’s brow and no more diabolical sin than to take away bread from those who are hungry.\*

There is another detail in today’s gospel that deals with the plan of the God and the plan of the evil one. The gospel says that in an instant (a vision is referred to here) all the kingdoms and all the glory of the world pass before Jesus: a great procession of members of the military and all the carriages of the emperors: all of these represent the glory of the world and the devil says that all of this (what sad possessions and I do not want to have something that is a possession of the devil) will be given to Jesus if he kneels down and adores him. How pretentious! Jesus responds with words that reflect God’s plan: *you shall worship the Lord, your God and him alone shall you serve* (6).

Jesus continued to be hungry in the desert but he was not conquered by the idolatry of power. What a tremendous and timely lesson for our day. Why do men fight in El Salvador? For power. But the devil says that power belongs to him and it is easy to acquire: just kneel down and worship the devil. But the plan of God is a NO to this form of idolatry. In my Fourth Pastoral Letter<sup>4</sup> I

stated that one of the services that the Church offers to the world is that of unmasking idolatry: the idolatry of money, the idolatry of power and any pretext that would have people kneel before these false gods. The truth is found in God's plan: *you shall worship the Lord, your God*. This is the true solution.

The true liberation of our people is found in teaching them that there is a struggle between the powers of the earth which trample upon the dignity of the human person and their human rights and that establish political systems that deaden the consciences of those who are powerful. Woe to the powerful when they do not take into account the power of God, the only powerful One ... when they try to subjugate people to their power by torturing, by killing, by massacring! What terrible sacrifices are being offered to the god of power, the god of money! So many victims, so much blood, for which God, the true God, the author of human life, will charge a high price from these idolaters of power.\*

The third vision is the third temptation that Luke places before us today in the gospel. The devil, not wishing to be overcome, leads Jesus to the parapet of the Temple (the side of the Temple that leads one from Jerusalem to the Cedron Valley) and says: *Throw yourself down from here because it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you."* In light of your success in this action the people will applaud you and you will be exalted as the Messiah that the people are awaiting (7). When faced with temptation, Jesus speaks about the plan of God: *It is written: "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test."* You want to see if I am an Messiah of convenience, a Messiah who seeks the applause of people, a Messiah who wants to win over the masses and shine in their presence by providing them with vain easy solutions ... but this is not God's plan. The plan of God is seen in the simplicity of human people who, through faith and an ordinary life, fulfill the will of God and make themselves pleasing to God.

It is not necessary to perform grandiose actions. A triumphalistic religion or political life is not necessary and it does much harm. What is lacking is greater conviction and the honorable simplicity of women and men who are willing to commit themselves to service of God. This is God's plan: the simple life, the ordinary life --- but giving this simple, ordinary life a meaning of love and freedom. How beautiful our country would be if we all lived the plan of God, each person busy in his or her job, without pretensions of dominating anyone, simply earning and eating in justice the bread that each one's family needs! We would not have this dreadful situation that has arisen precisely because people are looking for a false Messiah, for the Messiah that Satan holds forth.

Jesus triumphs over the plans of evil and clings to the unique plan of God, to the ideals of God. This is also what every Christian should do. Jesus overcomes temptations in the name of all women and men. There am I, there are each one of you and we must come to understand how the plan of evil can enter into our lives. For some it will enter through pride, for other it will appear in the form of vanity, and for others in the form of greed. My sisters and brothers, be very careful, Jesus has given us words that should be on the lips of each one of us when we are confronted with the temptation of life, words that will also enable us to defend the unique plan that saves and is long lasting, the plan of God.

Those who do not carry the cross want to eliminate the cross will fall into the temptations of the devil. Cling to and lovingly embrace the cross: that is God's plan. To live one's life with love: this is what God desires and is also the way to salvation. Christ now appears victorious. During this time of Lent I ask you to be mindful of the marvelous figure of Jesus in the desert, surrounded

by wild beasts, tempted by the devil, recovering Paradise. Indeed, Paradise will be recovered when all people become like Jesus, faithful followers of God's plan.

### **The action of the Holy Spirit as the power of God's saving plan**

My second point is this: the action of the Holy Spirit as the power of God's saving plan. In his gospel Saint Luke is insistent on the fact that Jesus was led by the Spirit. For this reason his gospel is often called *the gospel of the Spirit* (8); it is impossible to imagine a saving Christ of humankind who is not led by the Spirit. At the very beginning of the gospel the Spirit unites the divine person of the Son of God to the young virgin, Mary. Mary conceives Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. From that time forward Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore the work of redemption is also the work of the Spirit. In order to understand today's other readings it is necessary to keep this fact in mind.

