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LENT, THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Second Sunday of Lent

11 March 1979

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a,15-18

Romans 8:31b-34

Mark 9:1-9

We hope that this morning the electric company will allow our message to be broadcast without interruption. I want to tell everyone that I don't think there's any reason to suspect that the power failure last Sunday was deliberate. I don't want to entertain such thoughts. And I hope that my confidence is reciprocated by a sincere effort to provide us better service than we had last Sunday. I say this because this morning's message about the transfigured Christ is extremely important. We could say that for the Archdiocese of San Salvador this Sunday of Lent is an echo of August 6, the day when we have the honor of celebrating the transfigured Savior as the patron of our republic. In today's gospel we have a repetition—within the context of Lent and in preparation for Holy Week—of the great mystery of the transfiguration.

This figure of Christ becomes even more necessary given our present circumstances. A young man, killed yesterday in the labor conflicts at La Constancia and Tropica, was just carried out of the cathedral—a poor man carried by his poor family to Cojutepeque to be buried¹. The cathedral has had the privilege once again of feeling the sorrow of a mother who hands over to the arms of another mother a poor, slain youth. We are witnesses, then, of a new victim of our present situation.

Another precious detail this morning is the pilgrimage that is setting out at this moment, just as we are beginning our Mass here in the cathedral. This pilgrimage of silence, prayer, and reparation is now leaving Aguilares for El Paisnal, and it should be clear that it is a prayerful march whose object is to honor the memory of Father Rutilio Grande on the second anniversary of his murder. Those of us here unite with you, dear Catholic pilgrims on your way from Aguilares to El Paisnal, and we accompany you during these moments of prayer. We want to thank Father Grande and all the priests, sisters, and catechists who, unafraid of death, are proclaiming a Gospel which will inevitably stir up conflicts because its aim is to awaken consciousness.

Thanks to the Gospel message that Father Grande left in Aguilares, the church there is marked with the seal of authenticity. «If they persecuted me», Jesus said, «they will also persecute you» (John 15:20). I want to tell the communities of Aguilares and all the other communities that are now taking part in this pilgrimage of faith, hope, and love that they should have no fear because persecution is a sign of the church's authenticity. The church that should be afraid is the one that is not suffering persecution but is instead enjoying privileges

¹ The young man was Rafael Larín. *La Prensa Gráfica* (12 March 1979).

and being supported by earthly powers, for that is not the true church of Jesus Christ. We don't mean to say that this life of martyrdom and suffering, of fear and persecution, is something normal, but it does indicate the Christian spirit. Faith is not a question of being with the church only when everything is going well, but of following Jesus Christ with the enthusiasm of that apostle who exclaimed, «If we need to, let us die with him!» (John 11:16).

I would also propose another circumstance of our times that is a mark of the transfigured Christ: the harsh realities of our archdiocese—and other matters I'll mention later—are crying out for transfiguration, regeneration, and beautification of the church and the homeland. In this regard I have in mind the national pilgrimage we made yesterday to San Miguel to lay at the feet of the Virgin of Peace the document of Puebla. Present there were all the bishops, the Holy Father's representative, and a great many priests, sisters, and faithful. By that simple gesture of putting our pastoral plans for Latin America at the feet of the Star of evangelization, we were saying that we are committed to doing what the church's teaching authority has indicated for our peoples.

I felt very hopeful when I saw all the bishops there without disagreements. We reaffirmed the need to carry through with the document of Puebla, starting at once from the feet of our Patroness. We must begin, then, by studying the document; we shouldn't seek negative things in it or criticize it out of prejudice. If we study it carefully, we will see how much it helps us to promote the liberation, the enrichment, the independence, and the dignity of our Salvadoran people. It would be unfortunate if the Puebla document were to suffer the same fate as Medellín, since many people were carried away by prejudice and ignorance and never put Medellín into practice. Have no doubt, if our archdiocese has given rise to conflicts, it's because of our desire to be faithful to this new evangelization that is demanded by the Second Vatican Council and the meetings of the Latin American bishops. This evangelization must be fearless and unswerving, and that's why we prayed earnestly to the Virgin of Peace. May yesterday's ceremony in San Miguel not be just a superficial, romantic episode but the sign of serious commitment on the part of bishops, priests, religious communities, and parish communities to incarnate this demanding task of evangelization in our pastoral life. It will mean courting danger and losing privilege, but we should have no fear of conflict when it arises simply from our fidelity to the Lord.

