

129

LENT, RENEWAL OF OUR COVENANT WITH GOD

First Sunday of Lent

4 March 1979

Genesis 9:8-15

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:12-15

Dear sisters and brothers, the season that just began with Ash Wednesday is the most important one of the liturgical year. I want to ask you to experience this season with a sincere desire to follow Christ in the spirit of an authentically evangelical church. The essence of Lent is preparing ourselves to celebrate Easter and the paschal mystery that is the death and resurrection of Christ. By his death the Redeemer paid for all the sins of humankind, and by his resurrection Christ offers new life to all men and women. To share in the merits of the cross and in the new life of resurrection, we must dispose ourselves humanly. As Christ said in today's gospel, we must be converted: «Be converted, and believe the Gospel» (Mark 1:15).

Lent therefore is a time for conversion and for believing in the Gospel. The feast of Easter is not a feast of Christ alone but of Christ as the head of all of us who make up humanity. For this coming Easter of 1979 we ourselves must be the Body of Christ: our flesh, our lives, our concrete situations. We, the baptized people of El Salvador, must be the incarnation of that Christ who appears gloriously alive. Let us pay honor to our Redeemer, the one in whom we hope and believe. Let us prepare ourselves so that we are not dead cells in the living organism of Christ. Let us honor all the cells revived with this new spring that brings great hope and divine life. That is why the season of Lent down through history has provided a wealth of ways to help us prepare ourselves.

In olden times there were three groups of Christians who prepared for Easter. The *catechumens* were those who had been through a long course of studying Christianity; they felt that they were ready to receive baptism at the Easter celebration on Holy Saturday night. During Lent they received special preparation for that great sacrament that would incorporate them into the death and the resurrection of Christ.

Another group was called the *penitents*. These people had all committed sins out of weakness, fragility, or malice, and so they were separated from the body of the church. During Lent they got themselves ready to receive absolution, and this was given on Holy Thursday during the Mass of reconciliation. In this way they were made ready for Easter night, like dead persons who had come back to life or like prodigal sons and daughters who had returned from a far country. These two groups, the catechumens and the penitents, were the objects of special affection on the part of the merciful church, who like a loving mother gives eternal life to her children with each baptism and raises those who are dead with sin to eternal life with each sacramental absolution.

The third group was the *faithful*, the beautiful name given to us Christians. They recognized their tepidity, their weaknesses, and their temptations, but thanks be to God, they had not betrayed the Lord and been unfaithful. Nevertheless, these faithful souls also prepared themselves so that their faith would be reinvigorated for the new Easter.

So with all of these—catechumens who were preparing to become newly baptized, penitents who were turning from sin to reconciliation, and Christians who walked faithfully with the Lord—there was a revived church, an Easter parade that stretched from Christ the head to the very last person to be baptized.

Sisters and brothers, I'm telling you about this whole liturgical panorama of Lent and Easter as a way of announcing to you right now that Holy Saturday night must be the culminating point of this whole season. Our young people, when they were confirmed at Pentecost last year, announced a «Youth Easter» for this year, and they're getting ready for it. Other young people, along with catechists and communities, are also preparing for a holy Easter night.

We must resist a perennial temptation that wrecks Holy Week: the flight to the beaches and the resort areas. This is a time of rest, it is true, and I understand that many people don't do this out of maliciousness. Still, if we have followed Christ with his cross during Lent, it is a good thing, at least on Holy Saturday night, for us to accompany him as members of his church in celebrating the glory of the resurrection in our own lives. Let us organize our Holy Week vacation so that Holy Saturday night is also the culminating point of our vacation and a true participation in the grace of Easter. Let us therefore prepare, dear sisters and brothers in all the communities and all the parishes, for a holy night that will truly be the finishing touch of this season of Lent that we are just now beginning. (Applause).

In the center of all this preparation, naturally, is the risen Christ, but in today's gospel we meet the Christ who Saint Mark says was «driven by the Spirit into the desert» (Mark 1:12). Let us also enter into the desert with him, impelled by the same renewing Spirit. The desert is a figurative way of describing this season of prayer and austerity and renewal. If there is any country that is a desert in need of prayer and renewal, it is ours! How wonderful it would be if all Salvadorans were to use this season of Lent for introspection! We are all responsible for the evil that our country is suffering, but we want to put the blame on others without examining ourselves. Lent is an invitation to enter the desert with Christ and reflect on ourselves.