The first reading is the creed of the people of Israel. We must be mindful of this reality because when the people say, *I believe in God*, they are not speaking about a God who is distant from them but a God who is incarnated in their history. Thus Moses commanded the citizens of Israel to take the first fruits of the harvest of their field to the Temple and to offer them to God with the following prayer which contain Israel's creed: *You shall declare before the Lord, your God, "My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. But there he became a nation great, strong and numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression"* (9). The passage goes on to describe how God delivered them from Egypt and led them through the desert to their own country, a Promised Land.

Israel's creed is pure history. It begins with the promise that was made to the Patriarchs --- unbelievable promises. An old man, childless and sterile, is promised that he will be the father of a numerous people. A people that had grown more numerous in a situation of slavery is told by God that they will be given a land flowing with milk and honey. The people set out for the Promised Land and when the promise becomes a reality, the fruits of that land are offered as a sign that God has kept his promise. The offering is Israel's Mass and is like our own offering in which we give thanks for our land, for our country, recalling that God does not abandon the people.

It is a beautiful creed. The Israelites did not have an ethereal faith, like many Christians who think that speaking of things like this gets the Church involved in politics. Israel's faith was the faith of its political life. Faith and political life were turned into a single act of love for the Lord. Their political life breathed God's graces and promises. The God of all peoples, including the God of El Salvador, must be such a God, one who also illuminates political life. He is the One who gives us our farmlands and who wants land reform. He is the One who wants a more just distribution of the wealth that El Salvador produces. It is not right that some fill up their coffers and the majority of people are left without the gifts of God, gifts that he has given to all people\*.

Israel's creed was inspired by the Holy Spirit who gives unity to all of Israel's history. The Bible, which is the history of Israel's people, is like the Holy Spirit's own book. Although it was written by persons living in different eras and cultures, the Holy Spirit is the author of the pages of Israel's history that make up the Bible ... a model for the histories of all people. All of our people should read the Bible and learn from it the relationship between faith and politics. The Bible is the text from which we learn how to live the wonderful relationship between faith and political life.

When the Holy Spirit brings Israel's times to their fullness and Jesus is born through the Holy Spirit, Christ begins to form a new people. We Christians are that people\* and we, a people formed by Christ, are the work of the Holy Spirit. God works out the history of salvation in each people's history. Each people is different from every other and no imperial power may interfere with or influence our people's way of being.\* The God of the great empires is the God who demands justice of the powerful and defends the poor. God has plenty to do there. The God of our impoverished peoples is also constructing the history of salvation with El Salvador's history and not with some imaginary history.\*

History made alive by Holy Spirit provides, in the resurrection, a wonderful incentive for the Christian people. The Spirit who raised up Christ has provided in the risen Christ a model for history. The history of all peoples moves toward the resurrection. History must enable people who have lived the way of the cross, to rise to freedom --- to a freedom that can be enjoyed on this earth but that same freedom will not be definitive until we enjoy it in the fullness of God's kingdom. That does not mean that we are going to leave the people's liberation for the other side of death. The risen Christ is involved in our present history and he is the source of human liberty and dignity. That is why we prepare for Easter by observing Lent, so that from our Salvadoran condition, living our Salvadoran Lent, we Salvadorans may enjoy the new life of the risen Christ, striving for a more just and fraternal country. There we can live more intensely the life of God that Christ has brought us and that he gives us through his paschal mystery.

Lent and Easter are our own and each people can say the same thing. Christ is our own. Christ is a Salvadoran for Salvadorans. Christ has risen here in El Salvador for us: and our history will be a history of resurrection, of liberty and dignity to the extent we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit that led Jesus so that, with the power of that Spirit, we can pursue our own nature, our own history, our own freedom, and our own dignity as Salvadoran people.

### **Through faith we become participants in the victory of God's salvific plan**

Finally the third point: through faith we become participants in the victory of God's saving plan. I have already stated that in today's first reading we see that the profession of faith of the people of Israel consists of three great articles of faith: the call and election of the Patriarchs. God chose an Aramean to become the father of the nation. The second article of the creed of Israel revolves around the fact that God formed this people and brought them out of slavery and led them to independence: Egypt and the Exodus event. God formed the people but the people have to continue to create themselves according to the heart of God.