Given this context, then, of a country and a church that feel the need for transfiguration in so many things around them and within them, this figure of the transfigured Christ appears truly magnificent! The title, therefore, that I'm going to put on my homily this morning is this: «Lent, the Transfiguration of the People of God». I will develop this reflection in accord with the three readings, which suggest to me these three ideas: first, the covenant with Abraham that gave rise to the people of God; second, the transfigured Christ as the model and the cause of the transfiguration of our people; and third, the need for us, as God's people, to be transfigured here and now so that the Gospel on which we meditate today—and which I've always tried to promote—becomes a living word that speaks to me, to you, to our families, and to our communities. At this moment in 1979 we are feeling the fierce bite of our reality with its poisonous evil, but we keep alive our hope that good will come.

The covenant with Abraham that gave rise to the people of God

I will speak first about the covenant that gave rise to the people of God. The first reading tells us about the tremendous test of faith undergone by Abraham. Since I would like our catechesis during Lent to be a review of the history of salvation, as the Council recommends (SC 109), I ask you not to forget the lesson from last Sunday, which is closely connected to today's.

Last Sunday the lesson was about Noah surviving the flood. In displaying the rainbow as a sign of the covenant with nature itself, God promised that there would not be another flood that would destroy the earth. I really liked the commentary that Father José Luis gave in his homily at one o'clock on Monday afternoon. He drew out a conclusion that I hadn't drawn out myself, namely, that the rainbow, the sign by which God restored to humanity a natural world cleansed from sin by the punishment of the flood, was a covenant that required human beings to respect nature. Father José Luis drew this very important conclusion concerning the great ecological problem we are now facing.

You know yourselves that the air and the water and everything we humans touch are contaminated. Even though we keep polluting nature more and more, we still need it to live. We fail to understand that we have a commitment with God to care for nature. We cut down trees, and we waste water even when there is such a water shortage. We don't care about the foul-smelling fumes from the buses that are poisoning our environment. We don't care about where garbage is being burned. All these matters have to do with our covenant with God, and we must be mindful of the consequences since the population density in El Salvador is very high. Dear fellow Salvadorans, let us care for nature out of a truly religious sense so that it doesn't continue to become impoverished and die. This is our commitment to God, who is asking us for our collaboration. But those covenants are still in the realm of creation: from Adam to Noah and from Noah to Abraham. There are two distinct stages, but both are in the natural world that God has created and entrusted to humankind.

Now begins a third chapter. The covenant with Abraham has a very special character because from it will be born the people of God. That is why we called this section of the homily «The covenant with Abraham that gave rise to the people of God». The testing of Abraham's faith, which is presented to us today in the Bible reading, is the third test, and it will allow us to see the quality of this man whom God is going to make the father of all believers, because his offspring will consist of all those persons who have faith. When Saint Paul speaks of redemption in Christ and compares it with the law of Moses, he says that the faith that God required of Abraham reappears in Christ and that human beings are saved not by the law alone but by faith (Rom 4:13-17). This is important to understand because we often try to base our human relations on legalities, as if the law were everything. We have repeated a thousand times, and we will never tire of repeating, «Human beings are not made for the law; the law is made for human beings» (Mark 2:27). Saint Paul states that the law does no more than point out our sinfulness. In contrast, faith and redemption are the great work of Christ. What Christ asks of us is that we believe in him, for faith is what saves us.

God then gave strength to this man who was going to be the model of faith for all humankind for he was almost a hundred years old. In graphic language the Bible states that his generative energies were fading and his wife was sterile (Gen 17:17). They were already quite elderly and had had no children. God had earlier called Abraham in that setting of desert and

death and withered branches, and he had told him, «Go forth from your kinsfolk, and go to the land that I will show you. That land will be peopled by your descendants» (Gen 12:1-2). It seemed ridiculous, but Abraham had faith and said, «For God nothing is impossible». Without knowing where he was going, he set out with his sterile wife and with the hope of fathering a people (Gen 12:4-5).

When his faith was being tested on another occasion, Abraham lifted up his prayers to the Lord and asked for a sign that would confirm this promise that seemed so impossible and ridiculous. God told him to look at the stars and said, «As numerous as those stars will be your descendants, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in the people that will be born of your loins» (Gen 15:5-6). The covenant was made in the same way we explained last Sunday: the animals were split into halves, Abraham walked between them, and then the Spirit of God passed over them also. In this way the covenant was sealed. The animal slain and carved in two was a sign to those making the covenant that they had to fulfill it; otherwise, they would be cursed and end up like those animals.