That is why the pope will be entering on his spiritual exercises starting this afternoon; he will spend a week of reflection with his closest collaborators. In an attempt to imitate him in our diocese, a group of priests and I will begin our spiritual exercises this week. All of us are called to evaluate our fidelity to the Lord, and if we have the misfortune of being among the sinners, then let us do penance. We are already baptized, but Lent has some valuable elements that should make us think about the great dignity of baptism so that we can re-experience at Easter that magnificent dignity of being baptized in the Lord. And that's the direction in which my homily is going this morning. As is our custom, we will give it a title: «Lent, Renewal of Our Covenant with God». Lent is a renewal of our covenant with God, and I want to give special attention to that word «covenant». As the first point of my reflection I want to present the covenant as a sign of salvation. For the second point I will present Christ as the key of the

covenant, and the third reflection will be on baptism as the insertion of each person into this covenant with God.

The covenant, a sign of our salvation

Our first idea is the covenant as a sign of our salvation. Today's first reading tells us about the first covenant that appears in the Bible. One of the great things about Lent is that we review the history of salvation, that is, God's project for saving humankind. It is a project of love and benevolence. In the Bible the word «covenant» means the same as «pact», and it is also the same as «testament». These biblical words signify that God is establishing a relation with human beings, a relation that can be summed up in the words God addressed to the people under Moses' leadership: «I will be your God, and you will be my people» (Lev 26:12).

Today's first reading tells us what preceded the great flood. Human beings had wandered from the right path, says the Bible, and God almost repented of having created them (Gen 6:5-6). This is a biblical expression indicating that God was grieving over the people's infidelity. He decided then to punish the earth and all of humankind by opening the floodgates (Gen 7:11), which is biblical language for catastrophic flooding. In the flood «only eight persons were saved», Saint Peter tells us today (1 Pet 3:20). The survivors were Noah and his sons and his sons' wives, and along with them in the ark were one pair of each type of animal.

When this punishment had passed, God, who always loves us despite his punishments, pronounced the word «covenant», which provides the theme for this homily. Pointing to the rainbow, God said, «This is the sign of the covenant that I am making with you and with every living creature: I will place my bow in the heavens as a sign of my covenant with the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, the bow will appear in the clouds, and I will recall my covenant with you and with all the animals. Never again will a flood destroy all living beings» (Gen 9:12-15).

What is the significance of this covenant or pact? This was a very frequent and well-respected practice among peoples of the East. Making a covenant meant establishing reciprocal relations between two parties, with all the rights and duties that flow from such an agreement. For example, marriage was a covenant, with the two parties agreeing to live together perpetually and to observe the corresponding rights and duties as equals. A covenant also involved certain conditions. According to ancient traditions, especially in the East, covenants or pacts were made between equals, so that there was a balanced reciprocity. Sometimes, though, a conquering people made a covenant with a conquered people and imposed conditions on them. In the Bible we find a completely new form of covenant that did not appear in other religions: it is God who takes the initiative of making a covenant with a people. Among other peoples a covenant was considered something sacred, so that in a sense a god was always involved, but the gods did not make covenants with humans; rather, they were supposed to protect those who were making the covenant. Consequently, every violation of a covenant was considered sinful; it was an offense against the god who had witness the covenant.

The Bible reveals to us the one true God, and it also tells us how that God created human beings and how he chose one people with which to make a covenant. This covenant was not exactly an agreement based on reciprocal rights and duties. In the language of the prophets, the covenant God made with human beings appears as a grace, a gift, a promise of salvation. This

was the original form of the covenant, which was foreshadowing the coming of Christ. It was the covenant of a loving God who marked the stages of history with successive covenants of blessings and promises. That's why it was easy to change from the concept of covenant to that of testament, which represents the parents' gift to their children. The covenants of the Old Testament were contrasted—or better, were completed—by the new covenant in the New Testament.

