

# THE CHURCH, A SPIRITUAL ISRAEL

**Second Sunday of Lent**  
**February 19, 1978**

*Genesis 12:1-4*  
*2 Timothy 1:8-10*  
*Matthew 17:1-9*

In the Liturgy of the Word we encounter a person who is most beloved by the People of God here in El Salvador, that is, we encounter the transfigured Christ. Previously, the feast of the Transfiguration was celebrated today, the Second Sunday of Lent. We, in El Salvador, have become accustomed to celebrate this feast on August 6<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the Divine Savior -- the same day on which we also commemorate the origins of our city. Thus we find ourselves related by deep faith to our own intimate history and to the transfigured Christ of today's gospel. This relationship invites us to make today's homily a communion of love, hope and faith in the Divine Savior, the patron of our Republic and the One who gave us his name, the Divine Savior.

The transfigured Christ always speaks to us and the Father has given us this recommendation: *Listen to him!* (a). The one who preaches in this cathedral, like those who preach in the pulpits of every Church, is but a humble echo of the divine voice of the One who guides: Christ, the Teacher. Thus the person who preaches must listen to this eternal Word and enlighten our reality and the paths of our journey through history. For this reason every Sunday I am concerned about placing the Word of God within the framework of the events that occurred during the week. Each Sunday we discover events that ask for the light of God's Word. True Christians in El Salvador, unless they want to profess a Christianity that has no roots, cannot set aside these realities. Indeed, a Christianity that avoids commitments or that is simply spiritual is a very easy Christianity because it is separated from and not incarnated in the realities of our lives. But to live this gospel, that by order of the Eternal Father demands that we listen to Christ, (b) to live this gospel within the framework of our reality, that is difficult and will create conflicts. Yet this is what gives authenticity to the preaching of the gospel and the life of Christians.

Each one of you have your own unique story, your own family and community story. It would be impossible to highlight here each one of these individual concrete histories. This is the intimate work that must be done by each one of you, that is, you must allow the gospel to enlighten your hopes, plans, disillusionments and failures. You must enlighten these realities with the Word of God so that you might always live with faith and hope.

## **Events of the Week**

I speak here about events that are of interest to all of us. For example, even though this event might be of interest to me, but because of your kindness and friendship, I feel that this is a family event and so I express to you my gratitude for the solidarity and communion that we lived on Tuesday of last week. It is an unforgettable moment in my life, not because of

the honorary degree<sup>1</sup> that certainly is worthy of being esteemed especially since it comes from a university of such prestige that rarely confers this honor. But I received this honor with you and I feel that it was conferred on me to honor the communion with my beloved people and my beloved priests. Thus within the framework of this solemn homily, I restate what I have said before and therefore express my gratitude to all those people, who in one way or another, communicated to me their solidarity. In a special way I express my gratitude to Archbishop Chavez, Bishop Rivera and Bishop Revelo who most graciously shared in this evening. I thank not only the clergy of this Archdiocese but also the clergy of Santa Ana and San Vicente who have eloquently expressed their feelings of solidarity to me. I also thank the young men in the minor and major seminary for their words that gave me great consolation. The minor seminarians wrote a very significant letter in which they expressed their priestly ideals and their desire to live in communion with their bishop. I also thank the various religious congregations, the Federation of Schools, the parish base communities of faith and many other individuals. May the Lord reward each one of you.

I also express my thanks to the media who covered this event, *La Crónica*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Mundo*, radio KL, YSU, *Radio Internacional*, and Channel 2. I understand the conditions that have been placed on you because of the difficult circumstances in which we live. I also understand the silence of those who could not say anything and I admire those who mentioned this event, even though some had to do this in very small and limited space. May the Lord bless these actions that clearly reveal your heroism in an environment where self-interest is so often bought and sold.

My sisters and brothers, I invite you to pray with me on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, when I will celebrate one year of service to this Archdiocese. I will celebrate Mass here in the Cathedral on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, at noon.

