

CONVERSION, REQUISITE FOR TRUE LIBERATION

Third Sunday of Lent
March 9, 1980

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

Luke 13:1-9

Honorable Ambassador from Sweden¹, esteemed brother and Secretary General of the Swedish Ecumenical Movement, dear sisters and brothers:

In the midst of these bodies that are before us and in the midst of those who journey on this earth, in the midst of sorrow and applause, I gratefully receive this award which is not just for me but for all the beloved people of El Salvador. How beautifully were we described by the Secretary General of the Swiss Ecumenical Movement as he bestowed upon me the honorable award, the 1980 Peace Prize.*

The presence of the Swiss Ambassador, Mr. Henrik Ramel, signifies a valuable endorsement from that country's ecumenical initiative that is by its nature most Christian*. The unexpected sorrowful presence of the two loved bodies² and the presence of their family provides a powerful encouragement to a preacher of peace. We hear the voice of far off lands and for this reason their voice is impartial and disinterested, a voice that understands that which is often misunderstood here. The voice of eternity in the presence of the bodies in these coffins is also a word that from an eschatological and eternal perspective gives encouragement: the Christian journey is a journey toward peace.

With what pleasure I listened to the motives that led up to awarding this prize. Here I refer to the fact that this prize is awarded because of the efforts made on behalf of reconciliation and the establishment of justice. A wonderful coincidence between the voice that awards this prize and the voice of Saint Paul who calls his ministry a ministry of reconciliation!(1) This same theme is the center of the Word of God that I, as pastor of this Diocese, will develop this morning.

Today's readings bring us back to the sources of reconciliation and peace: reconciliation with God, conversion: these words are the unmistakable voice of Lent. How appropriate is this theme that speaks so clearly in the presence of death and is proclaimed here in El Salvador by voices from distant lands. Mons³. just said: *a dark night of repression and violence is being lived. The Word of God, however, enables us to experience the dawn of a new day if we become reconciled and repent.* How many polarizations, how many ideologies, how many selfish interests, how many mistaken paths of human beings: and today I want the words of Jesus Christ to resound over all these realities: *Repent! for if you do not repent, you will all perish* (2). Hopefully my call to repentance this morning, so providentially endorsed by the presence of so many different individuals and also endorsed by this award, will be heard especially by those who do not want to listen.

As usual I am going to give a title to my homily that should be seen as a response of gratitude from my Archdiocese to the noble ecumenical movement of Switzerland. By means of this Christian ecumenical voice and the sorrow of the family here present before the bodies of their

loved ones, I hope that these words will find an echo in every heart. The theme is the following: according to the plan of God that we have been reflecting on during this season of Lent and according to this plan that is above all human plans, above all political, social and earthly plans, we find *the plan of God which consists of personal conversion, an indispensable requisite for true liberation*. As usual I will develop this theme with three ideas: First, the gospel teaching: if you do not repent, you shall all be lost; Second, the punishment of Israel: not everyone was pleasing to God; Third, what does it mean to repent here and now in El Salvador?

The gospel teaching: if you do not repent, you shall all be lost

The teaching of the gospel is proclaimed by Jesus: *If you do not repent, you shall be lost* (3). We might ask ourselves: what does it mean to repent? What is repentance? Repentance is actually the synthesis of the whole gospel. John the Baptist began his ministry with the call to repentance and Jesus did the same and also commanded his disciples to preach to the end of time that *the Kingdom of God has arrived, repent and believe in the gospel* (4). Repentance is the foundation of the Kingdom of God.

Repentance means that one does penance. It has the same meaning as the Greek word *metanoia*, a change in attitude. Thus, repentance means that one changes his/her attitude. Those who kneel down before the idols of the earth change their attitude and now kneel before the only God. To repent is to return to God and there is a path that enables one to return to God. Jesus said: *I am the way: no one comes to the Father except through me* (5). To repent means that one clings to Jesus and seeks union with the Father.

The gospel of Saint Luke (the book that we are reflecting on this year) is original: from chapter 9-19 we are presented with a true Christology, a broad presentation of the meaning of Christ as the savior of humanity. Yes, we are presented with a Christology, a theology of the Son of God who journeys toward Jerusalem. Saint Luke's gospel places a definite focus on the journey to Jerusalem. We are not given geographical details of this journey because Saint Luke is not interested in those details but rather is concerned about the theological content of the journey. To journey toward Jerusalem has a meaning for Jesus and for all his followers, for Christians, namely, to seek to do the will of the Father, to journey on a path that Jesus himself proclaimed and was most aware of: the path of suffering, the path of Calvary, the path of humiliation and the cross. All of this, however, leads Jesus to the path of triumph and victory and resurrection.

For the people of Israel and in a special way, for Jesus, Jerusalem signifies the city of God's promises. When Jesus proclaims that he is going to be expelled from Jerusalem, it is because Jerusalem has been prostituted by men and women. The scribes and Pharisees and the priests will expel him. When Jesus is driven away from Jerusalem, he brings with him everything that is pure in Jerusalem and leaves behind all the bad habits, the sins, the injustices and the evil plots of the people. As Jesus is hung on the cross during this journey that terminates in great humiliation, he raises up with him all that is innocent and holy: he raises up the justice of God and the forgiveness of women and men. From the cross all the promises of a purified Jerusalem are extended to all people who want to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

To repent is to walk with Jesus on this mysterious journey toward the will of God, toward the promises of God; to walk and not allow ourselves to be seduced by triumphalism nor the intrigues of religion or politics or the things of this earth. In the gospel language of today, to repent is a sorrowful journey in the midst of tears and mourning, in the midst of pain and suffering, in the

midst of a crown of thorns, lashes and torture: but this journey ends in a victory: the resurrection of the Lord is the resurrection of all of us.