This creed is changed for Christians and the second reading speaks about the divine meaning of our history. Saint Paul describes in a wonderful way the process of Christian faith and the content of Christian faith.

Saint Paul tells us today that the process is very simple: *The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart: proclaim the word of God and bring the word closer to women and men* (10). This is the mission of the preacher. This is also the mission of our radio station and it is for this reason that we miss the programs of the radio station:\* they are vehicles that at the present time bring the Word of God to women and men. Saint Paul says that faith begins when we experience the nearness of the Word, *How can they believe in him of whom they have not heard?* (11). It is necessary to hear in order to decide whether or not we will believe. Yes, the first element is hearing and listening and in this way the Word comes near to us. My beloved sisters and brothers, in the



process of faith, parents, catechists, and professors in our Catholic schools have been entrusted with the great mission of bringing the Word of God closer to the ears of humankind.

Then, the Word is accepted in the heart of women and men. The acceptance of faith is part of the process of internalization. Saint Paul tell us that this intimacy of faith is not enough because faith must also be made explicit in our daily lives and activity. Faith is made explicit through liturgical signs. The sacraments are external signs of faith that is internalized in our hearts. We often speak about the sacraments of faith and therefore people should not receive a sacrament if they do not know what is the meaning of the action in which they are about to participate. In is also for this reason that we insist that no one should be baptized until the meaning of this sacrament has been explained to the child's parents and godparents. Thus no one should receive the sacraments unless they are aware that they are making explicit the faith that they bear in their hearts.

Participation in the sacraments should proceed from faith. When we come to Mass on Sunday we are participating in a sacrament, participating in the Eucharist which consecrates us because we believe that Christ is present, guiding us and leading us on our journey of faith. Therefore each Sunday we come together filled with faith because we experience ourselves as united with Christ. We make our faith explicit. If one is not Catholic then one does not come to Mass because this is not part of his/her faith. We come to Mass in order to say that we are going to share our intimate faith with all of our brothers and sisters who have gathered together today. We also make our faith explicit by the way that we live our lives and it is for this reason that I told you before that we must become the microphones of God. Our faith is able to be communicated to others through our good example, through our honesty and kind words and comforting words. We are invited to become models of God's Word which has become rooted in the depths of our being. This is faith!

What is the content of our Christian faith? Saint Paul tells us our faith consists of two things: (12) to believe that Christ is the Lord and that God has raised Jesus from the dead. These are the two great articles of Christian faith: Christ is the Lord and therefore when we speak about the Lord we are speaking about God and only before Christ should we kneel down in worship. We should only long to be united with Christ and should not exchange our love of Christ, who rose and now lives and who waits for us, for any other reality. Yes, we believe in a man who died but in a man who now lives and over whom death no longer has dominion. This is our Christian faith and during the season of Lent we prepare ourselves for the Easter celebration in order to be able to proclaim not only with our lips but with our lives: Christ is the Lord and we have no need to adore anyone else; we only kneel before him and even though he died we still kneel before him and we hope that we will never be found kneeling before any other human person or earthly reality.\*

My sisters and brothers, as you can see the content of faith in the Old Testament and the New Testament is distinct but we are being told that the spirit of faith is the same. When the Israelites professed their faith and said: *We believe in God who chose Abraham, who formed the people of Israel and brought them out of Egypt and gave us this land with all of its fruits*, they were saying that they trusted in God and believed in God and handed themselves over to God and therefore they would adore no other God. Now when we as Christians say: *We believe that Christ is the Lord who rose from the dead and lives among us*, we see that the content of our faith is distinct but the object of our faith is the same. Therefore we ought to believe in God, we ought to adore God and we ought to follow Christ. For the people of Israel, Christ was a promise that God would become man, but Jesus, the God-man, did not exist at that time. For us as Christians this is a great historical promise that has become a reality: Christ is God made man. As a result of our creed we are invited to change history through the personification of Israel. Christ is the personification of the long history of salvation. Lent prepares us to be worthy to follow the true Christ.

My sisters and brothers, in conclusion let us be a people of true faith and from a faith perspective let us enlighten our political situation. Let us work in history and be the creators of the destiny of our people. Let us work in this way but let this not be simply a human plan and even less let it not be a plan inspired by the devil, rather let us work on behalf of a plan that is inspired by God, a plan that leads us to be in Christ, a plan that enables us to experience the history of our nation as the history of salvation because we have made Christ a part of our family life, our laws, our government ... because we have made Christ a part of everything that exists in our country. May Christ be the light that enlightens everyone and everything in our country. In this way the nation will become an antechamber of the Kingdom of God.

