

THE PASCHAL MEAL

The Lord's Supper
Holy Thursday
March 23, 1978

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

We initiate what is referred as to the Easter Triduum with this celebration in honor of the institution of the Eucharist. These three days commemorate the greatest religious Christian event in history and, naturally, the greatest event of the Liturgical Year. Saint Augustine referred to the Triduum as the feast of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. Tonight is like a synthesis, a summary of the entire Paschal Mystery that we are celebrating. In order to understand this mystery, today's readings place us within the context of the ancient history of Israel that culminates with Christ, the Lord, who in turn gives his Church the responsibility of proclaiming this mystery until the end of time.

On this most sacred night of Holy Thursday I want to present three thoughts: (1) the history of Israel, (2) Christ who becomes incarnate, and (3) the prolongation of the Eucharist until the end of time.

The history of Israel

The passage from the book of Exodus that we have just read, speaks to us about the ancient history of Israel. At the time of the full moon that occurred during the month of Nisan (a month of the Hebrew calendar that coincides with our month of March-April) --- God commanded the people: *this month shall stand at the head of your calendar and you shall celebrate the Passover* (a). The Passover is the celebration of two great Old Testament mysteries: the liberation from Egypt and the establishment of the Covenant. Passover was first celebrated during the time when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt by the Pharaoh and unable to leave this land until the fulfillment of the tenth horrible plague when the first born of the Egyptians were slaughtered. In order to spare the people of Israel from the consequences of this plague, God ordered the people to kill a lamb and wipe the blood of this lamb on the doorposts of their houses. Seeing the blood, the angel of death would pass over those houses. The passing over of the angel is the meaning of Passover --- the Lord passes over the land to punish the Egyptians and free the Israelites.

On that first Passover night, while the Egyptians mourned the death of their first born, the Israelites, signed with the blood of the lamb, left the slavery of Egypt and began their pilgrimage through the desert to the Promised Land. Every year the people of Israel commemorate this event which is like our celebration of September 15th, but for the Jewish people this was a celebration of emancipation, a celebration of freedom, a celebration in which God passed over the people and saved them. At the same time that these people celebrated this feast that commemorated a past event, they also remembered that a Covenant had been established between God and the people. Thus Israel committed herself to respect

the law of God and God promised to protect the people in a by the people but as the years passed these celebrations were given a prophetic meaning. The Passover and the Covenant would find their fulfillment when the greatest among the Jews, the One born of Abraham and David, a holy descendent of Israel, would celebrate the Passover.

On that night, Christ our Lord, like a good Israelite and with a group of other Israelites, his apostles, formed a family, killed the lamb and shared a meal in the same way as all the families of Israel. In this way they remembered the ancient story of liberation and the establishment of the covenant. So many thoughts about the sacred history of Israel filled Jesus' mind! So many emotions surfaced as he reflected on this history of Israel! No other patriot had more love for his land and his people and their customs than our Lord, Jesus Christ. If we want to be authentic people of El Salvador, let us remember that Jesus was an authentic patriot who reflected on the history of his people and felt that this history was his history and felt that he was present with the people at the time of their slavery in Egypt. He lived his life with an attitude of thanksgiving to the God of freedom and to the God who established a covenant between himself and the people. So many thoughts filled the mind of Jesus that night, but all these thoughts reminded him of a special mystery.

Christ who incarnates the entire history of salvation

My second thought on this night is the following: Christ incarnated the entire history of salvation. Jesus told the Samaritan woman: *the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... but true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth* (b). During the time when Jesus defended himself as he heard serious accusations made against him he said: *Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up* (c). But the evangelist clarifies these words: *when Jesus said destroy this temple he was referring to his body because his body was the temple in which the realization of the covenant, the victory of God and the liberation of the people of Israel would take place* (d). His body was the temple, the victim, the priest and the altar. In Jesus is found everything that is necessary for redemption.