My sisters and brothers, as we look at the events of our history and the events of the past week, we cannot fail to mention the discourse of our President while visiting the United States.<sup>2</sup> I want to highlight some of his words because they are also an expression of the Church's thoughts. In fact, I am often surprised by the fact that when the Church expresses herself in these words, she is called communist or subversive. The President states: *Social peace is possible when a climate of harmony exists between the business and labor sectors of society. Mutual understanding of the just aspirations of one sector and the real possibilities of the other sector constitute a point of balance between forces. Indeed it is propitious that labor should provide wealth and well-being for everyone.* This phrase, the *possibilities of one sector and the aspirations of the other*, is a very wise and true statement. If this is balanced with justice then we would never have to lament acts of terrorism and violence, acts of repression and other realities that have caused bloodshed in our country. The President also stated: *We want a healthy nation where the freedom of men and women continues to sustain democracy. We want to attain a higher standard of living for the great masses of people who currently have fewer economic resources.*

He then went on to say: *[We want] a new way of living together so that the economy responds to the principles of social justice which in turn must guarantee all people a dignified human existence. We want to modernize the system of land development and ownership through a broader participation of people in private ownership.* This is what the Church has stated on many occasions.

Another thought expressed by the President: *We ought to satisfy the desire of those people who wish to participate in the government, and those who wish to freely express their thoughts. We ought to provide equal opportunity to people who want to work and/or study --- for in this way we permanently strengthen the creative faculties of people. People not only desire freedom and the opportunity to rejoice in life, but people also have the right to live with esteem and dignity.*

What causes me to be fearful is the following statement: *we want to achieve a better distribution of the population and lower the growth rate of the population.* What is involved in this process of lowering the population growth rate? Must we mutilate the source of life as a condition for accepting economic assistance? The Lord does not want us to subordinate the moral laws of nature and creation to economic well-being but wants us to create a more just order, a new way of living, new structures that allow everyone (without fear of repression) to participate in the achievement of their legitimate aspirations and the common good. Blessed be God, for the Church has always spoken these words and I say that it is precisely here where the Church encounters great conflict.

When one speaks about a dialogue between the Church and the government, the words that the Holy Father spoke to our Ambassador should be kept in mind: *a constructive dialogue, based on a pastoral perspective in which the Church desires not simply her well-being, but rather attempts to serve authentically the people who cry out for freedom, dignity and equality*<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, there is a great contrast between the news published by *La Prensa Gráfica*<sup>4</sup> affirming that the U.S. State Department presented Congress a document that spoke about the respect for human rights in Latin America, but when speaking about El Salvador, this same document stated that people on the margins of society continue to increase the pressure for change. Yet the privileged classes are opposed to these changes and all of this creates situations of greater violence. This is precisely what the Church has pointed out throughout our continent: terrorism and violent uprisings --- actions that the Church cannot approve but also cannot disapprove without a profound analysis of the causes of this violence. As long as an institutionalized privileged violence of one sector of society attempts to repress the just aspirations of another sector of society, then there will always be the seeds of violence among us. Therefore, as long as we do not put in place a new way of living, we cannot have peace or unity or communion among the people of El Salvador.

With these words of hope I want to inform you about a letter from the Worker's Union at the Central Refinery of Izalco. In their letter the workers state that they have been on strike for seventeen days and they demand a new work contract and the cessation of abuses against the workers and the labor code. They accuse the Ministry of Labor of complicity and intrigue because they [the Ministry of Labor] refuse to bring management to the table to discuss these problems. They also accuse the Ministry of favoritism for they have not forced management to fulfill the agreement that they have signed with the union. The letter concluded by asking for the mediation of the Archdiocese to help the workers achieve their objectives and for the freedom of several companions who have been imprisoned. As always our response is to accept any service that is requested of us.