### **Life of the Church**

We work for this objective, namely, to make the nation an antechamber of the Kingdom of God and we see that the work of the Church is distinct from the work of the government but the work of both of these institutions should converge in worship of the one God. Our work as Church must be specifically the work of the Church and therefore at this time I take advantage of this opportunity to share with you some information about the work of the Church, work that we are attempting to accomplish. Today at this Mass I want to express my gratitude for the expressions of solidarity that have been expressed to me during this week, a solidarity that has arisen because of the different events that have occurred here.

I received expressions of solidarity on the occasion of the third anniversary of being named Archbishop, an event which we celebrated with a wonderful Eucharist on February 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>5</sup> I want to profoundly thank all of you for your union with the bishop. May we walk together and always build the true Church that is founded on the presence of Christ in one who, unworthy though he may be, has been placed by the will of God in the midst of the community to represent the teaching, the authority and the unity of Church. All of this leads me to deeper reflection and a greater attempt to be faithful and so I ask for your prayers and your solidarity so that day after day we might build the authentic Church of the Lord.

Other expressions of solidarity have arrived here because of the slander that has been leveled against the pastoral ministers. I received a letter from the Vicariate of Chalatenango that protests the slanders made against the Archbishop, the priests, the religious, the Jesuits, the Sisters, and the attack on our radio station. *We condemn the slanderous campaign against the Episcopal Vicar, Father Fabían Amaya of Chalatenango. We are witnesses and collaborators in the pastoral work that is being done here and that is based on gospel principles and the documents of the Church: the Second Vatican Council, Medellín, Puebla, our week of Pastoral Reflection ... all of these documents have as their objective the development of the integral human person and all are familiar with these documents because of the media of the Church.* The Vicariate of Chalatenango also expresses their solidarity with regard to other situations that have occurred.

I also want to express my gratitude for the expressions of solidarity that have arrived from different sectors of the country on the occasion of sending a letter (which I read to you last Sunday) to President Carter in the United States. Several sectors of our people and our Church have expressed their solidarity with this action. I want to highlight the fact that the North American priests and Sisters who minister here in El Salvador have also written a letter to the President of the United States and, together with their Archbishop, ask for the same things that we stated in our letter last Sunday\*.

I want to thank people for the many expressions of kindness and solidarity that continue to arrive here as a result of having received an honorary doctorate from the University of Louvain.\* I highlight here a telegram that I received from the Municipality of Santa Ana: *The Municipal Council of Santa Ana congratulates you for the honorable distinction that was conferred upon you by the University of Louvain in Belgium. The Mayor and the Municipal Leaders of Santa Ana.*

We have spoken about the attack on our radio station but we also want to express our solidarity with the University of Central America for the attack that caused great damage to the library. It is significant to notice that a center of culture is bombed by people who do not know how to use and appreciate culture.\*

As we attempt to build a Church in accord with the plan of God we have the pleasure of speaking about the life of our seminarians whom I have begun to visit. We received a wonderful letter from one hundred young men who were unable to enter the seminary because there is simply not enough room for everyone who is seeking to become priests. Many of these young men have graduated from high school and they ask that we do not forget about them and give them consideration next year when we will once again be selecting candidates for our seminary. I want to take this opportunity to respond to these young men in public and tell them not to despair and to continue to prepare themselves by developing their spiritual life, by coming to our seminary and talking with the priests and seminarians there. In their own homes they are able to continue their preparation and when the moment arrives they will be the best candidates for our seminary, the best candidates upon whom the bishop will lovingly place his hands so that they become priests for our people.

I also want to thank the Holy Spirit for inspiring so many young men with this desire to seek the priesthood ... so many vocations that our classrooms do not have enough space for them. This should serve as a stimulus for those who are in the seminary because they should realize that they have been selected and therefore have to become the best seminarians. This should also serve as a stimulus for those who are on our waiting list because they should understand that God is inviting them to prepare themselves in another way. The paths of the Lord are varied and the service that the priesthood offers will be enriched by the varied and abundant experiences of these candidates.

This past week I visited the Belgium Sisters who minister in Quezaltenango, Cojutepeque, Santa Cruz Michapa and Santiago Texacuangos. I brought them greetings from their families who feel that the people in the communities where the Sisters minister are part of their own family.