The sacred covenant of ancient times was established by an impressive ritual, and it was called the «covenant of blood» because blood from both parties was mingled. For the ancients blood was the symbol of life, and a covenant was ratified with the lives of both parties. Do you remember when Moses sprinkled blood on the people to signify that God had made with them an alliance that was ratified by the blood of the victims (Exod 24:8)? This was simply a foreshadowing of the blood that would be shed one day on Calvary. This was the blood of God, but in the Old Testament it was the blood of lambs, the blood of pigeons, the blood of animals. It was the expression of life by which human beings pledged to God their commitment of adoration and duty.

Another ritual that appears in the Bible involved killing the animals, cutting them in half, and then placing them on either side so that those making the covenant could walk between them. This was a sign that the pact that they were making was so sacred that if one party did not fulfill its obligations, it would end up like those victims: split in two. This was how seriously the covenant or the pact was taken. That is why this word, originally derived from the customs of other nations, was used in God's revelation, the Bible, to express God's benevolence toward human beings and his commitment to saving humankind. So when I speak today of Lent as the renewal of our covenant with God, I want to issue a call to everyone to remember that, as a people of God and as a people of the baptized, we have a commitment.

What theological explanation can be given for the idea of covenant, especially the covenant that appears in the Bible, the one we are now renewing during Lent? The explanation is very simple. According to God's revelation, every sin is a breaking of the covenant. Sinners are disobeying a law, which means breaking with the supreme Legislator, our God. Disobeying his Ten Commandments causes ruptures with God and brings on tragic consequences.

Theology states that those who commit sin break away from the principle of their existence and their life; as a result, they experience an inner rupture of their being so that they carry disorder within themselves. We learn sadly from experience how bitter sin can be; we feel disordered and troubled and are disgusted with ourselves. And those who don't feel that way are worse off still—they're hopeless cases. During this Lent let us all be aware that something is broken within ourselves because we have broken away from God.

From that interior rupture and lack of peace in the sinner's heart arises another rupture: the rupture with other people. The Bible tells us about Cain killing Abel, and after that divisions multiplied (Gen 4:8). In our own time as well, when there are divisions among us and things that separate us and sow hatred and violence, it is because there is sin. Such ruptures are the consequence of our rupture with God. When we love God and are at peace with God, then we will also love our neighbors, even if they are our enemies.

And there is still another fateful rupture: the rupture with nature. When human beings disobey their Creator, they experience an immediate reaction. Remember what the Bible says: before Adam sinned, he was master of all creation (Gen 1:26), but when he committed a sin, the disorder within himself made him fearful (Gen 3:9), and he was afraid also of the wild animals since they no longer obeyed him. This tragic relation to the whole cosmos is a consequence of sin.

The covenant, then, is meant to draw together all these broken relationships. When we renew our covenant with God, we also renew our covenant with nature, with other people, and even with ourselves. So in these first three Sundays of Lent we are going to reflect on the three covenants of which the Bible speaks. Today's reading tells how God, after the flood, reveals that he is going to preserve nature: «This is the sign of the covenant that I am making with you and every living creature» (Gen 9:9). It is a cosmic covenant. The rainbow is a cosmic phenomenon. It doesn't mean that the rainbow was invented at that time; rainbows can be explained scientifically. God did not invent them, but he gave them a religious meaning. It's as though one of us were to say, «Let that rainbow bear witness to what I'm going to promise you, and whenever you see a rainbow, remember my promise». The covenant is made, and the rainbow is the sign of the covenant. It is a sign of what God has said: «There will be no more floods on earth (Gen 9:15). I will preserve nature, but people must work so that there is greater justice and so that the goods I have created are distributed according to my desires». This is what Paul means when he talks about the fullness of time and about how the nature created by God is groaning under sin (Rom 8:22). Rainbows remind us of the covenant, and the covenant demands that nature not be monopolized by just a few people since God preserves it for the happiness of all of us. Neither should nature be the object of jealousies and conflicts; rather, just as God preserves it with love, so let us lovingly use it for the happiness of all

This Sunday, then, the rainbow should remind us how God's cosmic covenant with humanity leads us to examine our use of the goods of the earth: whether we treat them as idols to be worshiped or rather place them at the service of this covenant which should undo the ruptures we ourselves cause. There would be no class struggles if there were true respect for the cosmic covenant. There would be no violence or hatred if we truly felt that God, the Creator of all, wants to form an alliance with his children and therefore wants us all to be sisters and brothers to one another. This is the kind of fraternity that God's revelation leads us to preach, and that's why I can never preach violence or hatred or guerrilla warfare. Those who say the contrary are speaking slander because what I'm saying now about the cosmic covenant is what I must say in the name of God.

