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# THE CHURCH, A SPIRITUAL ISRAEL

**Second Sunday of Lent  
19 February 1978**

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

In the Liturgy of the Word today we encounter a person who is most beloved by the people of God here in El Salvador, that is, the transfigured Christ. In earlier times the feast of the Transfiguration was celebrated today, the Second Sunday of Lent. In San Salvador we have the custom of celebrating this feast on August 6, the feast of the Divine Savior, the day when we also commemorate the origins of our city. Thus we find a deep relationship of faith between our own concrete history and the transfigured Christ of today's gospel. This relationship invites us to make of today's homily a communion of love, hope, and faith in the Divine Savior, the patron of our republic who has given his name to El Salvador.

The transfigured Christ speaks to us always, for the Father gave us this counsel: «Listen to him!» (Matt 17:5). The one who preaches in this cathedral, as in all church pulpits, is nothing but a humble echo of the divine voice that guides us, Christ the teacher. The one who preaches does nothing more than take this eternal word and illuminate with it the realities of our journey through history. That is why I take care every Sunday to place the word of God within the framework of each week's history. The history of El Salvador is so dense, sisters and brothers, that it is never exhausted. Every Sunday we find things that need the light of the Lord's word. True Christians in El Salvador cannot set aside these realities unless they want to profess an ethereal Christianity with no earthly dimension, a spiritualist Christianity without commitments. It is very easy to be a Christian who is disincarnate and uncomprehending of the realities of our times. But we create conflict when we live this Gospel that the eternal Father commands us to hear from Christ: «Listen to him!» (Matt 17:5). To live this Gospel in the context of our reality—that is difficult and creates conflicts. Yet that is what gives authenticity to the preaching of the Gospel and to the life of every Christian.

Each one of you, dear sisters and brothers, has your own unique history, your family history, and your community history. It would be impossible to describe here those concrete histories; that is work to be done by each person. Each of us must allow the Gospel to shed light on our hopes, our plans, our disillusionments, our failures. We need this light of the word of God so that we may 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, one event is of special interest to me, but I feel that it is a family event because of your kindness and friendship, and so I express to you my gratitude for the solidarity and communion we experienced last

Tuesday. It was an unforgettable moment in my life, not because of the honorary doctorate<sup>1</sup>, which certainly is worthy of esteem, especially since it comes from a university of much prestige that rarely confers this honor. But I received this honor along with you, and I feel that it was conferred on me to honor the communion I feel with my beloved people and my beloved priests. Thus, within the solemn framework of this homily I once again express my gratitude to all those people who in one way or another communicated to me their sentiments of solidarity. I especially thank Archbishop Chávez, Bishop Rivera, and Bishop Revelo, who were most kindly present on that 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. I thank the young men in the minor and major seminaries whose words gave me great consolation. The minor seminarians wrote a very noteworthy letter in which they expressed their priestly ideals in communion with their bishop. I also thank the religious congregations, the school federations, the base communities in the parishes, and many other individuals of diverse categories. May the Lord reward each one of you.

I express my thanks to the media who covered this event, *La Crónica*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Mundo*, Channel 2, and radio stations KL,YSU, and *Radio Internacional*. I understand how hard it is for the communications media because of the difficult circumstances. I therefore understand the silence of those who could not say anything, and I admire those who dedicated at least a tiny space to me. May the Lord bless such heroism in an environment so controlled by biased interests.

Right now, sisters and brothers, I want to invite you to a time of prayer on February 22, when I will celebrate one year of service to this archdiocese. I will celebrate Mass here in the cathedral on the twenty-second at noon.

We get a vision of our history, sisters and brothers, as we look at the events of the week. The discourse of our president in the United States cannot escape our notice<sup>2</sup>. I want to highlight some of his words because they reflect precisely the thought of the church. That is why I am often surprised that, when the church expresses herself in these same words, she is called communist and subversive. The president states, for example, «Social peace is possible when a climate of harmony exists between the business and labor sectors. Mutual understanding of the just aspirations of one sector and the real possibilities of the other sector constitutes a point of balance between both forces that is propitious for the productive labor that provides wealth and well-being for all». This is a very wise and true statement. If the possibilities of one sector and the aspirations of the other were balanced with justice, then we would never have to lament terrorism and violence, and there would be no repression or other acts that have so bloodied 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 higher living standards for the great masses of people with meager economic resources».