A delegation from the Federation of University Students from Honduras visited us in the Chancery and asked us to support the arrangements for the freedom of their companion, Luis Alberto Bonilla Contreras, a fellow student who, according to them, was captured by the

National Police on December 18, 1976. They have been unable to speak with the security forces. I also want to say that I share the fear that was expressed in a letter sent to me by the people of Chilicuyo. They spoke of a military contingent being sent to inspect the lands of Formosa. The people fear that this will result in some very unfavorable consequences --- we pray to God that this does not happen.

### **Life of the Church**

Finally, my sisters and brothers, I want to announce to you, as family members, that today we are going to bless a clinic at the Church of Concepción. We want to greet and congratulate the Franciscan Fathers and the doctors and nurses who are collaborating with them in this work in the parish of Concepción. I also want to speak to you about the pilgrimage to the Holy Land that has been announced by Don Juan Francisco Rivas Canjura. I ask him to remember us in his prayers as he travels to this land where the redemption of humankind took place. I ask you to pray for the eternal rest of Hipólito Morales and Daysi Guadalupe Aguilares de Marroquín.

My sisters and brothers, I have previously said that on the third Sunday of each month I would ask for your economic support for our seminaries. The support of this work rests upon everyone and this Sunday we conclude the week of Voluntary Sacrifice that we initiated last Sunday. Today's collection will be designated for two objectives: to help our Seminary and to support the campaign against world hunger. We need the assistance of all the People of God in order to fill the vacuum that is created by these three hungers: hunger for food, hunger for culture and hunger for God.

We find ourselves in the midst of this historical framework, and also in the context of the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word. We might call this homily: The Church: the spiritual Israel. I propose these three ideas: (1) God saves men and women and constitutes them as a People of God; (2) the transfigured Christ inherits all the saving promises of God (there is no salvation apart from Christ); (3) the letter of Saint Paul recommends that we live our Christian lives in solidarity with Abraham and Christ (we are the spiritual Israel).

### **God saves men and women and constitutes them as the People of God**

God saves by building a people. How beautiful today's first reading! We discover the origins of Israel in the Bible. Few peoples, perhaps none, can trace their origins like the Jewish people. Last Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, I told you that the first chapter of salvation history was creation: Adam. All human life is in some way in a relationship of solidarity with this first chapter because we are all descendents of Adam. The breath of life that God shared with our first father is the spark of intelligence, love and human abilities that every human person possesses. But our first parents betrayed their dignity as children of God because they wanted to achieve the fullness of divinity without obeying the Lord --- they were deceived by the devil. From the time of Adam until Abraham, we see that the Bible defines sin as an opposition to God or a separation from God.

During these days a young man from Santa Tecla made an interesting comment. He told me: *how could Adam have been created so perfectly since, after him, humankind seems to descend into a deep abyss? Could it not be that humanity was created so imperfectly that now it moves toward a higher level?* I told him: *Such a thought is dictated by human criteria, but in the light of revelation, Adam was a perfect man --- Adam was God's ideal.*

*The second Adam who was to come, Christ, is prefigured in this marvelous figure of the first man. This wonderful human being lost his supernatural greatness and his friendship with God. When a person loses this relationship with God, even though such a person preserves his human qualities, nonetheless this person falls even further from God's favor. History proves this fact: all people, no matter how intelligent or capable are not worthy of trust if they do not seek friendship with God or pray.*

Someone once asked a young man: *If you had a hundred dollars and had to entrust it to someone, would you give it to a professional who had no faith and was not seen as an honorable person, or would you give it to an illiterate, poor campesino, who was honorable and prayed?* The young man responded: *Naturally I would entrust the money to the campesino.* Clearly, human qualities are not enough. It is not enough to be a professional or a business person or one who possesses great wealth. When people separate themselves from God, they become degenerates. Separation from God --- these are the first chapters of human history and men and women have distanced themselves more and more from God. Recall those chapters about the flood, about Sodom and Gomorrah, about Cain's crime against his brother, Abel --- these stories show us the life of the human person without God.