In the village of Bontoncillal we had a ceremony during which we blessed many marriages and this moment was captured by a Catholic television station that was there and that was able to broadcast this expression of the Church's life in the rural areas of the Archdiocese. People were very moved by so many people who had their marriage blessed and who had been prepared for this ceremony by the lay catechists in that area. This afternoon in Colón we will celebrate the sacrament of matrimony with couples who have been prepared for this celebration by catechists.

With regard to the life of Church I want to inform you that on Saturday, March 1<sup>st</sup> at 10:00am, Deacon Jaime Paredes, who is presently ministering at our seminary, will be ordained to the priesthood here in the Basilica.

Next Sunday we will inaugurate the Week of Voluntary Offering. In *Orientación* you can read what this is all about. We are asking people to show their moral and economic solidarity with people who are engaged in combating hunger which affects our people in many different ways. I

call upon people to affirm this program and next Sunday some people who are in charge of this campaign will communicate to you a brief message.

I also want to thank the parochial schools and high schools and other centers of Catholic education for their statement in which they express their solidarity with those who suffer<sup>6</sup>. They protest the continued repression and they offer prayers for so many people who have died, especially teachers and other victims of the violence. I was also pleased with the news that during the celebration of Ash Wednesday in the Catholic Schools acts of reparation were made for the current situation of our country.

### **Events of the week**

Finally, my sisters and brothers, from the perspective of the Church, I would like to examine the political situation of our nation. I do not do this as a politician but as a pastor who is attempting to guide people so that they might be enlightened with Christian principles. It is you who must live in the midst of these political realities, just as I must also do the same but do so as pastor. May all of us know how to analyze and judge these realities from the perspective of the gospel and may we collaborate and commit ourselves to creating our history according to the plan of God.

I want to begin with the event that we have been concerned about since the beginning: the attack on our radio station. It does not matter to us what group wants to claim for itself the attack on our radio station. What matters is that, in the last analysis, those responsible are members of the oligarchy, which at this moment is desperately and blindly trying to repress the people\* The dynamiting of YSAX is only a symbol. It shows that the oligarchy, seeing the danger of losing the complete domination that they have over investment and other agricultural exports, as well as their near-monopoly of land, are defending their selfish interests, not with arguments, not with popular support, but with the only thing they have. They use their money to buy weapons and pay mercenaries who massacre the people and strangle every lawful cry for justice and freedom.\* This is the reason for all the bombs set off in their name, like the one in the Central American University. This is why they have murdered so many *campesinos*, students, teachers, laborers and other members of organizations.

During these days our Legal Aid office has communicated some very sorrowful news to us.

Many bodies with evident signs of torture have appeared in different areas of the country. Each day an average of six bodies are found but these bodies are unable to be identified. Some of the bodies are marked with the initials of criminal groups of the extreme right. For example, on February 20<sup>th</sup>, in Mejicanos the bodies of two men (one was approximately 37 years old and the other 28) were thrown out of a moving car. They were tortured and their throats were cut. On February 19<sup>th</sup>, the Church in Tontacatepeque was machine-gunned and six people who were in the park were assassinated. During the month of February at least fifty *campesinos* have died after being tortured or machine-gunned. At noon on February 21<sup>st</sup>, Dr. José Antonio Baires Zelaya and Ricardo Alfredo Torres were savagely assassinated. They were employees in Procuraduria General de Pobres. Two law students were also wounded.

The assassination of Dr. Mario Zamora<sup>7</sup> is well-known. The Christian Democratic Party has published the following statement: *The Party, as it speaks to the public about the deplorable occurrences, hold the mayor, Roberto D'Abuisson and his band of assassins from the extreme right responsible for this action.\* The connection is clear between the denunciation made on television by this sinister individual and the criminal act that destroyed the valuable life of one dedicated to the service of the most noble and disinterested causes on behalf of the people of El Salvador. We*

*once again repudiate the use of violence which has resulted in so much bloodshed and caused so much pain and suffering to the people of El Salvador.*

I personally want to express my condolences to the beloved family of Dr. Mario Zamora Rivas. At this time his body is being interred in Cojutepeque. I ask you to join together in prayer for his eternal rest.

On February 21<sup>st</sup>, in Suchitoto, the *campesinos*, Jeremías Melgar and Osmaro Acosta were ambushed and assassinated by individuals known to be members of ORDEN (Democratic Nationalist Organization). Osmaro is related to Lucio Elías Costa who was assassinated in similar circumstances on February 13<sup>th</sup>. Also on February 21<sup>st</sup>, the *campesinos*, Teodoro Vega, Miguel Angel Rivas Ruiz, Manuel Marroquín and Carlos Alvarado, were assassinated in Aguilares by members of ORDEN: these assassins were protected by members of the security forces.