We must understand the two events that Saint Luke narrates in this passage that deals with the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and with a moment of teaching his disciples. One event refers to those who died while making a religious offering. Some pious Galileans were killed while offering sacrifice. Without a doubt their death was the result of repressive action, death that came as the result of religious persecution. Here it is fitting to refer to the manner in which history describes Pontius Pilate (6): a man who carried out acts of violent repression, a man who sent soldiers into the midst of the multitude in the Temple to kill them. This man would certainly find a place here in El Salvador where we experience so much repression.*

The other event is similar in its political tone to that which we experience in El Salvador. Some people died during the construction of the tower of Siloam. (7) It is most probable that these individuals were members of a political movement, the Zealots, and they died during a struggle. Whatever the situation, it seems to be very common for human beings to unite tragedy with sin. When the disciples looked at the poor blind man they asked Jesus: *Who sinned, this man or his parents?* (8). Jesus goes back to the source of the mystery of suffering: *Neither he nor his parents have sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him.* Thus when Jesus is questioned about these two catastrophes, that is, the case of the Galileans in the Temple and those killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed on them, Jesus stated: *Do you think that they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you shall all perish as they did* (9).

How balanced is the Lord! He does not want us to focus on how a person died: was he tortured? killed unjustly? how did they die? Jesus is telling us that these matters are not important. What is important, however, and what is most transcendental, is were these individuals who died reconciled with God, had they drawn near to God? Therefore, from the death of these people he gives a message to all those who are living: *do penance and be converted.*

My sisters and brothers, if this observation of Jesus were ever valid, then it is certainly now, at this time in El Salvador, when everywhere life is endangered: Repent! Let us not be surprised by death! Let us not be found on the path of sin and injustice, much less on the path of crime and disorder! Let us walk with Christ and if death overtakes us as we walk with him, then there is nothing to fear ... death is a victory for those who believe in the Lord: *those who follow me will never die but will live forever* (10).

We should interpret the parable of the barren fig that is presented to us in today's gospel from the perspective of God's mercy. When the owner of the farm speaks to the administrator he says: *Cut it down because for three years I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none* (11). But the gardener says: *Sir, leave it for this year also. I will cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down.* In the parallel passage in Saint Matthew it is stated: *Jesus, seeing a fig tree by the road, went over to it, but found nothing on it except leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And immediately the fig tree withered* (12). Saint Luke, the evangelist of mercy, does not allow the parable to end so tragically but rather gives us hope. As Saint Luke interprets Jesus, he discovers that Jesus is concerned about a useful life, a life that produces fruit.

The gospel wants to teach us the following: what benefit does one gain from living in a grand style if one does not produce fruit? Such people are barren fig trees! At the same time Saint Luke

points out the gentleness and patience of God who waits: perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in a year. This is an echo of the Lenten call to examine our lives and to see if we are producing fruit or if we are simply trees occupying space in the world. Today we need people who do good. Today we need Christians who are light to the world. Today we need active and critical women and men who do not accept situations as they are but analyze these situations internally and profoundly. We do not want mobs of people who are so often manipulated by others. We want women and men like the productive fig tree, people who know how to say YES to justice and NO to injustice, men and women who know how to take advantage of the gift of life and are able to do this regardless of the situation. My dear sisters and brothers, the humblest person here, the least among us here today, though they believe they are the most insignificant, have a life which God looks upon with love. With great love God looks upon our brother and sister who are before us today, whose lives have ended. Our God gathers up and harvests the fruit of their lives. God cares for everyone and does so with the kindness of the gardener who cared for the fig tree for another year, the fig tree that was threatened with death.

For this reason the call of the Lenten season is most clear: do penance! Since Ash Wednesday the Lord has commanded us to speak these words to all people: do Penance! Thanks to God, through means of Radio Noticias del Continente these same words are being proclaimed to people who live in places where Radio YSAX was never able to reach.*

This week we were told by Radio Noticias del Continente that our homily is rebroadcast on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday because of the requests from various listeners.* We never imagined that we would be heard by people listening to their radio in Costa Rica, Venezuela, Colombia and in so many other places. Even people living in Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay have told us that they hear our transmissions. Here in our country religious congregations and Christian communities where there is short wave band reception are able to listen to our broadcast just as before. We are extremely grateful for this because this transmission is not simply communicating the voice of a man but rather communicating a voice that echoes a dream, a voice that is concerned about the message of God, a voice that is concerned about the message of Jesus. Hopefully the words of Jesus will touch the hearts of everyone: repent!

The punishment of Israel: not everyone was pleasing to God and therefore their corpses were scattered over the desert (13)

My second point reinforces the first: you can see then that the Church's call to repentance is not exaggerated but in accord with the theme of our preaching during Lent: the plan of God. As you know, the plan of God is the realization of the history of Israel. God chose these people from among all other nations to become a model for history. Because of Jesus and the cross their history would be the history of salvation in the midst of the history of all people. Through the history of the Church the history of Israel becomes the history of the people of El Salvador. The history of El Salvador is also the vehicle of the plan of God to the degree that the people of El Salvador take ownership of the plan of the history of salvation. Therefore, wherever the gospel is preached and in whatever political or social framework the gospel is proclaimed, it will always be mindful of God's plan even though the same plan will be applied in different ways, for example, in Switzerland there is a different situation. Here in El Salvador our reality is also quite distinct but the same plan is presented to us and therefore, there is the same need to repent.

The first and second reading present us with the punishment of the people of Israel. Today's readings remind us about three elements in God's plan for Israel. The first element is seen in the encounter between God and the leader of his people, Moses. The second element is the revelation

that God makes concerning his name and his mission in the midst of the people. The third element is the great history of the Exodus which outlines the path of liberation for all people.