Beginning with the twelfth chapter of Genesis, we see a change in perspective. Read this chapter attentively. This morning's first reading is taken from this part of the book of Genesis. God takes the initiative in forming a people and extends his hopes and promises to them. This is the great mission of Abraham and Israel: *I will make of you a great nation, a people from whom the Savior will be born.*

God is going to begin a new creation in the person of Abraham, a seventy-five year old man, one who on the surface would appear to be incapable of being the father of a nation. Nevertheless, through Abraham a new people come into existence, a people who ask great sacrifices from Abraham: *Go forth from the land of your kinfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you. I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you* (b). What a formidable elderly man! We might say he is an anomaly, a man from those semi-nomadic tribes of Ur of the Chaldeans. God chose this unknown person, this person who had spent his whole life as someone unknown.

Yet notice how Abraham set out from his homeland just as God had told him. (c) *Where is he going? To a land that I will show you* (d). He spent his whole life traveling in Canaan, where after many generations, people would finally take possession of the Promised Land. Abraham was a pilgrim in his own promised land and yet we can say that he was unaware of this fact. God was testing his faith. He was sterile, married to a sterile woman and now his wife is told that a great people will come forth from her womb. Sarah herself laughs. Yet the miracle is accomplished when Sarah gives birth to Isaac. But now God gives Abraham another test: offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham, finally blessed with a descendant, is obedient and leads his son out to the land of Moriah (an image of Jesus who will bear his cross). There on the Calvary of Jerusalem, the most wonderful figure is that of Isaac, laden with wood and walking toward the place where he will be sacrificed. The Lord's messenger stops Abraham: *do not kill Isaac; you have demonstrated that you are a man of faith* (h).

My sisters and brothers, Abraham's detachment, his commitment to seeming impossible things and the foolishness of faith --- this is what God asks of us. Faith implies placing

ourselves in God's arms and accepting God's word, even though it seems impossible. Faith is Mary, when the angel tells her that she will be a mother without losing her virginity. *I do not understand but may it be done to me according to your word* (i). Faith demands this commitment and so Abraham is not only called the father of Israel but also called the father of faith --- he is the model of faith.

### **The transfigured Christ is the heir of all God's salvific promises**

Let us see what happens when this history of Israel culminates at the fullness of time --- this is dealt with in today's gospel and is my second point. There on the mountain of the transfiguration we are told of the appearance of Old Testament figures, descendants of Abraham, Moses and Elijah --- religious figures who embody Israel's beliefs and hopes. Moses represents the law and Elijah represents the prophets. The law and the prophets are like Israel's constitution. What was written to establish the covenant between God and the people, what was written as the will of God, came alive through the prophets. God, through the voice of the prophets, exhorted the people to keep alive the hopes and promises that had been communicated to Abraham and his descendants. These hopes and promises were lived realities for centuries before the coming of Christ.

One day, Christ became present and established a new testament, a new and everlasting covenant. He had chosen some men from Abraham's Israel who were going to enter Christianity's Israel. Even though Peter, James and John were sons of Abraham, they were not part of the Old Testament. These three disciples, together with Jesus and the Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, appear together on the mountain of the transfiguration. Christ is in the middle of them, his face bright as the sun and his garments white as snow. This is the person of the God made man --- the Father testifies to this fact: *this is my beloved son* (j). This is the promised One, who will be the source of every blessing. This is the descendent of Abraham who will bless all nations. (k) No other name will be called upon, for he alone will save all people. Jesus appears on the mountain and seems to anticipate the Passover, appears as One who has been raised, as One who has nothing to do with death and the other miseries of the world.

