

THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

First Sunday of Lent
February 12, 1978

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

.....of this week¹, we find ourselves in that very profound season of the Liturgical Year that is called Lent. To understand this season of Lent, we go back a little to those Lenten celebrations of the golden era of the liturgy. In Rome, the people organized a great Lenten procession composed of three different groups of Christians. The main group was formed by the catechumens, that is, those who would be presented to receive Baptism during the solemn celebration of Holy Saturday. In this celebration the catechumens rise with Christ to live the Christian life. Lent was a time of more intense preparation for this celebration. The second group in this procession was the penitents --- people who became aware of their grave public sins and thus sought God's forgiveness and the Church's reconciliation. During Lent this group fulfilled their penance in order to receive absolution during Holy Week and thus became re-incorporated once again into the holy People of God. The last group, the faithful, those living in God's grace, and who, despite the ordinary human defects, had not betrayed God's law in any serious way and therefore asked the Lord for the grace of perseverance.

The Pope and the clergy led this procession of catechumens, penitents and faithful, for they too were part of this sinful humanity. Marked with ashes and clothed in vestments that symbolized penance, all walked through the different sections of the city where they inspired the People of God to undertake this process of renewal. For this reason the Second Vatican Council exhorts us to take advantage of this Lenten season and cultivate the rich elements of the Liturgy during these forty days, especially the baptismal and penitential elements (a). Even though, thanks to God, we have been baptized, let us identify ourselves with those who are preparing for Baptism on Holy Saturday so that we might be able to renew our baptismal commitment in the new liturgy of the East Vigil. Therefore, we ought to take advantage of this Lenten season to study and become more immersed in this Christianity which we entered at the time of our baptism. If we are conscious of some sins, some ways in which we have disobeyed God's law, some ways in which we have betrayed Christian moral ethics, then let us use this time of Lent to purify ourselves so that we might become living members of this People of God who desire to reflect the infinite holiness of God. We are going to speak about this more in depth as we reflect on the readings that are presented to us in today's Liturgy of the Word.

Events of the week

Before beginning this reflection on God's Word and especially during this wonderful time of the Liturgical Year that is called Lent, I want, as usual, to place my words in the context of the concrete events of the week.

At noon on Tuesday, a group of workers and *campesinos* and family members of those persons striking Izalco entered the Cathedral, closed it and occupied the church. The following day, Wednesday, another group, with the same motivation, entered the Church of El Calvario during the afternoon and closed the church in order to occupy it. Both groups wanted to dialogue with the Archbishop and I provided them with this opportunity. I learned that their objectives were to show their support for this strike and to ask for the release of their family members who had been imprisoned and, according to them, abused by the authorities.

During the dialogue I expressed to them what I now publicly want to tell you. On the one hand, I criticized the improvisation of these actions and stated that this serious act of occupying a church should not be taken lightly or seen as some kind of game. Such acts are signs that in this form can lose their effectiveness and run the risk of being frustrated. In fact, I insinuated that it would be better for them to leave the churches that they had occupied and I committed myself to express, as I am doing now, my solidarity with the just demands that at times our people express with voices and in ways that are disproportionate to the objectives they wish to achieve. And so it happened. Both groups left the churches peacefully. I am a witness of their departure from the churches and of the respect that was given to these places.

I also want to share with you this other reflection that arises from another event that I want to announce. Yesterday I went to Arcatao where I left the Guadalupana Sisters who will minister to the people there where there is no priest. At the conclusion of the religious ceremony there was a demonstration that was led by the Popular Revolutionary Bloc². Because of these events I want to repeat what I have said many times: the Church is independent of every human, political group, but at times, because of very biblical objectives, she associates herself with them and supports them. This association and support does not mean that the Church is in solidarity with their objectives and ideals but rather that she supports the just demands that are being made. I believe they are.....

I want to tell you that these groups, who undertake these initiatives, are not Church organizations and yet the Church exhorts Christians to become part of these groups and thus enable these groups to remain faithful to the Church's teaching. The Church teaches that the legitimate desire for the liberation of people very often bears within itself the temptation to violence and desperation. In such cases, the Church cannot approve, much less justify these actions, without first entering into a serious analysis of the causes that provoked these actions. Pope Paul VI, when he traveled to Bogotá, spoke the following words: *many historical crises could have been avoided if, with valiant self-sacrifice, the necessary reforms had been put in place, reforms that could have avoided desperate revolutionary explosions.*³