Another professor was assassinated, José Abilio Torres Benmavides. So far this year nine professors have been assassinated.

As a friend I want to express my solidarity to the family of Edgar Béneke who was caught up in this wave of violence.

The illegal arrests continue and it is presumed that these persons are now political prisoners. I am concerned about making this public because if these persons are still alive then I want those individuals who are holding them captive to listen to the voice of the people who demand the freedom of these brothers of ours. We do not want to have any more persons listed among those who have disappeared. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, in Aguilares, twenty civilian agents of the Treasury Police arrested the *campesinos* Gabriel Antonio Menjívar and Francisco Molina. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, the National Guard arrested Candelario de Jesús Alas, Silvestre Landaverde Cardoza, Pastor Escalante Escobar, and Roberto Antonio Villanueva. These men leave behind fourteen children who are now orphaned. The *campesinos* Carlos Amilcar and Rafael Antonio Linares were arrested on February 14<sup>th</sup> in San Salvador. The *campesina* María del Carmen Pérez was arrested on February 15<sup>th</sup> in San Salvador near the Municipal Market. Jaime López and Oscar René Aparicio were arrested on February 19<sup>th</sup> in San Vicente. The mother of Francisco Arnulfo Ventura entered here crying this morning. Her son had been arrested on January 22<sup>nd</sup> and has not been seen since. She asks for mercy for her son and for herself. He was one of the students arrested near the North American Embassy.

The Colegio Sagrado Corazón and the house of the Mayor of Sonsonate and other places have been machine-gunned. On Tuesday, February 19<sup>th</sup>, a bomb exploded at the headquarters of the Federación Sindical Revolucionaria and on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, an attempt was made to dynamite the headquarters of El Sindicato de Bebidas.

A very important case must be denounced: the firing of five leaders of the Association of Workers of ANTEL (the National Union of the Telephone Workers) which provoked the military to surround the building and also brought about the intervention of the Chancery. This is an interesting case because it appears that the right of free association is being violated, a right that the new government Junta has said would be respected. In reality, however, here in this specific case of ANTEL that right is being trampled upon. I call attention to article 191 of the Constitution and article 204 of the Work Code which affirm that the right of free association will be carried out, especially in the case of workers. More recently I have learned that seven more workers associated

with ANTEL have also been fired. It is only right that these events should be promptly investigated so that this labor conflict that involves fundamental rights might be resolved.

With money and violence the right, up to this time, has been able to paralyze the government and prevent them from fulfilling their promise which is also the promise of the armed forces, namely, to nationalize the banks and foreign business and initiate an integral land reform.

Now during this time of Lent, a time of conversion, we should become more aware of what it means to be a Christian and so I want to extend a brotherly call, a pastoral call, to the oligarchy so that they might repent and be converted and live, so that they might use their economic power to bring happiness to people rather than cause the ruin and disgrace of people\*. If they do not want to listen to me, let them at least listen to the voice of Pope John Paul II, who this very week, at the beginning of Lent, exhorted Catholics of the world to give up superfluous wealth in order to help the needy and to do this as a sign of Lenten penance<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore I believe that it is important to remember that Pope Paul VI has spoken about two ways of celebrating Lent (13): one way in the developed countries and another way in those poor countries where Lent is never ending because people are always fasting. In the situation of developed nations people there should make Lent a time when they deepen themselves in the understanding of the virtue of austerity and deprive themselves of something. Meanwhile here in El Salvador those who are always hungry should give a penitential meaning to their situation. We must not allow ourselves to become indifferent but must work for the kingdom of justice so that this kingdom might reign in our country. The best Lent will always be that in which we work together for social justice and love those who are poor, just like John Paul II suggested to me during my visit to Rome.