Next Sunday we will hear about the covenant that God made with Abraham, which was oriented toward another kind of rupture that God wanted to mend. It concerned the descendants of Abraham who were the people chosen by God, and in their case the sign would not be the rainbow but circumcision. The sign of belonging to the Jewish people was circumcision, and it meant that all the descendants of Abraham, all the people chosen by God, were to be sisters and brothers and to form a unity around the promises that God was giving them as a people.

The Sunday after next we will hear about Moses. The covenant that God made with Moses was to help people feel united in their understanding of God and in their respect for him. That's why the sign of that covenant was respect for the Sabbath, the day that we Catholics now

call Sunday, the Lord's Day. Attending Mass on Sunday means participating in our covenant with God. In every Sunday Mass we experience the covenant that makes us respect God and recognize him as the only true God, before whom we must dethrone all the idols that take God's place in our hearts and among our people. These are the idol of power, the idol of money, the idol of lust, the idol of all the things that alienate human beings from God. Sunday should be for us the renewal of our covenant with God.

This long season of Lent is like one long Sunday, a time for us to reflect about how God made this covenant so that we human beings would be more united as sisters and brothers and would use the natural world as God wants it to be used. That is the meaning of the covenant, sisters and brothers. Lent is the season when we recall those old covenants of God so that we can live our present problems in the light of the new covenant, accompanied by the Spirit of God who watches over us and hopes that we will be faithful to our commitments.

Christ as the key to the covenant

My second thought, therefore, is this: what is Christ's role in this desire of God to establish a covenant with humankind? Today the Sacred Scriptures tell us, «The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert for forty days and allowed him to be tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him» (Mark 1:12-13). What a sublime image of Christ—«driven by the Spirit»!

The second reading develops a little further this concept of Jesus being driven by the Spirit. Saint Peter tells us, «Christ died for sins once and for all, the innocent for the sake of the guilty, that he might lead us to God. Since he was human, they killed him, but since he possessed the Spirit, he was brought back to life. With this Spirit he went to proclaim his message to the spirits in prison who in former times had rebelled, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark in which a few were saved by crossing over the water» (1 Pet 3:18-20).

In today's two readings from the New Testament, Christ appears as the culminating point. All those covenants that God made with the ancient people of Israel were simply symbols and promises of what would reach complete fulfillment in the redemption that Christ would bring about. The true rainbow can be seen in the open arms of Christ on the cross. The true circumcision, says Paul, is the faith Christians place in Christ (Gal 5:6). The true Lord's Day is the worship that we render to our God. The old signs of the covenant—rainbow, circumcision, Sabbath—have no meaning except in Christ who brings them to fulfillment. Christ is the culmination of all God's promises to save the world.

Therefore, as Christ enters the desert of Lent to dwell among jackals and wild desert beasts—even though he's served by angels—he is the image of cosmic redemption. Controlling wild beasts and being served by angels, Christ is master of all things and will return them to the legitimate dominion of God.

Entering into Lent with Christ means claiming for ourselves all the richness that Christ's covenant has for saving the world; it means collaborating with Christ in the salvation of history. On that last night of his life, when Christ took the bread and the chalice to leave us a

remembrance of his life and his passion, he told us, «This is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the covenant» (Mark 14:24). Gathered together in that chalice were all God's love and all his reconciliation with humankind. His blood was shed for the forgiveness of all sinners who seek repentance. Lent is a summons to reconciliation. Lent is the time when the eternal covenants of God become reality in Jesus Christ.