My sisters and brothers, this is what I have always stated, namely that when the Church decries revolutionary violence, she cannot forget that institutional violence also exists, and that the desperate violence of oppressed persons is not overcome with one-sided laws, with repression, or with superior force. Indeed, as the Pope says, revolutionary violence must be prevented by courageous self-sacrifice, and by giving up many comforts. As long as there is not greater justice among us, there will always be outbreaks of revolution. The Church does not approve or justify bloody revolution and crises of hatred. But neither can she condemn⁴ them while she sees no attempt to remove the causes that produce these ailments in our society. This is the Church's position, one that makes her suffer terrible conflicts, but one that also enables her to feel that she is faithful to God's justice and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

My sisters and brothers, I want to make a necessary clarification here: the Vatican Ambassador from El Salvador has authorized me to tell you that in the Foreign Ministry Office a false rumor concerning the Archbishop is being propagated. It is being said that I have placed a condition on dialogue with the President of the Republic, namely, that this dialogue must take place outside the country. I want to tell you, my sisters and brothers, that this is completely false. Knowing that I have access here to speak directly with the President, it would be foolish for me to say that the both of us must leave the country in order to dialogue. What objective could be achieved? What is behind these false rumors? Again we see attempts to distort the Church's attitude and slander her intentions. The Church seeks an environment of trust that is ultimately proven by actions that serve and respect our beloved people.

Church events

Now my sisters and brothers, during this season of Lent I refer to ecclesial events and with you I thank the Lord for the clergy meeting that took place on Tuesday. There we analyzed the work of the Base Communities of Faith. These are groups of men and women who come together to reflect on the Bible and who create in our midst a Church that is more human, a Church that enters into more intimate dialogue with people and a Church that is more conscious of who she is. The priests have proposed to celebrate a congress of the Base Communities of Faith at the end of this year. At this time I want to greet all those who are working in this way. There are many persons [...] who create among us a culture that inspires us [...] this afternoon at 6:00pm will take possession [...]⁵

I had the pleasure of greeting the Superior General of the Josephite community who administer the Sagrada Familia Parish in Colonia Centro America. At this time I want to thank and greet the members of the Josephite Community who are doing much good in our Archdiocese.

This past week the Assumption Sisters celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of their ministry in the Escuela del Barrio de Lourdes. I participated in the celebration of the Eucharist during which we gave thanks to God. I witnessed the enormous change that this presence of the Church, through the ministry of the Sisters and their collaborators, teachers, and benefactors, has made in this important sector of our diocese.

As I have already said, yesterday we traveled with the Guadalupana Sisters to Arcatao. Through this radio broadcast I want to express my warm greeting and gratitude to the people of Arcatao for the reception that they gave me. My sisters and brothers, I would have liked that all of you could have experienced this celebration. It was like another Palm Sunday. So many people and *campesinos* had traveled as long as three hours in order to be with us at this beautiful moment in the history of Arcatao. The people, through the words of their representative Don Ernesto (I do not remember his last name), expressed their support to the Bishop and their gratitude for the presence of the Church there. I want to greet and congratulate the Sisters, who, in the name of the Church, are present and ministering there.

There is a new superior at Buen Pastor. Yesterday the Carmelite Missionaries celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of their foundation which is actually March 8th. With the participation of the alumni from the Colegio de la Gruta and other collaborators, a procession in honor of our Lady of Lourdes was organized. At the conclusion of this procession there was a beautiful ceremony --- many sick people were anointed --- a Christian act that affirms

the value of the pain of our sisters and brothers who are ill. When this ceremony was concluded, I heard people who were not ill express their gratitude for this voice of hope, for the Church that identifies herself with those who suffer and knows how to speak to those who are ill and seem to be useless to society: your pain and suffering, offered in solidarity with Christ on the cross, is precisely the salvation of the world.

I want to congratulate the lay people who participated in a meeting in Costa Rica in order to prepare the laity for their participation in the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops that will take place in October, in Puebla, Mexico. I also want to announce to the people in the Department of Cuscutlán that, with the authorization of the Bishop, the Commission on the Laity is working there in order to develop lay ministry in all the parishes of the Vicariate. While speaking about the laity, I want to tell you that I was filled with joy as I traveled through Chalatenango yesterday and saw the way in which these communities have flourished under the ministry that has been provided by the lay people of that area. From February 14 – March 15 a course will be offered in order to prepare people to bring the Christian message to all the communities [...].