Peter is completely taken up with this event and says: *Lord, it is good that we are here. This is Paradise! This is the destiny and the fulfillment of humankind's aspirations* (l). Jesus responds: *Do not speak about this to anyone because the bitter days of my passion are coming. Therefore, do not say anything until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. Then at that time proclaim the fact that Christ lives, that Christ died in order to save all people and that without this death, there can be no redemption* (m). This death, however, is not a failure, but a condition for the resurrection. This death that involved pain on the cross is the price that Jesus paid for the disobedience of men and women. It is a necessary death, bitter and painful, but through this death the sins of humankind are able to be forgiven. What is incredible about all of this is the fact that from this death and the tomb, Jesus is raised to new life. This is called the Paschal Mystery, the Passover event that consists of death and resurrection.

Lent leads us to Passover. Christianity and all history is moving toward the cross and the resurrection. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, we should not be surprised that the Church must confront the cross, for without the cross there can be no resurrection. A Church that seeks accommodation and prestige without the pain of the cross is not the authentic Church of Jesus Christ.

On Mount Tabor, Christ reveals the fullness of glory. Saint Paul tells us that the Divine Savior, the patron of our country, *is the affirmative response to God's promises.*(n) What a beautiful expression ---Jesus is the yes, the one who says *yes* to the Father, the one who fulfilled the promises of forgiveness and salvation. Christ is the road on which fallen humankind is restored to God. Through the cross and the Passover, Christ calls humankind to their true greatness as persons and as a society. We cannot have a new society or a new way of living without Christ. We cannot speak of well-being for all people or a new way of living without speaking about the justice of Christ, the Redeemer. Only Christ can inspire selfish people to repent. Only Christ can inspire resentful people to work honestly and honorably. Only Christ can give a true meaning to Christian liberation and free all people from sin and death so that they can participate in his glory.

### **The letter of Saint Paul encourages us to live our Christian lives in solidarity with Abraham and Christ**

My dear sisters and brothers, in the second reading, Saint Paul refers to Timothy's illness and timidity, but he also speak of Timothy as a man of great faith. Paul placed Timothy in a position to care for the community of Ephesus and he writes him this beautiful letter: *Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.*(o) *Health is not more important than trusting in God. The one who preaches, who proclaims the Word of God, who brings the community together as Church, who invokes the saints in order to create a Christian community, who with a clear understanding of the Gospel teaches in a Christian school, and all those who want to develop and live truly Christian lives in the midst of their family --- all of you, do not trust yourselves but trust God!*

*God saved us and called us to a holy life, not according to our words but according to his own design.*(p) What a beautiful echo for as Paul passes on his Christian heritage to Timothy we can hear of God's words to Abraham: *leave your kinfolk and your father's house and go the land that I will show you.* God acts this way with each person. Blessed are those who listen to this call of God: *Come, leave behind your life of sin! Leave behind the comfortable situation you created with your money, your land and the countless possessions that you believe will provide you with security! Leave behind those things that can only give you happiness here on earth and then continue to walk forward on the path that I will show you! Commit yourself to faith and love. Live this love for without love nothing else matters.* Love is what leads to the true development of an individual and as Paul VI has said, *avarice is the most obvious sign of stultified moral development* (q). Selfishness is stultified moral development. Therefore, the call that is made to all Christians at this time of the Church's history is the same call that God made to Abraham. *Come to the land that I will show you* (r).

I am happy, my sisters and brothers, that the Israel that was created by Abraham through his act of faith and that was prolonged among the people, is now handed on to us, authentic Christians living in 1978, we who reflect on this Word of God --- may we be faithful to the saving will of God. Paul said to Timothy: *I want to save everyone. God wants to sanctify us and this is God's initiative* (s).

My sisters and brothers, religion is not a human invention and no one can shape Christianity to their own pleasure. No one can give those who preach the gospel guidelines that adhere to their own personal criteria. God asks us to preach and we must speak the

words of the gospel. God takes the initiative in saving humankind. This is the great difference between true and false religions.

False religions arise from the will of people who want to determine how they will adore God, how they will believe and how they will organize their religious life --- but all of this is religion that is invented by human beings.