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<sup>1</sup> On 14 February 1978 in the Cathedral of San Salvador, Father Timothy Healy, president of Georgetown University, conferred on Archbishop Romero, in the name of the university, a Doctorate in Letters *honoris causa* «in recognition of the moral leadership which you have shown in the church of El Salvador. Your courage and eloquence in the defense of human rights has truly won international admiration». See *Orientación* (5 February and 19 February 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Discourse of General Carlos Humberto Romero to the Third Annual Central American Conference of Commerce in New Orleans, Louisiana, 16 February 1978. See *La Prensa Gráfica* (17 February 1978).

Most importantly he said, «We want a new way of life in which the economy responds to principles of social justice which work to 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 ownership». This is what the church has stated.

Another thought expressed by the president was this: «We should satisfy people's aspirations to participate in the government and to express their thoughts freely. We should provide equal opportunity for work and for study, and we should permanently strengthen our people's creative abilities. Besides having the opportunity to enjoy life, human beings also have the right to live with decorum and dignity».

What causes me to be fearful is the following statement in his discourse: «We want to achieve a better distribution of the population and lower the rate of demographic growth». What is involved in this lowering of the growth rate? Does it mean accepting mutilation of the sources of life as a condition for receiving assistance? The Lord does not want us to subordinate the moral laws of nature and creation to economic well-being. Rather, he wants us to create a more just order, a new way of living, new structures that allow all persons to participate without fear of repression in the achievement of their legitimate aspirations and the common good. Blessed be God, for the church has always said the same thing. But I repeat: this is precisely where the church now encounters great conflict.

There is talk about a dialogue between the church and the government, and this is what the church wants, as the pope told our ambassador: «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>.

On the other hand, there is the news published by *La Prensa Gráfica*<sup>4</sup> reporting that the U.S. State Department presented Congress with a document that spoke about respect for human rights in Latin America. When speaking about El Salvador, the document states that there is increasing pressure from the impoverished while the privileged are opposed to change; the result is greater violence. This is precisely what the church has pointed out throughout our continent: terrorism and outbreaks of violence are actions the church does not condone, but neither can she condemn them without a profound analysis of their provenance. As long as there is institutionalized, privileged violence that attempts to repress the just aspirations of the people, there will always be seeds of violence among us. Therefore, as long as we do not create a new way of living, we will not have peace or unity or communion among Salvadorans.

With these words of hope I also want to inform you about a letter from the workers' union at the Central Azucarera of Izalco. In their letter the workers state that they have been on strike for seventeen days, demanding a collective agreement and cessation of abuses against the workers and the labor code. They accuse the Ministry of Labor of complicity and collusion in refusing to bring management to the table to discuss these problems. They also accuse the ministry of favoritism in not obliging management to comply with the agreements that they already signed with the union. The letter concludes by asking for the mediation of the archdiocese to help the workers to achieve their objectives and to obtain the freedom of

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<sup>3</sup> PAUL VI, «Address before the El Salvador Ambassador» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 December 1977).

<sup>4</sup> «Situation of Human Rights in Latin America According to the United States» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 February 1978).

several companions who they say have been imprisoned. As always, our response is to provide any service that is requested of us and accepted by all parties.

A delegation from the Federation of University Students of Honduras visited us and asked us to support their petition for the freedom of their Honduran companion, Luis Alberto Bonilla Contreras, 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 share the fears expressed in a letter sent to me by the people of Chilicuyo. They denounce the sending of a military contingent to inspect the lands of the Formosa estate. They fear unpleasant consequences, but may God desire it to be otherwise.

### **Life of the church**

Finally, 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 congratulate the Franciscan Fathers and the doctors and nurses who are collaborating with them in this work in the parish of Concepción. I also rejoice to tell you about the pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Don Juan Francisco Rivas Canjura. I ask him to remember us there in that land that was the scene of the redemption of humankind. I also ask you to pray for the eternal rest of Hipólito Morales and Daysi Guadalupe Aguilares de Marroquín.