As I conclude these announcements, I want to refer to something that is very important, namely the Conference on Voluntary Sacrifice. Here beside the high altar are some posters that will be used during this week to call our people to join this campaign against world hunger by voluntarily depriving themselves of some good. Even in our poverty, let us contribute something to this campaign in which we are able to express our solidarity with our sisters and brothers who are hungry. My sisters and brothers, hunger is a great reality even in our own society. Our love for Christ ought to enable us to identify with our suffering sisters and brothers and so next Sunday we will take up a special collection to help those who suffer from the pains of hunger in our world.

Finally, my sisters and brothers, I want to extend a warm and kind invitation to all of you who consider yourselves my sisters, brothers, and friends, to accompany me on Tuesday at 7:00pm here in the Cathedral where I will receive an Honorary Degree from Georgetown University. As I have told you before, I do not receive this honor for myself but rather I feel that this honor is being conferred on me in order to stimulate, honor and congratulate the local Church, a Church that is composed of all my beloved priests, religious, and lay women and men who share this concern about making the Church's teaching real in our midst --- a gospel, that, as I said yesterday in Arcatao, wants to become incarnated and alive in the needs of the people. This is how I view the honor that is to be conferred upon me --- this honor is for you and is meant to encourage everyone who works for a more just order in the world.

This then, my sisters and brothers, are our thoughts for today's homily. Lent has changed the face of the Liturgical Year. Like a great university, Lent has interrupted Ordinary Time and invites us to undertake a course in salvation history, but not some theoretical course but rather a living course in which we all participate. This history of salvation finds its culmination in Christ, but had its origin in Adam and through Adam and Christ is prolonged in us. These are the three points of today's homily: two protagonists of salvation history: Adam and Christ, and its objective is the people, all of us, all of humanity.

Adam the protagonist of Salvation History

Today's first reading takes us back to the origins of history, the first man, the first woman --- the beginnings of the human race. It is interesting to see how creation and nature form the

first chapter of salvation history, in other words, Christ's redemption that comes afterwards is the second chapter and we are the *matter* of all this history. Today in Genesis, we read how the love of God created the world that was given over to humankind --- humankind is the reason for creation. The human person, created in the image of God, is the guardian of creation. All of creation is given over to the human person. This is the primitive origin of God's plan. The human person is called to collaborate with God. In a very graphic way the Bible presents us with God who breathes the spirit of life into a man who rises up from the clay of the earth. Thus the human person is a created individual who through the breath of God is the image of God because God has given humankind intelligence and the ability to love. God extended his creating hand over all things: *everything is yours* (b). It should not be forgotten that through this gesture of creation we see that all creation has been accomplished for humankind and that humankind is created through the love of God to be the guardian and the primary force of all things that exist.

It is sad that the second part of the Genesis reading recounts for us the regrettable response of humankind. Eve looked for the road to happiness by disobeying God. She seduced Adam to also walk on this road of disobedience. Thus human history begins beneath another aspect: fallen humanity, the fall of the human race, sinful. Yet Adam, through his disobedience, has been the father of a family and is the protagonist of all humankind. We should not forget these origins for later this will help us to understand the words that we are going to speak. But before that let us focus on the other protagonist of salvation for that is the second point of this homily.

Salvation history culminates in Christ

Christ, the second Adam, the Son of God who became incarnate in the womb of Mary, wanted to assume total responsibility for the human race --- for our disobedience which began with the disobedience in Paradise. Thus Christ's redemption is achieved through an heroic, divine act of obedience. Through obedience he becomes incarnate. Through obedience he accepts the cross, and through obedience we see him today in the desert. At the beginning of Lent, the eyes of all Christians should focus on Christ, fasting for forty days and nights. The gospel tells us that he was *led... by the Spirit* (c), by the spirit of obedience.

The Son of Man, the representative of all humankind, knows that men and women are in a state of fallen nature and that it is necessary to raise them up. He comes as a great healer and restores humankind. In other words, Christ is the Redeemer, the Savior. To save the world, to restore and redeem this fallen race of people it is necessary to fulfill the will of the Lord. Since it was temptation that caused the first fall of humankind and led to their disgrace, the gospel today presents us with the scene of Christ being tempted by the devil. Temptation is necessary so that the Son of Man can give us an example that happiness will be found by being obedient to the will of the Lord and not by following the deceitful words of the devil.

How easy it would have been for Christ to use his power and change the stones into bread! He was hungry and it would have been easy for him to fill his stomach by changing the stones into bread. But Jesus understood his role as Messiah and did not abuse his power by performing miracles to satisfy his own needs. Note well that the three temptations in the desert are temptations to use power in way that is contrary to the will of God. Christ's power is put in perspective when he says: *not by bread alone does one live* (d). It is preferable to die of hunger rather than be unappreciative of the nourishment that comes from God: the word of the Lord.