Today we encounter Moses on Mount Horeb, not particularly concerned about what God thinks about his life. We are presented with a theophany and, like others in the Old Testament, there is fire and the voice of God and the infinite holiness of God. Moses wants to draw closer but the mysterious voice says: *Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground* (14). This voice communicates to Moses that he is chosen to be God's instrument who will lead the people to freedom.

My sisters and brothers, what we are concerned about here is that all those who are going to lead people along the paths of God must have a personal experience of God. In the Bible we see this, especially in the case of the prophets: Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. We also see this in individuals in the New Testament: Paul and the Apostles first had to learn about this intimate contact with the Lord. This is also revealed to us today in the theophany on Mount Horeb: Moses has entered into communication with God and cannot forget or put aside the presence of God. Even though he felt incapable and unworthy of the great mission conferred upon him, he knows that he is not alone ... God is with him and God guarantees the success of the mission that has been entrusted to him.

The enthusiasm of Moses ought to be the enthusiasm of all Christians, the saved people of history. God is communicating to Moses something about the way in which he wants all Christians to live: intimacy with God that strengthens their hope and encourages their efforts and makes all fear disappear. *Do no fear because I am with you* (15) Saint Paul was able to say: *If God is for us who can be against us?* (16).

The second revelation that the Bible presents to us this morning is the revelation of God's name. Moses prudently asks this mysterious being: *if they ask, "What is your name?" what am I to tell them?* (17). God then defines himself with a word that constitutes the sacred word of Israel: Yahweh! Yahweh! This is an archaic form of the Hebrew word *to be*. Here we are dealing with a being, an active, dynamic being and not a being that simply exists. When God tells Moses: *I am who am* (18), he is saying: *I am a dynamic being. I am One who ought to be discovered in the dynamics of history. I am present in all the interventions of power in the world. I am the power of the stars and the seas. I am the one who brings things into existence.*

God also says: *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob* (19). In other words, we should not have some abstract concept of God as though God is a being in heaven who has left women and men alone to deal with the things of earth. This is not correct. God is the God of heaven and the God of earth, the God who builds history, the God who walks with the patriarchs, the God who walks with mothers and fathers, the God of my grandparents, the God of everything that occurs in my country. My dear sisters and brothers. This revelation is very important today when we are attempting to present religion in a way that many people criticize because they feel that we have separated ourselves from any form of spirituality. So many wild things are heard and so many tasteless columns are written in our newspapers: *No one goes to Church any more because no one preaches religion and all one hears is politics.* Here you have proof, never has the Basilica been so full.*

When I spoke with Doña Rosa⁴, a mother in mourning who is with us this morning, I told her that perhaps the environment of the Basilica is not appropriate for your loved ones who have died. She insisted, however, on bringing their bodies here and so now, in the midst of your applause, we

reverence the bodies of our beloved sister and brother.* Doña Rosa is the expression of an intelligent soul, truly pious, who understands that the pastor has to speak of politics not because he is a politician but because from the perspective of God's dynamism politics is under God's dominion.* Through God's revelation of his name God has taught us that he is a God who is with humankind, a God who experiences the pain of those who are tortured and die, a God who reproves with the Church, a God who denounces torture, repression and all similar crimes. The God whom we all worship is not a God who has died but a God who lives, who feels, who acts and creates and guides history. We trust and hope in God, in God who accompanies us as he accompanied Israel.*

The third element that is revealed to us today in the Old Testament and which later will become the thread that God uses in the New Testament is the concept of God's will. My sisters and brothers, we heard the words that God could have spoken about the people of El Salvador: *I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well that they are suffering. Indeed the cry of the Israelites has reached me and I have truly noted that the Egyptians are oppressing them. Come now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (20).* The history of the Exodus arises from the will of God. From that time, the time of his call by God, Moses labors to free people from the chains of slavery in Egypt and then leads them through the trials of the desert to the Promised Land, *into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (21).*

But something more than Israel was being revealed. God was also saying: "He is the path of history". No people have a land which "flows with milk and honey"; but they have a longing for liberation, for a more just nation, for doing away with the exploitation and injustice against the poor and oppressed which is God's will. God doesn't want them so but to put them on the path towards a promised land which will not be found in this world but is part of the world; and this land must already be a way in to the new "heaven and earth" (22) where there will really flow milk and honey.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, the presence of these bodes in our midst speaks to us about the true dimension of our trust in God. Without a doubt many politicians are listening to me, many people who have no faith are trying to make our country a place of greater justice and so I say to them: my brothers who are atheists, my dear brothers who do not believe in Christ or in the Church, your struggle is noble but not complete. Allow yourselves to be led by the plan of God, by the plan of true liberation. Allow your desire for justice to involve you in plans that do not come to an end on earth. Give true power and dynamism and hope to all the plans of the earth by incorporating the concept of transcendence into your plans.

Saint Paul reminds us that the last action that brings the history of the Old Testament to its conclusion, the culminating act of God's activity in the history of Israel occurred when the Son of God became man and God commanded that he be given a name similar to the name that was revealed on Sinai: Jesus. In Hebrew this name is a contraction of Ye-shua which means Yahweh saves. (23) Jesus, our Christ, who will become present in our Eucharist this morning, is the eternal Yahweh, made present in Christ, and made present in every moment of the life of Christians and non-Christians. The action of God is always rooted in a very clear plan to free all the people of the world from injustice.

In today's second reading Saint Paul reflects on the account of the history of Israel that was born with the revelation of who God is, a history that was prolonged for forty years in the desert and then prolonged throughout their history by the prophets. The punishment that Saint Paul warns us about is referred to with the following words: *These things happened to them as an example and*

they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of ages has come (24). The Christian era is the last phase in the plan of God and should be like an apprenticeship that takes into account all the lessons of Israel's history, the lessons of the history of salvation. The principal lesson that we are presented with today and which Saint Paul highlights is that the punishment resulting from the failure of those who were unfaithful to God reveals that belonging to the People of God is not enough.