As I previously told you, sisters and brothers, on the third Sunday of each month I will ask for your economic support for the seminary. Supporting this great work of ours is the task of everyone. Remember also that this Sunday we conclude the week of voluntary sacrifice that we began last Sunday. Today's collection, therefore, will have these two objectives: to help our seminary and to support the campaign against 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 bread, hunger for culture, and hunger for God.

This is the historical framework within which we find ourselves, sisters and brothers, as we celebrate today's Liturgy of the Word. We might call this homily, «The Church, a Spiritual Israel». I propose these three thoughts: first, God saves human beings by making them a people of God; second, the transfigured Christ is heir of all the saving promises of God, and apart from him there is no salvation; and third, 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 human beings by making them a people of God**

God saves by constituting a people. How magnificent today's first reading is! We discover the origins of Israel in the Bible. Few peoples, perhaps none, can trace their origins as can the Israelites. Last Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, I told you that the first chapter of salvation history was creation: Adam. All human life down through history is related with this first chapter because we are all descendants of Adam. The breath of life that God imparted to our first father is the spark of intelligence, love, and human abilities that every person possesses. But our first parents fell from their dignity as children of God because they wanted to achieve divine fullness without obeying their Lord. They were deceived by the devil and began to live the chapter of human history known as fallen nature. If we view the Bible from Adam until Abraham, we find that sin is truly defined as *aversio a Deo*, turning away from God.

One day recently a young man from Santa Tecla made an interesting comment. He told me, «How could Adam have been so perfect since after him humankind has begun to arise from 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, was foreshadowed in this marvelous figure of the first man. But that marvelous human being lost his supernatural greatness and his friendship with God. When people lose their relationship with God, they keep deteriorating even though they preserve their human qualities». History proves this to us: no matter how intelligent or capable people are, if they do not seek friendship with God and do not pray, they are not worthy of trust.

Someone once asked a young man, «If you had a hundred *colones* and had to entrust them to someone, whom would you trust? Would you give them to a professional who has no faith and is not an honest person, or would you give them to a poor, illiterate *campesino* who is honest and who prays?» 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 to have great human talents. People deteriorate when they separate themselves from God. The first chapters of human history are about *aversio a Deo*, when people distance themselves more and more from God. Recall those chapters about the universal flood; recall the firestorm on Sodom and Gomorrah; recall Cain's crime against his brother Abel. That is what human beings are like without God.

Beginning with chapter twelve of Genesis, however, there is a change in perspective. Read this chapter carefully. Today's first reading is taken from there. God takes the initiative in forming a people and extends to them his hopes and promises. This is the great mission of Abraham and Israel: «I will make of you a great nation» (Gen 12:2), a people from whom the Redeemer will be born.

Abraham was seventy-five years old—we would say he was worn out. Nevertheless, God is going to use him to make a new creation. A new people is to be born, and so Abraham must renounce his homeland: «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 families of the earth shall find blessing in you» (Gen 12:1-3). What a formidable old man! He was, we might say, someone anonymous, a man from those semi-nomadic tribes of Ur of Chaldea. God chose this person unknown to history; he had spent his whole life as someone unknown. How curious!

«So Abram went, as the Lord had told him» (Gen 12:4). Where is he going? He does not know. «To a land that I will show you» (Gen 12:1). He spent his whole life wandering in Canaan, where the Promised Land would be, but only after many generations. Abraham was a pilgrim in his own promised land, and we might say he didn't even know it. God was testing his faith. He was sterile, married to a sterile woman, and now he is told that a great people will come forth from his loins (Gen 12:2). Even Sarah laughs (Gen 18:12). Yet the miracle is accomplished when the womb of Sarah is made fertile and she gives birth to Isaac. But now God gives Abraham another test: «Sacrifice him to me. Kill him for me» (Gen 22:2). Isaac is his only hope for offspring, and yet Abraham obediently takes his son, who is an image of Jesus carrying the cross. That is why the most beautiful image there on Calvary in Jerusalem is that of Isaac laden with wood and walking toward the mountain where he will be sacrificed. Except that the angel stops Abraham: «Do not kill him; you have your faith» (Gen 22:12).