This is the true nourishment for Christian people: the Word of God. Here then, in the desert and at the beginning of Christ's ministry, we see that homage is given to the Word of God and thus Christ strengthens you and me as we reflect at this time on the Word of God. This Word of God is what first gives life to humankind. Let us be careful about this bread and not prefer some other bread to the Word of God. Let us not make our stomachs an idol and betray the Word of God for some place in society or politics. Let us not betray our convictions of faith. This is what the Lord teaches us!

The devil attempts to seduce Jesus a second time. Notice that it is Adam who is restoring humanity and he is not looking for some easy, spectacular way to do this but rather accomplishes this by walking the path of humility and reparation. The devil set him on the parapet of the temple. From there the magnificent atrium of the Temple appears very small and the devil tempts him to vanity when he says: *Look, throw yourself down from here because it is written that "he will bid his angels to take care of you so that you may never stumble on a stone" and the people will acclaim you as the Son of God! Look at the multitude and the way they will applaud you when you make this gesture!* (e). Jesus, with the serenity of one who is more obedient to God than the devil, says: *It is also written in Deuteronomy that you shall not put the Lord your God to the test* (f).

My sisters and brothers, those who are deceived by easy messianic promises, the devotees of revolutions who want to establish a new order by violating creation and those who seek applause and spectacles, betray God. Look at the wonderful response of Jesus Christ: *Do not tempt God. More valuable is the road of humility and simplicity, the road of duty and love and justice, the road of prayer, the road of justice, the road of the Gospel and not the road of the spectacular!* With these words Jesus denounces and overcomes another temptation of power --- power that seeks to take advantage of great spectacles and win votes and the applause of others even though they themselves are deceived. This is not the way that people are redeemed. People are redeemed by not tempting God, by not provoking God who is at times present in the people, in fact, often present and always present in the people.

Finally, the third temptation of this second Adam does not take place in Paradise but in the austere environment of the desert where he must pay for the licentiousness and the many ways in which we, as men and women, have offended God. The gospel tells us that the third temptation enables Jesus to see in a moment (like some cinematographic vision) all the kingdoms of the world pass before him. The devil tells him: *all these will I bestow on you if you prostrate yourself in homage before me* (h). What an incredible temptation have those people fallen into who say that they have made a pact with the devil! The temptation of power, the temptation to see great parades with cannons and armies, the temptation to stand before great masses of people who gather together not because of some conviction but because it is convenient --- indeed people often want to fill their stomachs with bread and receive the cheap applause of others. Jesus gives no value to any of this and tells the devil: *Away with you, Satan! Scripture has it: you shall do homage to the Lord your God; him alone shall you adore* (Matthew 4:10). This is the wonderful response of Christians who want to be saved from temptation and the easy paths of the world: adore the Lord. We have one Lord, our Lord, our God and he alone must we serve and adore. His law is the norm for our lives and his will is the design of our existence. We cannot travel on other roads that are contrary to the will and the service of the Lord.

Jesus is the second and the primary protagonist of salvation history. The commentaries say that Saint Matthew has written these pages while viewing the symbolic meaning of Christ for the Church in future centuries. It is not the divine person of Christ who is going to be tempted in such effrontery by the devil but rather Christ will be prolonged in history through the Church. The Church, therefore, will experience these temptations. Bishops, priests, religious and Catholic institutions will have to experience these tremendous temptations of power. We will be tempted to exchange our messianic and saving mission that leads us along the path of humility and austerity for the desire to find support in power and money and well-being. How many times has the poor Church fallen into this temptation!

We want to save the authentic Church so that she does not seek prestige from the applause of people or support from easy triumphs. We want Christianity to find its support in the same way as Jesus: in the Word of God. May the Church never betray the Word of God or seek those advantages that the world offers. May the Church know how to satisfy her own hunger and weakness and not see this as a failure, as though she were waiting for some better time. It is precisely during these days, at this present time, that we will find our support in Jesus to the degree that we make the Word of God the center of our faith. Indeed, our power is not found by performing miracles or finding support in the spectacular or triumphal, rather our power is discovered in the simple fulfillment of our duty and in the simple faith in the Word of God. This is the redemption that Christ offers us.