In this way God drew close to humanity and made the covenant of blood with Abraham. When what seemed impossible finally came true and the sterile Sarah had a son, Abraham was overjoyed because he would not die without descendants. Isaac was a reality! But then God told Abraham, «Take your son, go to Mount Moriah, and sacrifice him to me» (Gen 22:2). Think about it, dear parents. How would you feel if God asked the same of you: «Sacrifice your child to me in a holocaust»? That was the ultimate expression of sacrifice: burning the victim until there was no trace of it left. As today's reading tells us, Abraham was a man of proven faith and so submitted to this tremendous test. That boy Isaac, carrying the wood up Mount Moriah, was a figure of Christ carrying his cross. I had the good fortune to visit Calvary, the place where our Lord died. One of the paintings there pictures Isaac walking with his bundle of wood for the sacrifice, and alongside him is Christ walking with his cross. Christ's case was different because God did not spare his life, as Saint Paul tells us today (Rom 8:32). In contrast, Isaac was spared when the voice of God declared, «I have proved your faith. There is no need for you to kill your son» (Gen 22:12). Instead a lamb was offered in his name as a holocaust. Isaac was a patriarch who would later be mentioned whenever God was invoked: «The God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob» (Exod 3:15). This was the experience the patriarchs had of God.

A people has been born, as God had promised. Isaac, that only child who was tested to the point of holocaust, would prove to be the tiny stream from which would flow the abundant race to whom God made another tremendous promise: «They will emigrate to a foreign land, and they will spend four hundred years under the yoke of the Egyptians» (Gen 15:13). After that long period would come the covenant with Moses, but we leave that for next Sunday. Four centuries after they had gone to Egypt in search of food, the Israelites were made slaves, and that's where the book of Exodus begins, telling the story of the extraordinary migration to the Promised Land. It was not until then—imagine, more than four hundred years later—that God fulfilled the promise he had made to Abraham: «I will give you a land, and that land will be yours» (Gen 12:1). Abraham believed even though he died without seeing many of the things that God had promised. That's why, when Christ was arguing with his enemies, he said to them, «Abraham desired to see this day, and he did not see it» (John 8:56). Abraham believed in Christ without knowing him. Abraham believed that from his people would be born the Redeemer of humankind, and that's what makes that people so marvelous. When the Council speaks to us about the people of God, it goes back to the source on which we are now

meditating, and it says in chapter two: «God does not make human beings holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased God to establish them as one people, a people which acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness» (LG 9). God made a people for that reason: to acknowledge him and to serve him. «He therefore chose the race of Israel»—which began to be born of Abraham—«as a people unto himself. With them he set up a covenant. Step by step he taught and prepared this people, making known in their history both himself and the decree of his will and making them holy unto himself» (LG 9).

I want to make sure that we make a clear distinction, dear sisters and brothers, between the general notion of people and the people of God. Such a distinction is today very necessary. Not every people is a people of God. The Council also distinguishes between the kingdom of God and human progress because if we confuse those two concepts, we can fall into the danger that Pope John Paul II indicated to the bishops in Mexico. He said we should not confuse the idea of democracy with the special meaning of a people born of God's desire and choice. The pope also said that «the church is born from people's faith response to God»². Not everyone responds with faith, however, and that's why there are so many people in El Salvador who are not part of the people of God even though they are part of the Salvadoran people. As the Council just told us, the people of God is a prized possession of God that is especially ordained to adore him, acknowledge him, pray to him, and give thanks to him. The people of God has a long history, told in the many books of the Old Testament. The Bible makes it very clear how the people of Israel received special care from the patriarchs, the prophets, and God's own marvelous works so that it would be a chosen people in the midst of all the other nations. God himself told Abraham, «All the nations will be blessed in this people of yours» (Gen 15:18). Indeed, Christ would be born of that people. The other nations apart from Israel would later also be molded by faith—which is the principal thing—into the people that God was forming from the beginning, when he made the covenant with Abraham.

Let us now consider today's gospel about Mount Tabor, which is the mountain where tradition believes these events occurred. There Moses and Elijah appeared as the two great exemplars of the people of God (Mark 9:4). Moses was the leader of that people's liberation, and he wrote their laws for them. He was the prophet that God had announced. Speaking of Moses in the Old Testament, God told the people that they should listen to him (Exod 19:9). What a beautiful echo we hear today as well, when the Father says of the transfigured Christ, «Listen to him!» (Mark 9:7). It's the same thing he said when speaking of Moses in the Old Testament. «The new transfigured Moses is the Son in whom I take delight—listen to him!» Moses, then, is a high point of the Old Testament, and that's why he had to be present there on Tabor, when the whole river of promises that God had made to Abraham was rushing forth. It had been announced by prophets and kings for centuries and centuries: «The Savior of the nations shall come—the God of our fathers has promised it». The whole of the Old Testament had lived with that hope.