Today Saint Paul tells us (25) that those who left Egypt for the Promised Land were all members of the People of God, were all children of Abraham, but not everyone arrived: some were struck down in the desert and the reason for this was that many were displeasing to God because they were not faithful to their promises, their hopes. From this we see that the indispensable requisite is not that one is a Christian or a child of Abraham but rather that one enters a process of personal conversion. If we do not do penance then our baptism is useless. If we do not do penance then it does not matter that we are members of the People of God. If we do not turn our hearts toward God and repent of our faults we cannot think that we will enter the kingdom of heaven. This is the great lesson and also the great punishment.

What does it mean to repent here and now in El Salvador?

Now my dear sisters and brothers, my third and final thought I accommodate to our beloved people and I present this third idea in the form of a question: what does it mean to repent here and now in El Salvador? Who are the true Salvadorans who today could be called the People of God? The true People of God are those who walk united with Christ, seeking the heavenly Jerusalem, working to better this earth but not working according to their own plans but according to the plan of the transcendent God, working according to the plan that draws them closer to the Kingdom of the Lord.

Life of the Church

In a way that is more than an examination of conscience I want to present here the realities of our people so that each one of us and all of us as a community that reflects together can see whether we are walking as the People of God or have separated ourselves from God through disobedience. Therefore, in the first place, I want to look at the life of our Church in order to speak to the beloved priests, men and women religious, seminarians and faithful concerning the Church that we ought to build up according to the plan of God and not according to the theories of human beings. There are some wonderful events that give me great hope in this Church of El Salvador, this Church that we are living.

In the first place I want to tell you about the card that my beloved predecessor, Bishop Luis Chávez y González sent me and the message that he included: *Receive my affectionate greeting and through these lines I want to express my profound dismay for the wave of extreme violence that has dragged down our beloved Church and country El Salvador, both of which I have attempted to serve with a total commitment and a sincere allegiance. I offer my humble prayers so that the Divine Savior, the great patron of the Republic and the most holy Virgin of Peace, the patroness of El Salvador, might bestow upon all their children the gift of peace.* Many thanks to you, Bishop Chávez,* I appreciate your words. This is a wonderful example that enables us to see that life is always useful. Bishop Chávez, elderly and ailing, gives all his warmth and kindness to his Church and his country. His pains and sickness become another form of great service to the country. I hope that this message is heard by all of those who are sick and those who are suffering so that they

can understand that there is no such thing as a useless life as long as one continues to journey on the path of conversion.*

Lent also reveals the fact that our Church is living a very exuberant life, for example, in the popular devotion of the Stations of the Cross which move through the streets of our towns and villages during the Fridays of Lent, with many people devoted to prayer and participating in the sacraments. Hopefully you will take care, my dear Catholics, to make your annual confession and communion during Holy Week. Yes, we should be mindful of those great elements that the Council places before us in order to celebrate the season of Lent worthily: baptism and penance. We want our Lent to be a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter at which time many young people and all of us are going to renew our baptismal promises. We also hope that this time of Lent will be a preparation for the feast of Pentecost at which time those young women and men who have not received the sacrament of Confirmation will receive this sacrament which signifies a true conversion to God. Therefore on Holy Saturday in the evening, April 5th and Pentecost Sunday, May 25th, we will see the fruits of this Lenten season which I hope everyone will live in an intense manner.

I also want to congratulate the catechumenate communities who have taken upon themselves the wonderful task of reminding all of us of these events of the golden time of the liturgy of the Church: the preparation for Easter and the renewal of our baptismal promises.

Another expression of Lent is seen in the organization of the charitable works in our Diocese. *Cáritas* represents the instrument of charity for the Diocese of San Salvador. Let us join together with *Cáritas*, a committee of the Archdiocese and with the Ecumenical Commission of Humanitarian Aid as we attempt to serve the needs of our people and do this from the perspective of true Christian charity. Let us not focus on religious distinctions (Catholic or Protestant) but rather let us keep before our eyes the needs of our sisters and brothers and serve them to the best of our ability. I therefore invite all of you to support these works of Christian charity.

In the communities we have seen much liturgical and catechetical creativity, for example, in the village of Lourdes where a group of young people are being prepared for the sacrament of Confirmation.

During my visit to Aldeita I saw that Father Gabriel (a great pastoral minister) is mentoring four young men in their ministry. These seminarians will be ordained next year.

The new chapel in the village of El Salitre, Tejutla, has created much enthusiasm among the people there who understand that the Church is not only the physical building or the building committees but is the community of women and men without whom there is no real church.

Youth groups everywhere give us much hope. Today there is a gathering of youth at San José de la Montaña which will conclude with a Mass that I will have the pleasure to celebrate.

The community in Aguilares is preparing to celebrate the anniversary of the death of Father Grande, our first martyr during this wave of persecution. A Mass will be celebrated there next Sunday at 11:00am and those who are unable to go there because of the wave of repression that is occurring in that parish are invited to come to the Basilica. Our 8:00am celebration next Sunday will honor Father Grande and then from here we will go together to Aguilares to celebrate the anniversary Mass at 11:00am.

The silent ministry of the Missionaries of Charity in Cuscatancingo is marvelous. I do not want to abuse your time so I will not read you a wonderful letter concerning the testimony that they are giving in that area where there are no priests. As true missionaries of poverty they are visiting the most needy people not only to bring them the little that they are able to offer in material assistance but also helping people to understand the great gift of Jesus Christ. This enables people to understand and come to an awareness that poverty becomes divine when it is supported in the great gift of our redemption.