The Pope pointed out that material goods, which some people view as superfluous, are needed by hundreds of millions of human beings and are essential for their survival<sup>9</sup>. The Pope said that the Church's concern is not only that there be a fairer distribution of wealth, but that this sharing become a reality as people take on an attitude of wanting to share not only their possessions but also their lives with those who are disadvantaged in our society.<sup>10</sup> This is beautiful. Social justice is not just a law that mandates sharing. Seen in a Christian manner, it is an internal attitude like that of Christ, who, being rich, became poor so as to be able to share his love with the poor.(14)

I hope that this call of the Church will not further harden the hearts of the oligarchs but will move them to conversion. Let them share what they are and have. Let them not keep on silencing with violence the voice of those of us who offer this invitation. Let them not keep on killing those of us who are trying to achieve a more just sharing of the power and wealth of the country. I speak in the first person, because this week I received notice that I am on the list of those who are to be eliminated next week. But let it be known that no one can any longer kill the voice of justice.\*

For this reason I believe that this call to conversion must also be extended to the armed forces. At the beginning of the year the highest authorities of this institution committed themselves to support the process of anti-oligarchy reforms that would ultimately benefit the majority of people. Since we have begun our celebration of Lent, a season of gospel repentance, if there is any truth in their word, then now is the time to honor this commitment. Do not allow the oligarchy to continue to manipulate you in order to defend their own interests. Guarantee all citizens the right of expression, the right to organize, the right to mobilize and support those persons who will carry out the authentic changes that the country demands.

It appears that the State Department in the United States is now conditioning their economic and military support. They demand that there be in place a government that is capable of bringing about the necessary reforms. As I said last Sunday, it seems that this condition is not being fulfilled. A reporter has stated: *The United States has warned the conservative military leaders of El Salvador that the relations between both countries will be seriously injured if the armed forces are able to block the program of reform of the moderate government that now holds power ... We do not want the assistance of the United States to El Salvador to contribute to the repression in El Salvador nor do we want it to be used to frustrate the reform movement.*<sup>11</sup> The reporter alluded to the letter that I read last Sunday and that a member of the government of the United States classified as *devastating*.<sup>12</sup> I did not want to devastate anyone but rather, in the name of the people (and thanks to God it appears that the eyes of the United States have been opened) I wanted to ask that military assistance not be given unconditionally but that such assistance be carefully monitored so that it does not result in harm and repression of our people\*.

It is clear that the position of the armed forces has become more and more pro-oligarchy and brutally repressive.\* In light of my gospel words and my call to conversion I hope that the United States will not give assistance to the armed forces unless they are converted. Even more, I continue to request that under no circumstances should any of this assistance be used to reinforce the preparations of or the equipment of the armed forces because there are no guarantees that this institution will act on behalf of the people\*. Finally, I reaffirm my desire to see the economic support of the United States given to the people of El Salvador without limiting the legitimate right of the people to determine their destiny.\* As long as this right is not guaranteed and as long as there are no guarantees that this assistance will not be used to repress the people, then it is neither just nor right that assistance from any nation should be provided to our government.\*

My Lenten call to conversion would not be complete if I did not speak, as a pastor, some kind words of the popular forces. It is urgent that the popular organizations continue to mature so that they are able to fulfill their mission as interpreters of the will of the people. The lofty dignity of our people demands that their suffering and oppression not be distorted but be given a deeper meaning by embracing a true spirituality of poverty. We reminded people about this last Sunday that poverty is not only a denunciation of the country's injustices but it is also a spirituality that the poor have at their disposal ... poverty, a great instrument that enables people to be holy and pleasing to God. Poverty is also a commitment, a commitment to Christ who, being rich, committed himself to live with the poor in order to save them ... save them from his poverty. Here I praise the efforts of all Christians who live their commitment and hand themselves over to the sacrifices demanded by poverty.

As I call upon those who are poor and those who are members of popular organizations to repent and be converted, I want to remind you of the wise words of a beloved Salvadoran writer who said: *There are those who are so poor that they have no economic interests to defend. These individuals have not received any direct personal harm but have a great desire to see a strong hand take charge of those rebellious people who have altered the meaning of peace and mined the national economy. What might be the anger and violent reaction of those who see their property and income destroyed with undeniable harm for so many poor families?* The words of the Book of Wisdom could be applied to the oligarchy: *Terribly and swiftly shall he come against you ... and the mighty shall be mightily put to the test\** (15). *Should millionaire repressive violence be combated with proletariat terrorist violence? Some Catholics who are said to be progressive say that no other alternative is left to our people but that of violence. Secondly, will the Kingdom of God and his justice finally be established among us with bombs, fires, occupying buildings, abductions, and even assassinations? Thirdly, do you believe that the Holy Spirit and not the devil*

*and not Christian morality or the life and estates of the oligarchy is inspiring these subversive acts of vandalism? To cling to and defend rather than condemn subversive violence with the same energy is, in my judgment, to provoke insolent repression which we experience everywhere as the bloody groups of repression react against the attacks of subversive groups.<sup>13</sup>*

It seems to me that during Lent we have to achieve a sane balance. I repeat that the Church has defended and continues to defend the right to organize and the right to cry out for just demands and we believe in the role that the political forces and the organizations of the people can undertake in this regard. But again, I place before you the call to mature so that you might be true expressions of the people who by nature are not violent but rather people who live and desire rational solutions.