Elijah, the high point of prophecy, also appears. The situation for Elijah was perhaps similar to what we have now in our Salvadoran homeland; it was a time of crimes, distortions of the truth, political machinations, bribes that undermined justice, abuse of wealth and money. Elijah had to flee to the desert pleading, «Enough, Lord!»—it was like the slogan of the priests

² JOHANN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 29 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

in the procession the other day: «Enough already!». Feeling almost hopeless, Elijah lay down to die under a little tree that hardly shaded him from the desert sun. He wanted to die, but God roused him with the words: «Get up! You still have a long road to travel!» (1 Kgs 19:5-8). Elijah was nourished by a mysterious bread and walked forty days and forty nights until he reached where he wanted to go, Mount Horeb. There he experienced a new revelation. God revealed himself to Elijah and filled him with strength and consolation, just as he had consoled Moses after traveling forty years through the desert. Moses and Elijah, the classic Lenten figures, now join with the great protagonist of our Christian Lent, Christ our Lord. There is something magnificent about Lent, and that's why I say that Lent is the renewal of our people. Elijah was depressed at what was happening in his land, and he traveled to the mountain to consider the many ways in which his people were betraying the law that God had given them on Sinai. But there God encouraged him and told him, «You must not die. You have to keep on working» (1 Kgs 19:9ff.).

Dear sisters and brothers, this is the people of God, a people of faith. The Bible says when speaking of Abraham, «He believed against all hope» (Rom 4:18). How necessary it is for us now, here in El Salvador, to believe against all hope, to believe even though all the lights seem to be dimmed and all the roads blocked off. That strong faith of Abraham was infused into his people to make them a believing people until our own time—let us imitate him! Even when Moses was being persecuted by his own people, he remained faithful to the design that God had for his life, and his courage carried him through to death. Likewise with Elijah—even when he was depressed and thinking of suicide, his fidelity led him to rise up again and continue his work. If this is how it was with them, what is stopping us, fellow Salvadorans and people of God of 1979? Our desert, our Lent, our blood, everything that happens can be turned into liberation and light, into consolation and hope. (We have asked you often not to sell things during Mass)³.

The transfigured Christ, model and cause of the transfiguration of our people

This Jewish people produced Christ. With Christ a new phase begins, and so my second thought is this: the transfigured Christ of this Sunday is the origin, the model, the cause, and the hope of all of us who have put our faith in him. Alongside the Old Testament figures like Moses and Elijah we find three men who are part of our Christian tradition: Peter, James, and John—the first pope, the first bishops, the first Christians (Mark 9:2). They also enjoyed that epiphany on Tabor, and Peter was so delighted that he exclaimed, «Lord, how good it is for us to be here! Let us stay here! We can make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah» (Mark 9:5). But Christ, understanding that such enthusiasm was inappropriate because much work remained to be done, ordered them to keep silence: «Say nothing until the Son of Man has risen» (Mark 9:9).

Today's second reading gives us a very good description of that Christ whom the Father called the «Son in whom I take delight»—even though Christ preferred to call himself the «Son of Man». Saint Paul refers to him with the term we use today, «paschal mystery», which means the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 8:34). I want to put great emphasis on this term because the season of Lent renews our people precisely by preparing them for the celebration of the paschal mystery.

³ Archbishop Romero interrupted his homily to make this observation.

Dear sisters and brothers, it is time for us to begin to celebrate Holy Week in a mature way. Our Holy Weeks should no longer consist only of processions that leave our hearts afterward as unbelieving, materialist, and selfish as before. It is time for us to think of Holy Week as the turning of our people toward the Passover event, toward the death of the Lord, so that we can rise up again with fresh maturity and new energy. Like Elijah after his forty days of fasting or like Moses after his long journey across the desert, we should be able to feel that God is walking with his people. Instead of trying to solve problems through hatred and violence and other ways that only impede the progress of our people, we should seek God here among us, as Puebla tells us in the words of John Paul, «Open the doors to Christ!»⁴. We must open the doors of politics, the doors of business, the doors of sociology, all the doors that people open and close, all the fields that human beings cultivate. Christ has the right to enter in because he is the Son of Man. Remember what the fathers of the Vatican Council told the world's rulers, «Do not crucify him anew, for that would be decide: he is the Son of God. Do not kill him again, for that would be homicide: he is the Son of Man»⁵.