Last Sunday the Belgian Fathers in Zacamil were threatened with death. We express our solidarity with them and we hope that their lives are not abused and that they are able to continue to minister in our communities and in our Church.

Today at 5:00pm we will celebrate Mass here in Basilica in memory of Dr. Mario Zamora.

Tomorrow at 10:00 we will celebrate funeral rites in the Cathedral for nine of the persons who were killed as a result of the repression against FENASTRAS (National Trade Union Federation of Salvadoran Workers).

Lastly some news that gives us joy: YSAX has been involved in some intensive work in order to be able to transmit our programs once again. We had hoped to be able to be on the air today but we have to be patient. I thank you for the assistance that has arrived from so many parts of the country.*

I am grateful for the testimonies that have been published by the media and especially for the publication of the news concerning the Peace Prize that was bestowed on me by the ambassador from Switzerland⁵. Thank you again. I want to share with you a testimony of solidarity from the University's newspapers: *the attempt to strangle every voice that cries out on behalf of the people and every voice that proclaims authentic justice is the desire of the darkest forces of our country. They use weapons and violence to oppose the spread of certain ideas yet paradoxically more voices and more cries are heard ... our people are no longer indifferent but are more concerned about building a new and authentic society. The latest attack on YSAX can be seen as a great historical mistake on the part of the enemies of the people**. *The Archdiocesan radio station was damaged and the Church has been deprived of an important means of communication but most affected by this criminal action are those abandoned by the law and the oppressed because one of the few sources of accurate and truthful information has been taken from them, a source of truthful information in a country where the press distorts and covers up the reality, a press controlled by the oligarchy**. *As a means of guidance we refer to the document of Medellin where the bishops speak about those who have and do not wish to share (26): "if they jealously retain their privileges and defend them through violence they are responsible to history for provoking 'explosive revolutions of despair'"**

With regard to the Church's teaching I want to remind you about the wise observations of John Paul II that were communicated to the government officials in Nicaragua when they visited the Vatican: *Allow me to make a particular observation on an important aspect of the reality of Nicaragua today. I am referring to the literacy campaign, to which much considerable energy is being dedicated. Leaving the technical aspects of the problem aside, I consider that an initiative aimed at bringing the bread of culture to every citizen without distinction, is in itself deserving of all praise, provided it is planned and carried out in full respect of the right and religious convictions of the people and, more concretely, of the parents of the pupils. This respect of the rights of parents and of the Catholic family to an education in conformity with the faith they profess, excludes imposition of concepts contrary to faith⁶*. This is what I have always said and I

see in the words of the Pope an affirmation of what we talked about personally during my visit to Rome: support the struggle for social justice and support a preferential love for the poor but let us be careful my dear sisters and brothers so that those earthly struggles that are just do not ignore the true Christian values of our people. Let us work together for this Christian sense of justice.*

Events of the week

The community that desires to incarnate the history of salvation and that shares in this analysis is the Church. The Church, as I told you before, wants to be a people that embodies the history of salvation in order to enlighten the worldly history of people. Therefore we must speak about social, political and economic realities because we must enlighten these realities with the light of the gospel.

Two profiles mark the civil life of the past week: repressive violence and the promulgation of structural reform law: land reform and the nationalization of banks.

With regard to the first characteristic of repression, with sadness I have to tell you a wave of frightening repressive violence continues to grow and hold sway over our nation. During the first two months of this year 400 of the 600 deaths that have been recorded are the result of repressive violence. I want you to remember this number 600 because people attempted to distort the words that I spoke last Sunday. As a result *Orientación* had to print a clarification and you can read this in today's edition of our newspaper⁷. The editor of *Diario Latino* called attention to my words and stated that *the words of the Archbishop are contradicted*⁸ by the information of a reporter, Eduardo Vásquez, who spoke in the name of the army and said that it was not true that 600 persons died in confrontations between the security forces of the government and extremists. I did not say that. I said that *during January and February six hundred persons had lost their lives as a result of the political situation in our country*⁹ and I maintain that position ... you can count them yourself.*

Here we are referring to the repressive violence that is attributed to the security forces and the armed forces and the paramilitary groups of the extreme right. I have never omitted speaking about and denouncing the violence of the left and I will do the same today.

The National Press has admitted that fourteen bodies were found on Monday¹⁰. Some have been identified, such as Togelio Alvarez who died as the result of horrible torture after being captured illegally by civilians.

The bodies of two other students and a *campesino* from El Paisnal have also been found.

Also on Monday night a professor at San José, José Trinidad Canales, was riddled with bullets. Five civilians with a list in their hands asked for the professor before committing this criminal act. In the course of 1980, fourteen professors have been assassinated.

The bodies of four *campesinos* were found after the military invasion in the area of Cinquera.

Nineteen people were killed after an attack by the Guardia and those who died had nothing to do with this attack and in fact the majority of these people were transients.

On Tuesday, four *campesinos* from El Tule, El Paisnal, were killed, and among them was a young boy of twelve years.

At the same time three more bodies were found near kilometer 28 close to the village of San Jerónimo.

In the village of ICR of Suchitoto thirteen *campesinos* died after an invasion by 50 civilians, strongly armed and wearing bulletproof vests. Ranches were set afire and Andrés Escobar, Francisco Escobar and Alberto Rodas were arrested.

These same civilians, with trucks and powerful military equipment, invaded the villages of Tres Ceibas, Líbano Trapiche and Chaguitón.

The offices of the FENSTRAS were sacked by armed civilians wearing bulletproof vests.

The mayor, Daniel Escobar, was assassinated.