The history of salvation is prolonged in ourselves

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, this last thought, the third idea of this homily is the fact that all of us are in solidarity with the two protagonists of salvation history --- we are all in solidarity with Adam and Christ. Saint Paul has told us in the second reading that each and every person experiences this double solidarity. Everyone here has the ability to understand this reflection. We are intelligent, free, and capable of love. We have many human abilities to organize a business, to be professional men and women, to be politicians or merchants. We are human persons and these abilities of intelligence and organization and worldly prestige come from Adam. We are descendants of Adam and our human abilities are an inheritance that comes to us from that breath of God that bestows life upon us.

For this reason, my sisters and brothers, so often we are satisfied with this solidarity with Adam --- we are satisfied with this natural breath of God. But there is a second solidarity that few understand: we are also in solidarity with Christ. Paul tells us today that this solidarity with Adam makes all of us sinners, members of a fallen and failed human race. Even though we are intelligent and have many natural gifts, we would still be part of fallen humanity if it were not for Christ who is constituted the protagonist of redemption. Only the descendants of Adam, who also enter into solidarity with Christ, can make real the human race that God desires: Christianity. Christ is the second Adam and no one can belong to this family of God unless they are also incorporated into this second Adam.

Now we understand the meaning of this Lenten season. Lent is more than an acceptance of customs and ascetical practices. It is above all a theology. It is the theology of the human person, of men and women, who want to discover the meaning of their Baptism. Lent enables us to realize that Baptism brings us into solidarity with the One who allows us to participate in his death and resurrection. For this reason I want Baptism to be celebrated more consciously. Baptism is not just another social event: Father or Bishop so and so baptized my child, Mr. and Mrs. so and so were our godparents. All of this is a social

concern and while it is good, we must remember that more important than all of this is the need of the parents and godparents to come to the Church before the Baptism so that the significance of Baptism can be explained to them. Children do not receive their dignity through their godparents nor because they are descendants of Adam. Children receive their dignity because they are incorporated with Christ who died and Baptism is a participation in this death. Children receive their dignity because they are incorporated with Christ who rose, and Baptism is a participation in this eternal life of the resurrection.

Lent should remind us of this great dignity of Christians --- a dignity that we will carry with us throughout our lives and that was conferred upon us at the time of our Baptism. At the time of our Baptism we did not understand this, but now, as the Church celebrates this season of Lent each year, we become more conscious of the meaning of our Baptism. We are no longer children, but men and women involved in business and politics. What is the meaning of our Baptism? Ah! We cannot live with just those qualities that enable us to be in solidarity with Adam but rather we ought to live the demands that Christ places upon us. If we do not do this, we cannot be saved even though we shine brilliantly in the eyes of the world.

This then is Lent, a theological reminder of what reincorporates us and enables us to live in solidarity with the Redeemer, with Christ, and with the Son of God who shares with us the very life of God so that all who believe in God might be saved. It is not enough to be a descendant of Adam even though in some powerful way we might feel the breath of natural life. It is necessary that this breath of natural life become a breath of solidarity that through Baptism makes us one with Christ. If unfortunately we have lost this solidarity with Christ, then we have before us the second reality of Lent: Penance. Among the group of pilgrims who are part of the Lenten procession we find ourselves not among those who are preparing for Baptism --- we have been baptized but have not been faithful to this incorporation with Christ. We want to wash away this betrayal with penance and repentance, with fasting and signs that happiness is not found on the paths of Adam and Eve nor on the paths that are not God's ways. Rather happiness is found by walking the paths of Christ who overcame the temptations of the world.

My dear sisters and brothers, let us celebrate this Eucharist of the First Sunday of Lent with the intention of living anew the life that Christ has given us so that at the celebration of our Passover, our Holy Week, that time when we call to mind the death and resurrection of Christ, we might live again with the fullness of Christian enthusiasm. Let us stand now and proclaim our faith.

¹ The *Vox Panamericana*, radio station of the Archdiocese, was interfered with during the transmission of this homily which makes it difficult to hear some passages. There are also interruptions during the recording which are marked by square brackets.

² The Popular Revolutionary Bloc (BPR) was a social organization which brought together the Christian Federation of Salvadoran Campesinos (FECCAS) and the Union of Rural Workers (UTC) as well as others organizations of teachers, students, slum dwellers and workers which played a strong role in the struggles during the decade of the seventies.

³ See Paul VI, "Alocución en la misa del Día del Desarrollo en Bogotá, 23 August 1968.

⁴ The verb is obliterated in the tape, but "condemn" seems the most likely.

⁵ Interruptions in the registration of the homily.