Let us open the doors to our Lord Jesus Christ. Today's second reading tells us that «the Father did not spare his own Son but handed him over to death for us» (Rom 8:32a). This gives rise to a huge question: if that Father, like Abraham with Isaac, walked alongside his Son carrying his cross to Calvary and did not rescue him but handed him over to a painful death, «how could he not give us everything else along with him?» (Rom 8:32b). Ask yourselves, sisters and brothers, what might you desire that is so great that it cannot be given to you by God, who has given you the greatest thing in the world: Christ his Son? «This is my beloved Son» (Mark 9:7). And if he has given him over to die on a cross, «how could he not give us everything else along with him?» How can God refuse to give us a solution for our Salvadoran problem? How can there not be ways out of this situation if all the happiness of us Salvadorans is worth less, infinitely less, than Jesus Christ? God is certainly not lacking power, and he has given us proofs of his love. Paul asks today, «Who will accuse the chosen ones of God?» and then asserts, «It is God who justifies» (Rom 8:33). That's what I was telling you before: these laws made by human beings are viewed by Saint Paul with tremendous derision. He states, «Who will accuse God's chosen ones, and who will lay down laws for them? If God is the one who justifies, then even if they condemn you to life in prison, you are still free. Who will condemn? Will it be Christ who died for us and then was raised and is now at the right hand of God interceding for us?» (Rom 8:33-34). Please take note of these last words; it is as if Christ is always praying for us.

How beautiful our heartfelt faith would be if it were like that of Abraham and if we sincerely asked ourselves these questions posed by Saint Paul. We would react with optimism and not believe that everything is doomed. But we have hardly begun. If God is eternal, if my Father can do everything, if he surrendered for me my older Brother whom he loved so much, if he has justified me, if he has not condemned me, then why should anybody else condemn me? That's why God tells us so much about love and forgiveness: it's because that's the way he treats people, even the most wicked.

As the Council continues its reflection on the people of God, it helps us to see how the new covenant came to be; it was no longer just the old covenant with Abraham. After telling us

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily on the Inauguration of his Pontificate», 22 October 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 October 1978).

⁵ VATICAN COUNCIL II, «Messages of the Council to Humanity», 8 December 1965, *To Rulers*, 5.

that the Jewish people were descended from Abraham, the Council states, «All these things were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ, and of that fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God Himself made flesh. ... This new covenant was established by Christ who called together Jews and Gentiles». The new people of God would no longer be a nation that was geographically distinct like Israel. It would be a people with spiritual characteristics because its members would come from among the Jews and the Gentiles—even though many of the Jews never became Christian and many of the Gentiles remained pagan. The Council states that Jews and Gentiles «were made one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new people of God» (LG 9). And what are the characteristics of this new people, dear sisters and brothers? It is a church. Just as the Old Testament called Israel the church of God as they wandered in the desert, so also «the New Israel that journeys through the world at the present time, searching for the future and everlasting city, is designated as the church of Christ» (LG 9).

The people of God needs to be transfigured here and now

Now I would like us all to focus on the renewal of our church as a key aim of Lent so that we will have a Holy Week that truly renews us. Lent should make us happy that we have buried our old selves in order to rise with Christ to new life. May the husband who has been a torment for his family be from now on a new man who brings joy to his home. May the woman who failed to show the warmth of love to her husband and her children begin to feel that her kingdom is the home in which love reigns supreme. May the young men and women who take great joy in worldly banalities realize that their true joy is in Christ and in being renewed in Christ. May the whole of humanity be reconstituted in love: families, nations, politicians, rulers, those who have money, those who have none, bishops, priests, sisters—everybody in the church and in the world.

I've already told you that this world is not the people of God. Rather, those who are the people of God must venture forth into that world where there are many who walk along sinful paths. The Council sets out a clear goal and framework for our renewal: «That messianic people has Christ for its head, ... and now, having won a name which is above all names, reigns in glory in heaven» (LG 9). Do you see? He is our head. We must try to realize that this pilgrim church on earth has her head already in heaven and is rising up to be with that head; the whole body of the church is rising, member by member, to become constituted as the definitive church in glory! That young fellow who was laid out here dead—if he died faithful to this covenant of the people of God, then he is already a living member of the church triumphant.