Wednesday, the masked bodies of three workers were found in San Pablo Tacachico. They had been abducted in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

Four workers were arrested in San Salvador: Alvaro Nerio, Rafael Contreras, Ofelia Meléndez and Estela Romero.

On Thursday, the headquarters of FENASTRAS in Santa Ana was machine gunned. Three workers were killed there and the remainder of the people were put in trucks and then thrown out onto the highway as the truck traveled to Sonsonate. The law of “escape” was applied to these individuals, that is, it was reported that these individuals were trying to escape and therefore they were shot. One by one these people died: Roberto Rodríguez Quiñónez, José Roberto Núñez Rico, Raúl Hernández, Juan López, Victor Juárez, Ricardo Guardado, Bonerges Solís, Ana Mirna Figueroa. Today, these bodies are in the Cathedral and tomorrow at 10:00am we will offer Mass for them.

Ricardo Padilla, Pedro Donal Montes and Eduardo Ortiz were buried in Santa Ana. As I have said they were killed because presumably they were trying to escape.

Seven *campesinos* were assassinated in San Antonio Mecate, Cojutepeque and all of these individuals were members of organized groups.

Other *campesinos* belonging to organized groups were assassinated in San Vicente and the village Analco De Zacatecoluca.

The bodies of three *campesinos* were found on the road leading to Chalatenango.

The *campesinos*, Juan Juárez, Julia López, Tomás Juárez and Roberto López Hernández were arrested.

Crowning these bloody events is the sad case that involves the presence of the bodies that are in our midst today: Roberto Castellanos Braña, a member of the Democratic Nationalist Union and his wife, Annette Mathiessen, a Danish citizen. I am moved by the coincidence that as our companions from Sweden bring us a Peace Prize, a citizen of a neighbouring country is laid out before us as though sorrowfully affirming the need to support the work on behalf of peace.*

I received a very revealing telegram from Costa Rica with regard to this case: *On Sunday, February 29th at 5:00pm Roberto Castellanos, a companion of ours at the National University, and his wife, Annette Mathiessen, a Danish citizen and a student were arrested. We denounce their arrest and demand that the government immediately release them. Signed: A Christian group at the Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica.* We lament the fact that this denunciation had not arrived in time especially when individuals are so quick to assassinate such valuable people as has occurred on this occasion.*

We received a letter from a seminarian in La Unión who states: *In the early morning hours of February 10th, officials and members of the army removed from his house my brother (his brother, José Eduardo Alvarez¹¹ is one of those who have disappeared) Santos Domingo Vásquez. Despite the fact that my father pleaded for the life of his son, Santos was shot by members of the army. Again on the morning of February 28th the army returned and invaded the villages of Conchagüita, Amapolitca and El Farito and removed Narciso Antonio Cuevas, 22, from his home. He was having breakfast when the army arrived and moments later he was assassinated by a bullet that destroyed his head. Santos González was also arrested and his body was later found on the highway together with the body of his brother, Martín González, who was returning from work with Victor Turcios ... they worked at Puerto de Cutuco in La Unión. These three workers were arrested and then assassinated far from their village: their bodies were found on the road near El Pilón.* This letter requests that we do something to stop this horrible repression.

We also received a telegram from the Council of Churches that states: *We are concerned about the long detention of the student, Guillermo Castro, a member of the First Baptist Church and a member of the Christian Student Movement. He was arrested on February 29th and we have been informed about his detention and we request that we be informed about this case. If no charges are going to be brought against him then we demand the immediate release of our brother Christian. Signed Eugene Stockwell, Secretary General of the Ministries of World Council of Churches in the United States.* I have received many letters from Guillermo's friends and companions and I know this student and have great esteem for him. I hope that the life of Guillermo, who gives much hope to El Salvador and to the Christian community, will be respected and we pray that he has not been assassinated ... God willing this has not happened.

I received a sad note from the Community of Playas Negras in La Unión: *This Saturday the body of our catechist, Rubén Benítez, from the parish of La Unión, was found assassinated. Last Sunday the Guardia Nacional was in his house questioning him about the whereabouts of his weapons. We, members of the Christian community of Playas Negras, are witnesses of the pastoral labor of our catechist. His work was based on the Gospel and he followed the footsteps of our Divine Master, giving his life for the Gospel. A Judas sold him..*

This is another proof of the wave of repression that has been imposed on the country against those persons who are members of popular organizations, individuals such as teachers, union members and politicians. It should not be forgotten that our beloved brother, whose body is in our midst this morning, was a member of a Party that is officially recognized and legalized.

The number of people who are assassinated on a daily basis continues to increase and manifests a conscious and informed political decision to annihilate by violence all those members of leftist organizations who are not in accord with the plans of reform proposed by the government and supported by the United States. This is a basic fact that must be recognized if we want to understand the meaning of the structural reforms that will be initiated this week.*

We cannot be silent before the sins of the left, but it must be admitted that in light of the violent repression their sins are proportionately less serious. The repression cannot be justified or explained by the actions of political military groups. This past week their victims have included three politicians in Ilobasco and three or four local commanders. Thus the number of victims is no more than ten or a daily ratio of about 1.5 victims a day which has been constant for the past two months.

Other actions included an attack on the one of the posts of the National Guard and other forms of harassment. The seventy victims caused by the security forces and the so called paramilitary groups had nothing to do with these subversive attacks but rather they appear to respond to a general program of annihilation of members of the left who, if unprovoked, would not act in this way if the social justice that they desire were a reality in our midst.*

Without a doubt there have been actions that result from agitation such as burning of buses, occupation of buildings, strikes, especially the seven day strike called by ANDES [National Association of Salvadoran Teachers] to protest the assassination of teachers. All this offends peace; but in general the assassinations have not been for these actions.