It makes no sense to enter into Lent simply to fast and observe the church's legal requirements for the season. The church herself can be a problem if all we do is comply on the surface like the Pharisees. Do you remember last Sunday when John's disciples and the Pharisees, who fell into such legalisms, were criticizing Christ's disciples? «We are fasting, so why don't you fast?» Christ told them that what was life-giving was the spirit of the law, not the letter: «While the bridegroom is still with the bride, the friends of the groom do not fast» (Mark 2:18-19). This is a time for happiness and joy in the presence of salvation! No matter how austere and disciplined people may be, no matter how much they may fast and punish themselves and walk on their knees to the sanctuaries, if they carry hatred and resentment in their hearts, all that devotion is of no use to them, not at all. Christ's renewal comes out of love and fidelity to the Lord. This is true religion! This is the Christ of the covenant, the Christ of love, the Christ of reconciliation, the Christ of goodness!

Baptism, the insertion of each and every person into the covenant with God

And so finally, sisters and brothers, my third thought is this: how do we enter into this covenant which God makes with us in Christ? If Christ died and rose again twenty centuries ago, how do I, a poor citizen of the twentieth century, participate in that redemption that took place so long ago? Saint Peter gives us the answer this morning in the second reading, when he evokes the rainbow and the flood. The rainbow was only a sign, says Saint Peter; the reality is something else. «That was a symbol of the baptism which saves you now. Baptism does not consist in cleaning dirt from the body but in appealing to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ who is at the right hand of God» (1 Pet 3:21-22).

Baptism is an essential element of Lent. How does Christ's Lent become our Lent? It becomes ours through our baptism, by which we have been incorporated into Christ so that everything that Christ did is credited to us and passed on to us through baptism. Why can we hope that our sins, as great as they may be, will be forgiven us? Because Christ died on a cross in payment for these sins, and the merit of the cross becomes yours and mine through baptism, which incorporates us into the death of Christ. Why do I, a mortal person, feel my life is growing old and my strength is declining, as if I'm on the way to the grave? Why do I feel the weight of mortality and limitation and illness and sin? How can any of us hope for eternal life as risen persons who will not die? We can do so because baptism has made ours the eternal rejuvenation of the risen Christ; we can do so because the glorious life of Christ is ours through baptism. Everything that belongs to Christ becomes ours because we are baptized.

Our glory is great, sisters and brothers, and that's why Lent seeks to awaken in the heart of every Christian a keen awareness of being baptized. On Holy Saturday night we should all feel that the bountiful merit of the cross and the sublime joy of the resurrection have also become the merit and the joy of the poor persons who live on the margins, of the laborers without work, and of the workers who are deceived and defrauded. Let it also be the merit and the joy of the employers who are just and who try to live as truly baptized Christians, the ones

who respect the workers on their estates, ever mindful that they and the workers are all members of the church and so share a common life because Christ is the head of us all. There is no room for social categories: «There are no longer Greeks nor Jews; there are no longer slaves nor free persons; there is no longer anything but sisters and brothers in Christ» (Gal 3:28). The equality implanted by baptism is beautiful. Through baptism we are all of equal category; we are all members of Christ, living by his merits. If we have any worth, it is not because we have more money or more talent or more human qualities. If we are worth anything, it is only to the extent we are inserted into the life of Christ, placed on his cross, and enlivened by his resurrection. This is the measure of humanity! Paul VI expressed it well when he spoke of human development: «People are more precious for what they are than for what they possess» (GS 35). And people *are* to the extent that they live by the divine life that Christ brought into the world. Even natural values are of little importance in themselves because Christ's redemption reveals that our human qualities have divine value only when baptized by Christ and incorporated into his divine merits.

This is the kind of Lent we must celebrate, dear sisters and brothers, and that's why it is worth our while to see how Christ experienced his Lent in the desert, for he is not some character isolated from our reality. This Christ of Lent of 1979 is everything for us, the people of God here in El Salvador; he is our church, he is our country, he is the situation of our people. This is the reality of Lent in 1979.