Therefore, dear sisters and brothers, there are many of you fighting for your rights in our land. You are our beloved workers and *campesinos* and members of the people's political organizations. The church cannot identify directly with you, but she understands you well; she also demands the same justice and fairness that you demand because these are a reflection of the kingdom of God, which will gather together for eternity all that is good in the world. As the Council says, «Whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men and women, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God» (LG 17). The church must preach this transcendence because her head is Christ, who has already penetrated into the heavens and wants to animate his whole body to pursue the same heavenly goal. We must do this not by sitting back and doing nothing—that would be a false spiritualism—but by working and

achieving merit on earth with the hope of possessing those merits for all eternity. So we should not work only to improve things here on earth, for we are the people of God inspired by the hope of Abraham, and Christ is our head.

What else does the Council say? «The state of the people of God is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple» (LG 9). That is why the church cannot be conformist. The church must awaken people's consciousness of their dignity, but this is called subversion. This is not subversion. By the light of the Gospel our communities are coming to a Christian consciousness that being human, even just a poor worker, is being made in the image of God. That is not communism or subversion. It is the word of God that enlightens everyone and moves everyone to seek advancement. We don't want people just to be an inert «mass». That's why I told you that we need to distinguish between those who are a people and those who are not. There are some very advanced peoples who are not yet part of the people of God, but on the margins of society there is an immense population that cannot even be called a people; they are simply called «the masses».

We don't want «masses». We want education that helps people develop; we want the Gospel message that makes people experience what John Paul said: «Each human being is an unrepeatable prodigy of God»⁶. No two people are alike. That's why we shouldn't try to copy other people but simply be what God wants us to be. I am who I am, nothing more. You are who you are. Making people into masses is awful, but it's what happens when people are manipulated, when their votes are tampered with, when their dignity is disrespected. The problem is that people haven't learned how to claim their rightful place. To claim one's place is not to provoke subversion. I am simply telling everyone who is listening to me: recognize your dignity for «the true state of the people of God is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in his temple» (LG 9).

What is the law of the people of God? The Council tells us that «it is the new commandment, to love as Christ loved us» (LG 9). There are many people who have already discarded this law of Christ, but Christianity cannot exchange the force it possesses for other ambiguous forces which show great weakness, because hatred and violence are ultimately weaknesses. The true force is love, and that's why love is what distinguishes God's people.

«The messianic people», the Council tells us, «has as its end the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him at the end of time» (LG 9). So that is what Lenten renewal must be about. Our church in El Salvador is made up of all of us who are baptized. Unfortunately, we receive baptism when we are not conscious of it, and the sacrament has become just a social custom, something folkloric and maybe even commercial—we want godparents who will give our child a gift or be of assistance to us. In reality, baptism is about entering into the kingdom of God and being fully incorporated into it. That's why we are now requiring pre-baptismal talks in all the parishes, and if any parish is not doing that, then it's disobeying the norm. The talks are given so that the parents will know what the commitment of baptism means for that child. If the child is not going to become a committed Christian and a member of God's people, as we have explained today, then it would be better that the child not be baptized. Perhaps the child would be better off without baptism. But if any of us wants truly to belong to God's people, then Lent

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse on the Inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

gives us magnificent opportunities so that those of us who are already baptized can reaffirm our baptism and our membership in God's people. The Council tells us that the people of God consists of baptized persons who have been incorporated into the Christ who has died and risen for us (LG 9). The same Christ established this people in order to unify and save all humankind. All that Christ came to accomplish he is now doing through his people. Therefore, when I tell you this morning, dear sisters and brothers, that Lent means the renewal of God's people, I am calling each one of you—and myself as well—to be faithful members of the people of God. We should not only live our Christian faith personally but let it shine forth; we should try to save others and unify those who are now scattered; we should repent for those who walk in the paths of sin and reach out to those who have gone astray. There is so much to be done in our country, and that's why we get discouraged. When we talk about renewing our country here and now, as we are accustomed to doing here in concrete ways each week, we are not going beyond our preaching role. We are bringing all the responsibility of God's people to bear on our archdiocese. What have we done this week to build up the people of God?

Life of the church

Here I want to recall the recent words of the pope, who praised humility as the ideal virtue for Lent; he said that humility provides a method for freeing our humanity and expressing our spirituality⁷. A typical case is that of a person who has a problem with alcohol. Such a person has valuable lifesavers, such as the groups of Alcoholic Anonymous. There would be no drunks if everyone were humble. Who are the people who join groups of Alcoholics Anonymous? They are the ones who recognize that they cannot be cured by themselves; they know they need a group for therapy, support, and friendship. I congratulate all those who have made this humble gesture and attend the meetings because they humbly recognize that they need the help of others. We hear them declaring with joy, «It's been so many years since I took a drink. One day at a time, and the years go by». We can go so far when we have humility! Is your home life coming undone? You may be lacking humility: you blame the other party and avoid blaming yourself. It's humility you lack. Why are there divisions in the church? I am ashamed to say it, sisters and brothers, but we are lacking humility. Humility is truly the virtue that frees us, says the pope.