What God asks of us, sisters and brothers, is this detachment of Abraham, this commitment to what seems impossible, this madness of faith. Faith means throwing ourselves into God's arms. Faith means believing what God says even though it seems impossible. Faith is Mary when an angel tells her that she will be a mother without losing her virginity. «I don't understand, but may it be done to me as you have said» (Luke 1:30-38). Faith demands this commitment, and that is why Abraham is not only called the father of Israel, but also the father of faith—he is the model of faith.

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

Let us see now how this history of Israel culminates with the fullness of time. Today's gospel provides me with my second point. There on the mountain of the transfiguration appear the Old Testament figures Moses and Elijah, descendants of Abraham; they embody all of Israel's beliefs and hopes. Moses represents the Law, and Elijah represents the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets were like Israel's constitution, defining God's covenant with the people and showing how God's will remains always active through the prophets. So says the Lord: «Keep my hopes alive, keep my promises alive», and by those hopes and promises the people lived during all the centuries before Christ.

The day comes when Christ is present. He sets about establishing a new testament, a new and everlasting covenant. Christ chooses some men from the Israel of Abraham to enter into the Israel of Christianity. Peter, James, and John are sons of Abraham, but now they are no longer part of the Old Testament. Together with Jesus and the Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, these three disciples are present 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 God made man, as the Father testifies, «This is my beloved Son. This is the promised One who I said would be the source of blessing. This is the descendant of Abraham in whom all nations will be blessed» (Matt 17:5; Acts 4:12). No other name has been given to humans by which they can be saved except the name of Jesus. And Jesus appears there as if anticipating Easter; he appears as the risen One who no longer has anything to do with death and the miseries of earth.

Peter becomes animated and says, «Lord, it is good that we are here. Let us stay here, for this is paradise. This is the destiny and the aspiration of humankind» (Matt 17:4). Jesus responds, «No, not yet. Don't speak about this to anyone because the bitter days of the passion are yet to come. Say nothing until I rise from the dead. Then, by all means, proclaim that Christ is alive, that Christ died to save all people and that without his death there is no redemption» (Matt 17:9). But this death is not failure; it is a condition for the resurrection. It is a death in which all human disobedience is paid for by the pain of the cross. It is a necessary death, bitter and painful, so that all the sins of humankind can be forgiven. What is glorious is that from that death and from that tomb Jesus rises to new life. This is called the paschal mystery, the Passover that is death and resurrection.

Lent moves toward that Passover. All the life and all the history of Christianity are moving toward the cross and toward the resurrection. That is why we should not be surprised, sisters and brothers, that the church must bear many crosses, for otherwise she would not have much of a resurrection. A church that seeks accommodation and prestige without the pain of the cross is not the authentic church of Jesus Christ.

On Tabor Christ reveals the fullness of his glory. Saint Paul tells us that the Christ, the Divine Savior who is the patron of our country, is the «Yes» of God's promises (2 Cor 1:20). What a beautiful expression: Christ is the «Yes», the one who says yes to the Father, the one in whom the promises of forgiveness and salvation are fulfilled. Christ is the road by which fallen humankind is converted to God. The chapter of conversion began with Abraham: *conversio ad Deum*, turning toward God. Through his cross and resurrection Christ is summoning human beings to their true greatness as individuals and as society. There cannot be a new society or a new way of living without Christ. There cannot be well-being for all people without the justice of Christ the Redeemer. He alone can inspire selfish people to repent. He alone can inspire resentful people to work honestly and honorably. He alone can give a true meaning to Christian liberation and redeem us from sin and death so that we can participate in his glory.

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

And so we come, dear sisters and brothers, to Saint Paul's letter to his disciple Timothy. It seems that Timothy was sickly and timid but had great faith. Paul had asked Timothy to care for the community of Ephesus, and then he wrote him this beautiful letter: «Bear your share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God» (2 Tim 1:8b). Being in good health is not as important as trusting in God. This message is for all you who preach, all you who proclaim God's word, all you who bring the community together as church, all you who teach the true meaning of the Gospel in Christian schools, and all you who want to live in family as true Christians—do not trust in yourselves, but trust in God!