Life of the church

Now, in an effort to make this message more concrete, I want to remind you that the pope has given us a magnificent description of what should be the Lenten spirit of 1979. He said that Lent must have a special meaning: «It should make manifest to the eyes of the world that all God's people, because of their sinfulness, are doing penance to prepare for the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ»¹. What do the renunciations of Lent signify? Let us pay close attention to what the pope says: «Going without things does not consist only of giving away what we do not need; sometimes it also consists of giving away what we truly need, like the widow in the gospel who knew that her small alms were a gift received from God (Mark 12:41-44). Renouncing something means freeing ourselves from the slaveries of a civilization that incites to ever-greater convenience and consumption without any concern for preserving the environment which is the common heritage of humanity»². Take note of these words which are seeking what is good in the material realm. We are victims of a society of luxurious consumption. We purchase things because the advertising is relentless; we frequently buy things that are beyond our earning capacity. We want to live lavishly, we want to consume like everybody else, and so we become victims and slaves of consumption. Do you see how the austerity of Lent can help us break those chains?

The pope went on to say, «By suffering privations during Lent, our hunger helps us to participate in the hunger of those who have no food. Let us not wait until it is too late to help that Christ who is in prison or without clothing, that Christ who is persecuted or a refugee, that Christ who is hungry or homeless. Let us help our sisters and brothers who lack the bare necessities ... to find a way to reach true human advancement»³. Do you see, then? Lent means

¹ JOHN PAUL II, «Message for Lent 1979» in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4 March 1979.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

opening our eyes to the misery of others. When we speak of the church of the poor, we are also addressing the rich and telling them, «Turn your eyes to this church, and show concern for the poor as you would for yourselves». What is more, as we bishops said at Puebla,⁴ the problem is one that Christ spoke of at the end of his life: «Whatever you did for one of these poor little ones, you did it for me» (Matt 25:40). The pope, therefore, illustrates this Lent of 1979 by holding up the faces of the imprisoned, the homeless, the ill-clad, the persecuted, the tortured. All of these make up our Lent of 1979.

The pope also spoke with a group of young people and told them, «At your age the great question you ask is, what is the meaning of life? As we know, sadly, a great deal of modern thought is atheistic, agnostic, and secularized. It persistently teaches people that asking about the meaning of life is a human sickness that needs to be cured. They question whether life can have any value in the face of the absurdity of death and nothingness. As a result», the pope said, «we have so many young people seeking the meaning of life in the distractions of vice or in senseless violence, but they will never find it there»⁵. Lent, therefore, is a time when young people especially can reflect and find meaning for their lives.

As I already told you, our archdiocesan community will begin Lent by entering into spiritual exercises this week. I want to ask the prayers of all of you so that those of us who are going on retreat, simultaneously with the pope and his staff, will become holier and better able to serve our people. On Tuesday of this week we'll have a meeting of the clergy to study the Puebla document and explore ways to give it life in our diocese.

Next Saturday, March 10, at ten o'clock in the morning we will be in the Basilica of San Miguel, together with all the bishops and priests and all the people of God who want to take part. You are all invited. We want to entrust the Puebla document to the Virgin of Peace so that it becomes embodied in the ministry of evangelization in our country. I certainly hope that our archdiocese will have a very lively presence there.⁶

I will now give the blessing and then continue the part of the homily I couldn't finish earlier. If some people are in a hurry to leave, then they can leave after the blessing.

May the blessing of almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, descend upon you. Go in peace.

There are some announcements that I think would be good for you to keep in mind. The pilgrimage of the archdiocese to the Queen of Peace will be next Saturday, the tenth, at ten in the morning. At the next clergy meeting the priests will plan their own participation, and we hope that the sisters and the rest of the faithful will also join us in this spiritual visit to the Virgin to present to her the document of the Puebla meeting.

⁴ *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, 3.

⁵ The source of this quotation is uncertain. It is probably not a precise citation but a commentary on the address John Paul II gave to young people on 28 February 1979. See *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 March 1979).

⁶ At this moment the homily was interrupted because of a blackout. Archbishop Romero proceeded to the celebration of the Mass and continued his homily after the final blessing.

Also, during this Lent, in keeping with the spirit the pope spoke about, we will hold the annual day of voluntary sacrifice for the world campaign against hunger. It will be organized by Ana Guerra de Jesús Center, which will announce it in due course.