During these days we are saddened by the death of Cardinal Villot, who died at the age of seventy-three. He held the important position of the pope's secretary of state and was also the cardinal *camerlengo*, both very honorific titles. The secretary of state is second-in-charge after the pope; he is like the first secretary; in our system we'd call him the minister of the presidency. He's the pope's other «self». Paul VI gave this confidential position to Cardinal Villot, and so did the two following popes. That indicates that he was a man of great responsibility and considerable intelligence. The *camerlengo* is the cardinal who is in charge of organizing everything that needs to be done for the election of a new pope after a pope dies. Cardinal Villot had to perform this delicate task twice. We could say that he was governing the church at that time since he was the one who convoked the cardinals and did everything else that was necessary. I ask your prayers, then, for his eternal rest, and let us be thankful for the service he gave with so much honor.

As I already told you, the people are right now making a pilgrimage to the tomb of Father Grande in the community of Aguilares, and we are accompanying them spiritually.

⁷ JOHN PAUL II «Sunday Allocution», 4 March 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (11 March 1979).

During our Mass we will also remember, among our faithful departed, the dear young man who was lying here a while ago; they have already taken him to Cojutepeque, where he will be buried. Let us commend his soul to the Lord.

I am very grateful personally for the warm welcome they gave me in San Miguel yesterday. We went there with some other bishops to pay homage to Our Lady of Peace. May the Virgin continue to bless these people who are so hospitable and are certainly deserving of a better lot. The Puebla documents were discussed at the clergy meeting held this past week, and they played a part in the spiritual exercises that we made with other priests under the direction of Redemptorist Father Fermín Aranguren and Father Fabián Amaya. I am grateful for the enlightenment and guidance we received during those days in Planes de Renderos.

Let us take a look now at the communities of our archdiocese, where God's people keeps growing. I visited the parish of San Antonio Abad in order to reaffirm the guidelines in my pastoral letter⁸, especially after what happened in El Despertar. I helped them to understand—and now I take the opportunity to do the same for all the communities—that I was happy to have the opportunity to give them guidance regarding the relationship between faith and politics and between the Christian community and other political organizations because these realities should never be confused. When there are doubts, they should seek advice, but we should never act so imprudently that it would result in harmful consequences. I feel satisfied that the people in San Antonio Abad understand this clearly and are trying to make it part of their pastoral practice.

Corazón de María parish in the vicariate of Asunción inaugurated a center for formation in the faith. While I was there to dedicate the center, I made use of the Puebla document to present to them, as a synthesis of their own studies, the three truths that the pope commended to us at Puebla: the truth about Christ, the truth about the church, and the truth about humanity⁹.

At 10:30 this morning we will have a confirmation ceremony in San Pedro Perupalán.

At the minor seminary in Chalatenango I will have the pleasure of getting to know and spending some time with the minor seminarians who are being formed there. In this regard, I am very happy that the vocational ministry has been taken very seriously by our beloved priests. They will soon be making known a program that will involve all our dear people.

From San José de las Flores, Chalatenango, Father Eduardo Alex Poprawa sent me a telegram saying that he has now served sixteen years in that parish. I take the opportunity to congratulate him and to ask the faithful to commend him to the Lord.

There are many other things being done in our communities that are building up the church. I want to make it very clear, sisters and brothers, that what I am trying to build up is the church, if the Lord grants me that wish. That is what I ask of our dear priests and communities: to build up the church, the people of God, with those qualities that we have already described. If we are treated badly for fulfilling this command of the Lord to build up the

⁸ *The Church and the People's Political Organizations* (6 August 1978).

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse on the Inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 February 1979).

church in the world and for inviting people to form part of this church that we have talked about, then we have no fear. If they misinterpret us and slander us and make us something else, let us be fearless. All our intention and desire, the major aim of our work should be to create communities of faith, hope, and love and make them grow so that they become the beautiful bride of Christ, the church community.

From the perspective of this clearly defined, evangelical church we look out on the world because the church is not meant to be preserved and kept in some closet. The church is meant to be a steady light that shines forth to serve and illuminate the world. Accordingly, we must shed light on the realities around us. Don't take it amiss, therefore, if after describing the shapes and forms of the church and meditating on the Gospel that helps us build up the church, we direct our sight toward what is around us in order to affirm what is good and to denounce and reject the bad and sinful things that are taking place.