«Rely on the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy life» (2 Tim 2:8-9). See how beautifully Paul echoes God's call to Abraham, expressing it to Timothy as a Christian vocation: «Leave your kinfolk and go the land that I will show you». God calls everyone in this way. Blessed are those who hear this call of God: «Come, leave behind your life of sin! Leave behind the comfortable situation you created with your money, your properties, and the things that give you security! Leave behind the things that give only earthly happiness, and follow the path that I will show you! Commit yourself to faith and love. Live with love for without love nothing else matters». Love is what leads to true human development whereas avarice, as Paul VI has said, «is the most obvious sign of moral underdevelopment» (PP 19). Selfishness is underdevelopment. That is why the call that goes out 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» (Gen 12:1).

I am happy, sisters and brothers, that the Israel created by Abraham through his act of faith is prolonged in the people of God, reaching as far as yourselves, authentic Christians living in 1978 and reflecting on this word of God. This is the same saving will of God who wants to save all, as Paul tells Timothy. He wants to sanctify us, and the initiative is his (2 Tim 1:9).

Dear sisters and brothers, religion is not a human invention. People cannot shape Christianity to their tastes. People cannot set guidelines for the preacher of the Gospel according to their whims. It is God who commands us to preach. It is the word of the Gospel that we must proclaim. It is God who takes the initiative in saving humankind. Herein lies the great difference between false religions and the true religion. False religions arise from the will

of people who decide for themselves how they will adore God, how they will believe, how they will organize their religious life—but this is a religion of human origin.

True religion is the faith of Abraham who listens with attentive ears and eyes: what is the Lord saying? The initiative comes from God, and we must profess a faith that is not according to our tastes but according to the Lord's will. We have to live a morality not invented by ourselves but as shown to us by God in his commandments. That is why God points to Christ, his messenger, his word, the fullness of his revelation, and says, «This is my beloved Son. I have instructed him to tell you all. Listen to him. Those who follow him will be saved. Do not invent a Christianity to your liking, a Christianity that is conformist, selfish, lazy, without conflicts or difficulties—such a Christianity is not mine and is not the word of the beloved Son in whom I am pleased» (Matt 17:5).

Therefore, dear sisters and brothers, Lent is a time for sincere renewal as the Liturgy of the Word makes clear. By the way, this very week the pope and his collaborators in Rome made a spiritual retreat. We all need to renew ourselves, beginning with the pope, the bishops, the priests, the religious, and all Catholic institutions and communities. Lent is a time to renew ourselves because the temptations that Christ experienced in the desert are also the church's temptations. We too can sometimes seek the kingdom of God proposed by Satan rather than the kingdom of God announced by the transfigured Son of God. Let us be very careful during this Lent and take time to examine our Christian life, our family relationships, our respect for God's law, and our obedience to the Gospel.

Dear sisters and brothers, this is the Liturgy of the Word over which the transfigured Christ has presided today here in our cathedral. Christ is now not only word but becomes host and chalice; he becomes communion and life. As we take Communion, let us identify ourselves with his thoughts. Let us live our Eucharist. Today the call to voluntary sacrifice and the request to assist our seminary set before us a concrete objective for our faith. Let us celebrate this offering of gifts. Let us be generous. Let us share our poverty with the poor. Let us share our bread with the hungry. Let us share our love. If we have nothing more to give than our good will, then let us love. Let us not close ourselves up in selfishness and hatred. Lent transfigures and renews the human person.

Let us hope that all God's holy people, as they celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ at the end of Lent, will become aware of the love that led Jesus to Calvary. Let us be aware of that life that he exhaled through all his pores, not as one transfigured 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 Christ our Lord sustain our life and our love, for this is the meaning of baptism and being Christian. Lent is nothing more than renewing our baptismal commitment, which identifies us with Christ who died and rose for us. Let us proclaim our faith.