Next Sunday, March 11, in the parish of Aguilares and El Paisnal there will be a celebration of the second anniversary of the tragic deaths of Father Rutilio Grande and the two *campesinos* who were killed with him. To prepare for this celebration a novena began this past Friday. In all the parishes there will be Masses and celebrations of the word that will allow us to reflect on the Gospel message that Father Grande left to his parish. On Sunday the eleventh, a week from today, the faithful will begin to gather in the parish of Aguilares at eight o'clock in the morning. From there they will go in pilgrimage to the chapel of El Paisnal, where this priest and his two fellow Christians are buried. Let me tell you how the spirit of this pilgrimage is described by the pastor and the community of that parish: «It is a pilgrimage with a penitential and reparative character. This time we will make it in silence, a silence that does not mean passivity but rather indicates the people's respectful hearing of the word of God. Our people will not shout words of hatred or vengeance, but they are resolved to walk through this world with and alongside Jesus, building up the kingdom of God». This pilgrimage is a celebration of the church, and therefore no groups should try to dominate it, even if they claim to be Christian. From the church we will go forth as church. All Christians are invited to be there next Sunday at eight o'clock in Aguilares.

On Friday this week the community of San Pedro Perupalán will celebrate the feast of their patron, Saint Frances. I've been invited to attend by our esteemed pastor, Father Solórzano, but due to my spiritual exercises and my pilgrimage to San Miguel, I won't be able to go there until Sunday. Therefore, next Sunday at ten-thirty we will travel to San Pedro Perupalán to greet that parish and to celebrate there a confirmation liturgy for the young people who have been prepared by Father Solórzano and his catechists.

The gathering of the ecclesial base communities that was organized by the parish of Zacamil and held in the Externado San José was truly a great celebration. That event inspires me to issue a call to all the parishes to make an effort to create these small communities in all the neighborhoods and villages. Such communities were praised and highly recommended at Puebla.

The vicariate of Asunción inaugurated Lent for the archdiocese on Ash Wednesday at Corazón de María parish. I had the good fortune to preside, and I want to thank the many communities that were present and took part. I also want to congratulate the team of pastors for carrying out a very useful collaborative work. On this coming Tuesday, for example, a new course will begin at the Center for the Promotion of the Faith. I commend them also because they have taken sacramental preparation very seriously. Nevertheless, I regret that in the sector of San Benito, in the Colonia Escalón, and elsewhere, there are some pastoral agents—often not from our diocese—who do not respect the pastoral norms of the archdiocese. I would ask them to help us carry out the true sacramental ministry that the church of our time is requesting.

This past Friday in the Centro El Despertar of San Antonio Abad, we commemorated forty days since the death of Father Octavio Ortiz and the four youths who were killed with him. In a very moving gesture the community presented five bouquets of red flowers to the

mothers of the five who were killed. At that moment there were many tears and a great sense of solidarity.

I want to take issue with certain groups of ORDEN who, against the will of the pastors, are organizing processions, holding stations of the cross, and even taking up collections. They should know that the pastor is the authority in each parish and its corresponding districts and that no one should usurp his authority. I especially want to denounce what is happening in the parish of San Martín in the district of San José Primero, where some people want to take control of the chapel and organize the patronal feast of San José. Such a celebration would not be truly Catholic since it's against the pastor's wishes. If they bring in a priest, they should know that he is thereby excommunicated and has no authorization to celebrate Mass or the sacraments. Be very much on guard, then, against these celebrations that are seeking to create a true schism in our church.

Events of the week

I also want to use this opportunity to say that the church community I've just described is involved in civic events and commentary. I think that one of the most important events of the week was the repeal of the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order⁷. We want to state that the government's action was appropriate, and it will be seen as a gesture of good will if it is followed up by other gestures and actions that restore people's confidence, as we have been demanding. We are not going to be naïve enough just to wait for things to move smoothly ahead. It will be hard for us to believe that there is a sincere desire for peace and justice if, despite the repeal of the law, we have to keep deploring the deeds of the previous week, as we have to do now. Still, we must say that what is most positive about this measure is the government's ability to recognize its error to begin to correct it. The church feels satisfied that she was able to point out this error immediately by contrasting this pseudo-law with the definition of law given by Saint Thomas Aquinas: «Law is an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by those who have responsibility for the community»⁸. Only a law of this kind can be said to have the support of God. Otherwise, legislators forfeit their authority and become despots, and their principle is the anti-law which says: «*Sic volo, sic iubeo, sit pro ratione voluntas*», which means, «That's what I want, that's what I command, and the reason is because I will it». May God grant, then, that this glimmering of rationality keep growing and shedding light on the irrationality of our situation. Let us educate ourselves in the steps and the gestures of peace!