There are other letters of a particular character that I ask you, who are listening to this message, to keep in mind. A family from San Antonio Los Ranchos says that a certain radio station in San Salvador has mentioned the names of people who are members of ORDEN. Specific mention is made of José Humberto Menjívar and Andrés Menjívar and it is known that these men are members of said organization. Here we must be very careful not to slander and act vengefully and make outrageous demands of people who have nothing to pay.

Another clarification comes from Chalatenango that states: *In La Prensa Gráfica published the news that an elderly man of seventy-two years was beaten and assassinated by subversives. His wife says that reference is being made to her husband and that the facts mentioned in the newspaper are totally false because we, my family and myself, do not know how any of this occurred.* It is dangerous to make affirmations when we are not sure of the facts.

We also received a sad call from a mother who was in the Hospital of San Rafael in Santa Tecla. She left her child, just a few month old, in the hands of a woman who was asked to watch her while this mother went to buy some juice. When the mother returned neither the other woman nor her child was there and they have not been seen again. She has asked that if anyone has information about her child to contact her where she lives, on the estate of Talcualuya in the village of La Esperanza, San Juan de Opico.

My sisters and brothers, the history of our people is very weighed down but I am consoled in knowing that our history is enlightened by the history of salvation. Today, Jesus in the desert has taught us that an individual can be swayed by the law of God's plan and by the temptations of evil. Christ, the Son of Man, represents all women and men and is communicating to us today's great message. We are creating our history under two influences: our Christian faith and the evil influences of crime, violence and other realities which at this present time are becoming primary in our history.

Like Jesus in the desert, I ask you to reflect on God's plan. As Christians let all of us mirror the plan of God and act in conformity with the will of the Lord and not according to the whims of human beings especially when these individuals are inspired by crimes of selfishness. Let us ask the question: what does God desire? From the hunger in the desert to the cross of God's own Son we see before us not some appearance of salvation but the true power that gives dynamism to the cross and sacrifice. Lent is a call to love our country and therefore let us know how to enlighten our country by pointing out those paths that will lead us to the Lord. Let us not allow ourselves to be deceived. For this reason, following the example of the people of Israel, let us proclaim our faith in the God of our history.\*



<sup>1</sup> See Comunicado de la Secretaría de Comunicación Social de;l Arzobispado de San Salvador, *Orientación*, 24 February 1980.

<sup>2</sup> See *El Independiente*, 20 February 1980.

<sup>3</sup> This is a paraphrase of what Paul VI said in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations (8 October 1965). See *Message to all Humanity*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> See *Misión de la Iglesia en medio de la crisis del país*, (6 August 1979), 37.

<sup>5</sup> “Monseñor Romero: profeta y pastor”. Words of Fr Cristóbal Cortés on the third anniversary of Mons. Romero’s appointment as Archbishop of San Salvador (22 February 1980), *Orientación*, 2 March 1980.

<sup>6</sup> See Pronunciamiento de la Federación de Centros de Educación Católica de la Arquidiócesis de San Salvador (15 February 1980), *Orientación*, 2 March 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Zamora Rivas, well-known leader of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano and Procurador General de Pobres, was assassinated on 23 February 1980. Three days before Roberto D’Abuisson accused him on a televisión programme of belonging to the guerrilla group Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL). See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 24 February 1980, and *El Independiente*, 26 February 1980.

<sup>8</sup> See Message of the Holy Father to the people of God at the beginning of Lent (19 February 1980), *Osservatore Romano*, 24 February 1980.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> “Condición de Estados Unidos para ayudar a El Salvador”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 23 February 1980.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> We have not been able to identify the author or source of this quotation.

*Marginal References* (1) SC 109; (2) SC 109; (3) Mt 5,13; (4) Lk 4,34; (5) Lk 9,10-17; (6) Lk 4,5-7; (7) Lk 4,9-12; (8) Lk 4,1; (9) Dt 26,4-7; (10) Rm 10,8; (11) Rm 10,14; (12) Rm 10,9; (13) Pae 28; (14) 2Cor 8,9; (15) Ws 6,5-6.