The gratitude of the people of Israel becomes incarnated in Jesus, a gratitude to God for having been freed from slavery. The patriotic hope of Israel and the hopes of all people become incarnated in Jesus. This night Jesus is the lamb who takes away the sins of the world. (e) His blood will seal with freedom the hearts of all those who truly want to be free. This night, Jesus is the priest who praises the Father and brings the Father's forgiveness and blessings to the people.

Tomorrow, Good Friday, the tortured Christ culminates his life with the crucifixion, yet the memory of that passion, the memory of all that took place on the evening before, remains. As Christ dies on the cross, Jesus is the lamb whose blood seals the hearts of those who believe in him. These people of faith will be free and will not die tormented by their sins. Jesus is the one who takes away the sin of the world! He comes and fills our hearts with hope! Blessed, my sisters and brothers, are all those who celebrate the Lord's Supper here in the cathedral, in all the parish churches, in the chapels and in all the communities throughout the Archdiocese. Today we form part of Jesus' Israelite family that slaughters the lamb --- the lamb that is Jesus. We eat his flesh and drink his blood: *Take and eat for this is my body that is given for you. Take and drink for this is the cup of my blood which will be shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins* (f).

A prolongation of the Eucharist until the end of time

My third thought revolves around the Eucharist. The body and the blood of the Lord that becomes present on the altar each time that a priest celebrates the Mass is the same sacrifice that Jesus offered on the cross, the whole history of salvation. That history of salvation becomes present here, on the altar. Furthermore, we have just listened to Saint Paul tell us: *For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes* (g).

The Christian people are a people who remember the event of Calvary. They remember this action not simply as some event that took place in the past, but as an event that becomes present now and even more, an event that gives hope to the future. At the Mass, Christ becomes present in the host and it is Christ who will return. It is Christ who will come to judge history. It is in Christ that all people find the solution to their problems, the definitive solution, because only in Christ do we discover the hope of this people that journey through history, tortured and martyred, but at the same time journey with a hope for that definitive liberation that is to come.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, this evening our Eucharist has to be a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord --- a prayer of thanksgiving because Jesus has redeemed us and because his suffering on the cross now becomes present in the consecrated host on the altar. His blood that sealed the covenant between God and humankind becomes present among us once again and enables us to reaffirm the alliance, the eternal covenant between ourselves and God. Blessed are this Christian people and blessed are the people of Israel who sealed their alliance with God with the blood of the lamb! As Christians we seal God's love for us and our hope and trust in him with the blood of Jesus, with the blood of Christ, with the sacrificial body of Christ who died on the cross and now becomes present in the host.

Thus, my sisters and brothers, the Christian Passover that we celebrate tonight, the Passover that receives its meaning in the crucifixion that takes place tomorrow, Good Friday and in the resurrection of Christ that is celebrated in the evening of Holy Saturday, this Passover that is the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, this Passover the Lord wants us to celebrate within a framework of love and humility.

The gospel narrative that we have listened to this evening begins with the wonderful words: *Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass* (to pass by, to Passover) *from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end* (h). In all of history no one has ever encountered a love that was so --- excuse me for using this word --- but a love that was so crazy, so exaggerated: to surrender oneself to the extent of being crucified on a cross. No other friend has given his life for another friend with such profound suffering and love as Christ. This is the framework of our Passover. Therefore Jesus tells us that the sign of Christians resides in living the new commandment --- the new commandment that is given to us by Jesus. It is a commandment that is renewed in our memory and in our lives this evening: *As I have loved you, so you also should love one another* (i)

The greatest disease that exists in our world today is the fact that people do not know how to love. There is so much selfishness and exploitation of one person by another. There is so much cruelty and torture; so much violence and repression. The houses of our sisters and brothers are burned. Our sisters and brothers are thrown into prison and so many other cruel

acts are committed against them. Jesus would truly suffer tonight as he looks upon the situation of our nation where so many crimes and cruelties are an ever present reality. I believe Jesus would be saddened at the Passover table as he looks upon El Salvador. He would say to us once again: *I have told you that you must love one another*. My sisters and brothers, this evening the framework of love ought to be the context for our celebration of Holy Week. We cannot celebrate Holy Week if we harbor in our hearts feelings of selfishness and cruelty toward our sisters and brothers. We can only celebrate this Passover of Christ if we love, if we forgive and if we know how to exercise the greatest power that God has placed within our hearts: the power of love.