In this context of death and annihilation we must judge the two important reforms: land reform and the nationalization of banks.¹² Both measures are important and represent a certain triumph, at least an immediate triumph, of the Junta and the Armed Forces over the oligarchy. These are not only promises and threats but ways of making their words a reality.

The appropriation of land has begun and land holdings greater than 500 hectares are being taken over. This action has affected about 200 large land owners or about 2.5% of the population who, as Colonel Majano said, possess more than 300,000 manzanas of land.¹³ Owners of 100 or 150 to 500 hectares are not affected by this law and those who have less than 100 hectares (about 85% of the population) are also not affected by this law. The appropriated land will be transferred to those persons who work the land and as explained by Colonel Majano there will be three forms of property: state property, cooperatives and private property¹⁴.

My sisters and brothers, there is not enough time to adequately evaluate this measure and we cannot at this time make a precise judgment. We can say at this time that it is good that the oligarchy has been confronted. This new law no longer allows a small minority to possess all the land and these individuals will receive payment for the land that is being taken from them and this is only just. This law is not drastic and demonstrates that this reform is being carried out according to a moderate capitalist plan* Another good point of this reform is the fact that the beneficiaries of this law will be those who work the land, the *campesinos* and salaried workers. According to the law no one is excluded from being a beneficiary of this reform simply because they are members of some organization.

Nevertheless there are some serious doubts about this process and we must also speak about these. Putting aside for a moment the technical problems, which I will not go into here because I am not an expert in these matters, but certain doubts arise from its connection to a more general plan. In other words, what is the meaning of these reforms in the general plan of the government? This question is posed in light of the fact that one of the essential elements (and we have examined this element today) appears to be bloody and deadly repression of those who propose a different national plan. We are beginning to learn more about the plan of the Democratic Revolutionary Government¹⁵ and they have a right to make their plan known and to seek popular support for their plan.* This is an alternative political plan that the popular organizations ought to defend and confront other political realities with.

What has occurred though is that under the pretext of reform the present government is attempting to annihilate those that the Colonel¹⁶ Majano has called leftist extremists. While the extreme right is accommodated the extreme left is repressed*: and thus it is unjust to judge the actions of the left and right in the same way. The ultra leftists are not as extreme when one takes time to read the plan of the Revolutionary Government¹⁷. It is necessary to keep this plan in mind and not consider people who are opposed to the official plan as enemies.

On the other hand, the government ought to understand that even though these reforms are necessary and desired by the majority of the people, this majority has not been consulted or directly taken into consideration when planning these reforms. The Land Reform has been presented as a political-military action of the Armed Forces*: and what is more serious is that this reform can lead to a systematic militarization of the Republic through a series of militarized estates.* Thus we see the very real possibility of systematic control that would involve repression and spying: actions directed against the popular forces.

If these reforms are unable to establish means that will stop the repression of the *campesinos* and if these same reforms are not supported by the people (by people who are organized as well as those who are not organized) then these reforms will not resolve any problem and their failure will become another reality that will enable the oligarchy to believe that they have triumphed and that they alone are able to save the country.*

This criticism is made as a warning and we hope that the good elements of this reform are preserved and that the doubtful and dangerous elements are eliminated. It is time that the Government, if they are sincerely in favor of the people, make every effort to seek the truth and to dialogue about the plans that the people have proposed.*

Something similar could be said about the nationalization of banks¹⁸ even though in this regard there are less dangerous elements. The nationalization of banks as it has been proposed is a measure that has also been put forth in the general plan of the Democratic Revolutionary Government. This is a clear and precise blow to the oligarchy and it is a more pointed attack on the oligarchy than the land reform. This measure is a sign that the Junta's plan is not in itself pro-oligarchy even though it continues to be pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist.

There are two possible problems with this reform: First, it is part of a more general plan which is supported by the United States and includes repression: this is not good. Second, it runs the risk of being carried out in such a way that the majority of people receive no benefit from this reform. Both possibilities make us very cautious. Actions will indicate whether these elements are possibilities or realities. If the repressive elements are avoided in both of these plans and if there is dialogue concerning the enacted measures that involve land reform and the nationalization of banks then it is possible (in fact, this would be the ideal) that an agreement could be reached between members of the government and members of the opposition. We know that the project of the left involves not only well-known organized members but also highly capable people intellectually, and this must be born in mind.

But a coming together will only be possible if the repression ceases. As long as there is repression no sector of the people will have confidence in collaborating with the government.* How dangerous is all of this? You yourselves can be the judge of this as you listen to this letter that has been sent to us and that is very revealing: the letter of resignation of Dr. Héctor Dada from the Junta de Gobierno¹⁹. It reads:

On January 6th the National Convention of the Christian Democratic Party named me as a candidate to form part of the honorable government Junta. I was asked to work on behalf of the strict fulfillment of the plan that had been presented by the armed forces: a condition for the participation of the Christian Democratic Party²⁰ in the government. After the government committed itself to the plan of the armed forces and after they confirmed me as a member of the new government Junta I took up the position that I had been charged with and did so with an explicit decision to fulfill the party's mandate.

It is true that enormous problems had to be confronted and it is also true that the Junta was and still is incapable of acting against those whom I believe are the primary opponents of the process that has been proposed. It is clear that with the passing of each day the opposition has become more entrenched in government structures. The development of a democratic revolution has now taken a path that is totally perverted.