On February 28 there was a commemoration of the second anniversary of the Plaza Libertad events, in which many citizens who were protesting the fraudulent election results lost their lives⁹. On this occasion there was a deplorable military occupation of the whole city, the streets, the plazas, the terminals, everything. If there were sincere respect for the people and their political rights, such an ugly spectacle of repression in our own city would be avoided.

⁷ On 27 February 1979 the legislative assembly repealed the Law for the Defense and Guarantee of Public Order, which had been passed on 24 November 1977. *Diario Oficial* (1 March 1979).

⁸ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2, q. 90, a. 4.

⁹ On 28 February 1977 the army and the security units repressed a popular demonstration in the Plaza Libertad which was denouncing fraud in the presidential elections of 20 February 1977, which had given the victory to General Carlos Humberto Romero, candidate of the National Conciliation Party.

We lament the national tragedy of the fire at the warehouses of the Rosales Hospital. We want to make a call for fraternal assistance, in keeping with the pope's remarks that we read this morning. We also regret the fire on March 2 at the Cooperativa Algodonera in Usulután. We grieve also for the death on February 28 of Nicolás Alas, former member of the municipal council of Aguilares.

El Diario de Hoy reports that still another body has appeared, that of a young man, in Lake Güija. Please take note that I'm just reporting what I read in the paper; I'm not insinuating anything. «The young man», reads the report, «was blindfolded with a piece of white cloth, his hands were tied by the thumbs behind his back, and on his wrists were handcuffs with the key in the lock»¹⁰.

We also deplore the recent arrest of two *campesinos*, Eleuterio Hernández on February 23 and Marciano Meléndez Dueñas on February 24. Neither one has been formally charged or released; practically speaking, they have been kidnapped. We also grieve over the abduction of four poor children in Apopa. While their parents were working, they were alone in their houses; several men arrived in a car and kidnapped them. Let us hope that they act humanely and return them. We also deplore the murder of Carlos Borrromeo Mata, the head of personnel at ADOC, on Saturday the third; he was gunned down when he was leaving his house and saying good-bye to his son.

For many weeks now we have had no news about the situation of those who have been kidnapped¹¹. As a member of the mediation commission—named at the request of the kidnappers themselves—I want to express my grave concern and my desire that a humanitarian solution be found for this problem, which has already gone on too long. Also still detained are the *campesino* and the two workers who were arrested several weeks ago: Macario Miranda Mejía, Oscar Armando Interiano, and Santos Martínez González.

We also want efforts to be made to settle the labor conflicts at PRONAC, La Constancia, and the Sindicato de Pesca¹². We want to make it clear, contrary to some false rumors, that the church's Legal Aid Office has not taken part in these cases.

Finally, I want to denounce the case of Jaime Baires¹³. I visited him on his sickbed in the Rosales Hospital. He is in the burns unit with wounds and serious burns all over his body. He received his degree in social and economic sciences in France. He was not involved in any activity and was receiving medical treatment. On February 23 he left his house and was arrested when he was walking by the San Carlos army post. He was possibly confused with his brother Federico, who years ago was president of AGEUS and now lives in Costa Rica. We saw Jaime in the hospital, and his prognosis is uncertain because of the torture to which he was subjected. In view of all these cases, I want to ask that human dignity be respected. Without such respect, the enactment or the repeal of laws is useless. (Applause) For the words of Jesus Christ are still in force: «Human beings are not made for laws; rather, laws are made for human beings» (Mark 2:27) (Applause). Many thanks.

¹⁰ *El Diario de Hoy* (1 March 1979).

¹¹ The FARN claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of the following persons: Ian Cameron Massie and Michael Chatterton on 30 November 1978; Takakazu Suzuki on 7 December 1978; and Ernesto Liebes on 17 January 1979.

¹² *Orientación* (4 March 1979).

¹³ *Orientación* (11 March 1979).