My dear young people, those of you who believe violence is the solution to our problems and those of you are involved in different forms of vice, you who have lost your faith in love and believe that love can solve absolutely nothing --- my dear young people here you have the proof that love solves everything. If Christ had wanted to impose his redemption through armed force or through fire and violence, he would have achieved nothing. All would have been useless and produced only more hatred and evil. But the crowning point of his redemption is handing on to us his new commandment: *As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.*(j) *So that you may see that these are not simply words, watch with me tonight! Watch as I sweat blood as I reflect on the evil of humankind and the pain of my own sufferings! Tomorrow, watch when I pass by as the silent lamb and climb with my cross to Calvary. Watch as I die there and be assured that there is no resentment in heart. From the depth of my soul I cry out: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."*(k) My sisters and brothers, let us reflect on this love that is personified in Jesus. At the time of temptation to act with vengeance, resentment, cruelty, or selfishness, let us not look at the sad example of those whose hearts are filled with hatred. Rather let us raise our eyes toward the love of the Lamb who becomes our food, our Passover and our Covenant.

Jesus teaches us that in order to rise to these heights we must travel the road of humility. For this reason priests are obliged to preach not only with words but with the same gesture that we are about to demonstrate here in the cathedral and that is demonstrated in every church where people are gathered to celebrate this Holy Week. Jesus tells us: *If I, therefore, the teacher and master, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet* (l). Jesus took off his outer garment, knelt before the apostles and, like a servant, began to wash their feet. It was the responsibility of servants to wash the feet of the dinner guests before they ate. These servants might be compared to the people who kneel before us to clean our shoes. Saint Paul tell us: *[God] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness* (m). This evening we see Jesus humbling himself before the feet of the apostles, before the feet of Judas. Tomorrow, Jesus dies like a slave --- it was prohibited to crucify Roman citizens but the slaves of the Roman people could be crucified. God takes on the form of a slave, and reveals himself as the humble Lord of lords.

What a wonderful example for those who are filled with pride and arrogance. Because of a lack of humility the world is in the present situation. No one wants to feel inferior to another because everyone believes that the world revolves around them. We have set ourselves up as gods and become idols unto ourselves. My sisters and brothers, it is necessary to destroy all these idols and I, more than anyone else, must destroy my idols. Only in this way can we become humble and only with humility can we know what it means to be redeemed, know what it means to be true collaborators that the world so desperately needs. Liberation that cries out against others is not true liberation. Liberation that is achieved through revolutions of hatred and violence that destroy the lives of others and

represses the dignity of others is not true liberation. True liberators do violence to themselves just as Christ did violence to himself. They put aside their independence and become servants in order to serve others. These are the true liberators that our country desires, liberators with humble hearts, hearts that shine with the characteristic love of Christians.

My sisters and brothers, on this Holy Thursday, the celebration of our Passover, let us embrace all the precious lessons of our Divine Redeemer. We need to be freed today from so many forms of slavery and so we embrace the One who can break our chains and open our prisons --- we embrace Jesus, the Lord. We place our hope in him. We live our Christianity with authenticity and pray that our Church might continue to proclaim before the world that only in Christ will we find the hope that sets us free. Let us imitate the love and humility of Jesus, for these are the true paths that lead to the fullness of life.

Now we will imitate that gesture of Jesus, a gesture that I feel most unworthy of imitating. But I use this gesture so that I might preach to you not only with my words, but as I have always said to you: May we preach the word with the silence of love and humility.

Margin References (a) Ex 12,2: (b) Jn 4,23: (c) Mt 26,61: (d) Jn 2,21: (e) Jn 1,29: (f) Lk 22,19-20: (g) 1Cor 11,26: (h) Jn 13,1: (i) Jn 13,34: (j) Jn 13,34: (k) Lk 23,34: (l) Jn 13,13-14: (m) Ph 2,6-7.