True religion is like that of Abraham who listens. Their ears and eyes are attentive: what is God saying? The initiative comes from God and we must profess a faith that does not conform to our liking but conforms to God's will. We have to live a morality that is not our invention but one that conforms to God's will as expressed in the commandments. Therefore God points to Christ, his messenger, his word, the fullness of the Father's revelation and says: *This I my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him. Those who follow him will be saved. Those who invent their own Christianity, a Christianity that is selfish and lazy and without conflicts or difficulties --- such a Christianity is not mine and therefore cannot be the word of the beloved son in whom I am pleased (t).*

Therefore, my dear sisters and brothers, notice how the liturgy of the Word deals with this situation and points out the fact that Lent is a time for sincere renewal. In light of this reality, the Pope and his collaborators in Rome made a spiritual retreat. We all have a need to renew ourselves, beginning with the Pope and the bishops and the priests and religious and continuing on to include all Catholic institutions and communities. Lent is a time to renew ourselves because the temptations that Christ experienced in the desert can very easily be the Church's temptations. Yes, there is always the possibility that we will also seek the Kingdom of God that is suggested by Satan rather than the Kingdom of God that is announced by the Son of God. Let us be very careful during this time of Lent and let us take advantage of this time to examine our progress in the Christian life, our family relationships, our respect for God's law and our obedience to the gospel.

My dear sisters and brothers, this is the liturgy of the Word that here in our cathedral has been presided over by the transfigured Christ. Christ is not only the Word but also becomes the host, the chalice, communion and life. As we take communion, let us identify ourselves with Jesus' thoughts. Let us live our Eucharistic celebration. Today the call to voluntary sacrifice and the call to assist our seminary place before us a concrete objective for our faith. Let us celebrate this offertory, this offering of gifts. Let us be generous and in over poverty let us share with those who are poor. Let us share our bread with those who are hungry. If the only gift we can offer is our good will, then let us share our love --- let us love one another. Let us not close ourselves up in selfishness and hatred. Lent transfigures and renews the human person.

Hopefully all the holy people of God, as they celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ during the sacred Triduum, hopefully they will become aware of that love that led Jesus to Calvary. Hopefully they will become aware of that life that is poured forth. Hopefully they will become aware of this Jesus, not as one who was simply transfigured here on earth but as one who possesses the fullness of eternal life and wishes to share this gift with all people. May the life of Jesus Christ, our Lord, sustain our life and our love --- for this is the meaning of Baptism and the meaning of our name Christian. Lent is a time to renew our baptismal commitment that identifies us with Christ who died and rose for us. Let us proclaim our faith....



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<sup>1</sup> On 14 February 1978, in the cathedral of San Salvador, Dr Timothy Healy, President of Georgetown University, Washington, conferred on Mons. Romero, in the name of the university, a Doctorate in Letters *honoris causa* “in recognition of your moral leadership which you have shown through the Church of El Salvador. Your courage and eloquence in the defence of human rights has won international admiration”. *Orientación*, 5 February 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Discourse of General Carlos Humberto Romero to the Third Annual Centralamerican Conference of Commerce, New Orleans, Louisiana, 16 February 1978. The passages in italics are textual quotations from the discourse. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 17 February 1978.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul VI, Address to the new Ambassador of El Salvador to the Holy See, *Osservatore Romano*, 18 December 1977.

<sup>4</sup> See “Situación de derechos humanos en Latinoamérica”, Departamento de Estado de los Estados Unidos, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 10 February 1978.

*Margin References* (a) Mt 17,5: (b) Mt 17,5: (c) Gn 12,1-3: (d) Gn 12,4: (e) Gn 12,1: (f) Gn 15,5-6: (g) Gn 18,12: (h) Gn 22,2: (i) Gn 22,12: (j) Lk 1,30-38: (k) Mt 17,5: (l) Ac 4,12: (m) Mt 17,4: (n) Mt 17,9: (o) 2Cor 1,20: (p) 2Tm 1,8: (q) 2Tm 1,9: (r) PP 19: (s) Gn 12,1: (t) 2Tm 1,9: (u) Mt 17,5.