I am not going to go into detail here about my interpretation of events. They simply confirm the reasons that have led me to the conclusion that I have now accepted. We have not been able to stop the repression and those who commit these acts that are both repressive and discredit the authority of the Junta appear to have immunity. The promised dialogue with the popular organizations has not been realized. The possibility of bringing about reform with the support of the people seems to be more and more impossible. If another example is needed then let me present here the fact that powerful declarations of the Minister of Defense²¹ contradict a military member of the Junta and ridicule the demands of the Christian Democratic Party. He stated to the high command of the armed forces that he would resolve the problem and then went on to say that there would be no changes in the top ranks of the military. He denied that there was a plot to overthrow the government and yet everyone has been informed of such a plot. This individual has never been sanctioned and those who were involved in this plot have never been punished.*

*I do not believe it necessary to speak more about the causes that led me to make this decision. In a note that I sent to the Christian Democratic Party I expressed at length my reasons and that I can no longer continue to represent the party in this high level government position. I see a clear contradiction between the plan that was proposed and the actual practice of the Junta and therefore my political ethics prevent me from continuing to be a part of the Junta since in practice the original plan has been greatly altered. For this reason I am obliged to present my resignation from the position entrusted to me by the government Junta and I am convinced that in doing so I will better serve the authentic interests of the people of El Salvador.**

My sisters and brothers, excuse me for having spoken for so long but the life of our country is very weighed down and therefore I want to proclaim to you the words that we heard from Saint Paul in the second reading. He presents us with a Jewish tradition, a belief that the rock which gave them water in the desert accompanied them on their journey. This leads Saint Paul to the conclusion that *the rock was Christ* (27). The pilgrims in the desert experienced what we are living this morning: the altar is the rock and the rock is Christ. It is from this perspective that the hopes of Israel were illuminated and so too now the hopes of all people are enlightened.

We journey together with this rock who is Christ. We journey with our brother and sister whose bodies are in our midst. We journey with the honorable messengers from Switzerland and we journey with the anguish and the hopes of the people gathered here this morning. Let us unite ourselves to Christ and let us follow the path that Christ has pointed out as the only path to

salvation: *repent or you will all perish* (28). Those who journey with Christ will find the true God and true salvation. So be it.

¹ Before the homily, Sr Henrik Ramel, Ambassador of Sweden in El Salvador, bestowed on Mons. Romero the “1980 Peace Prize” in the name of the Free Churches in Sweden and the Swedish Action for Ecumenism. Mr Anders Kompass, secretary for Latin America of the Swedish Action for Ecumenism, read the document which, among other things, said the prize was being given to Mons. Romero for his evangelical work “of reconciliation among people, justice and humanity... When a people is oppressed, tortured, persecuted and has lost its liberty and humane conditions, it is a christian duty to defend and support it. Swedish Action for Ecumenism considers that Mons. Romero and his church have provided significant help in defense of the oppressed.” Afterwards, Mons. Per-Arne Aglert, secretary general of Swedish Action for Ecumenism gave a brief message in which he thanked God for having, in Mons. Romero, “a clear and strong light..., a light that will never lose its clarity.” See *Orientación*, 16 March 1980.

² Roberto Castellanos Braña and Annette Matthiessen Schultz. See Informe de la Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador, *Orientación*, 16 March 1980.

³ Monseñor Per-Arne Aglert.

⁴ Rosa María Braña de Castellanos is the mother of Roberto Castellanos Braña who was assassinated together with his wife Annette Mathiessen, a Danish citizen, on 26 February 1980. See *Orientación*, 16 March 1980.

⁵ See *El Mundo*, 8 March 1980.

⁶ Meeting of John Paul II with members of the Government of Nicaragua (3 March 1980), *Osservatore Romano*, 9 March 1980.

⁷ See *Orientación*, 9 March 1980.

⁸ See *Diario Latino*, 4 March 1980.

⁹ See *Homily* for 2 March 1980..

¹⁰ See *El Diario de Hoy*, 3 March 1980.

¹¹ José Eduardo Vázquez.

¹² Decreed by the Government on 6 and 7 of March respectively. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 7 and 8 March 1980.

¹³ Message of Colonel Adolfo Arnoldo Majano announcing decree n° 153 of the Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno: Ley Básica de la Reforma Agraria, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 7 March 1980. Note that in Central America a *manzana* of land is equal to 1.75 acres.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*

¹⁵ See Plataforma Programática para un Gobierno Democrático Revolucionario de la Coordinadora Revolucionaria de Masas (23 February 1980), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 28 February 1980.

¹⁶ Colonel Adolfo Arnoldo Majano, member of the Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno. See *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Gobierno Democrático Revolucionario.

¹⁸ See Decree n° 158 of the Junta Revolucionaria del Gobierno: Ley de nacionalización de las instituciones de crédito y de las asociaciones de ahorro y préstamo, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 8 March 1980.

¹⁹ On 3 March 1980, Héctor Dada Hirezi resigned as member of the Junta Revolucionaria del Gobierno; his place was taken by José Napoleón Duarte. See *El Independiente*, 6 March 1980. The full text of his resignation letter can be found in *Orientación*, 16 March 1980.

²⁰ The original text reads: “ingreso de demócrata-cristianos al Gobierno”.

²¹ Colonel José Guillermo García.

Marginal References (1) 2Cor 5,18; (2) Lk 13,3; (3) Lk 13,3; (4) Mk 1,15; (5) Jn 14,6; (6) Lk 13,1; (7) Lk 13,4; (8) Jn 9,2-3; (9) Lk 13,2-3; (10) Jn 6,47; (11) Lk 13,7-9; (12) Mt 21,29; (13) 1Cor 10,5; (14) Ex 3,5; (15) Ex 3,12; (16) Rm 8,31; (17) Ex 3,13-14; (18) Ex 3,14; (19) Ex 3,15; (20) Ex 3,7-8^a; (21) Ex 3,8b; (22) Rv 21,1; (23) Mt 1,25; (24) 1Cor 10,11; (25) 1Cor 10,5; (26) M 2,17; (27) 1Cor 10,4c; (28) Lk 13,3.