Events of the week

This week there are some events in which we can rejoice. For example, we rejoice with the *campesino* families in San Antonio Silva who received portions of land. This has made us reflect a lot. Today 356 *campesino* families have been allotted those 37,000 *manzanas* of land that were previously owned by seven persons¹⁰. What is this telling us? A simple glance at the agrarian reform reveals the enormous injustice in the way land is distributed among us. This incredible social contrast is what predominates in our country, and that is why the church calls it institutionalized injustice. The pope has stated that every day the number of those who have little increases, while the wealth of the few who possess much also increases¹¹.

We also want to celebrate with the workers of the San Sebastián mines. You may remember that for a long time we have been pleading for those families who have no work. Since the company did not fulfill its legal obligations, a judicial proceeding has made the workers the collective owners of the mine. Now they only have to wait for the Ministry of the Economy to authorize that decree so that they can go back to work there. When justice is done, then it is only right to praise it.

We're also happy because the workers of the glove factory have now resolved their labor problem according to newspaper accounts¹². At the same time we are disturbed by certain statements or reflections that have been published as paid ads¹³. We were hoping that people would be intelligent enough to be more understanding of the church's work and not misrepresent it when they talk about the «activity of certain prelates of the church». Naturally,

¹⁰ *La Prensa Gráfica* (5 March 1979).

¹¹ In his «Discourse at the Inauguration of the Third General Assembly of Latin American Bishops in Puebla», 28 January 1979, John Paul II stated, «The growing wealth of a few runs parallel to the growing misery of the masses». Also, in their *Message to the People of Latin America, 2*, the bishops in Puebla wrote, «The truth is that the distance between the many who have little and the few who have much keeps growing greater».

¹² *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 March 1979).

¹³ The National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP) published in *La Prensa Gráfica* on 6 March 1979 a statement titled «A Call to Reflection», which declared among other things, «The church hierarchy should be very careful about the public interventions of some of its prelates who, abandoning their spiritual mission and contravening the constitutional and papal prohibition regarding involvement in politics, have contributed through their preaching to the idea that class struggle is the only solution to our social and economic problems, without considering that such preaching will lead us into fratricidal war and anarchy».

they are referring to the present speaker and numbering me among those who provoke class struggle.

We sadly lament the death of Jaime Baires, the man I told you about last Sunday. His parents have stated that before dying Jaime told them that he had been tortured by the National Guard. The Guard has issued statements declaring their innocence¹⁴, but I don't think declarations are sufficient. If a judgment is called for, then the case should be taken to the tribunals. The parents claim an offense was committed, and they have the right to have their petition for a trial heard. And they aren't the only ones. I think all of us also have a right to know what those in uniform are doing.

We are very saddened by the kidnapping of a boy named Carlos Villatoro Fuentes in San Miguel. We declare that this is an inhuman act, and we join in solidarity with the National Association for the Protection of Children and with that beautiful parade of children who have called for their friend Carlos to be released.

We regret the fire in the El Fuerte stocking factory, and we are saddened by the death of four *campesinos* and the wounding of three soldiers who were involved in a confrontation in San Vicente, according to official sources¹⁵. We also share in the insecurity felt by the families of the *campesinos* Marciano Meléndez Dueñas and Óscar Jiménez; these men were arrested in February and their whereabouts is still unknown. We also grieve with the family of Óscar Armando Interiano, the trade union leader whose body was found handcuffed and blindfolded in the lake of Güija.

How impressed I was with two letters I received from mothers! One states that her son has been in prison in Gotera since August and she has no hope for his release; they cannot visit him because they are very poor and live far from the prison. The other letter is from the mother of the teacher Hipólito Rolando Martínez, whose family is asking for mercy given their situation.

Labor conflicts have still not been resolved. I must refer especially to the one that is causing us all the most concern right now¹⁶. Last night when I returned from San Miguel, I learned that during the day they had called me several times to mediate in the labor conflict so as to avoid more bloodshed. For reasons of faith and humanity I accepted the petition, and last night I invited both sides to dialogue in my presence. Later in the night we met with a management representative and a union committee representing the negotiation commission for the different workplaces, which commission is the only body authorized to make decisions. The workers asked for the negotiations to be restarted before the workers left the premises. For their part, the management wanted the workers to be removed before the negotiations began again; they guaranteed the safety of the workers who are presently occupying the premises of La Tropical and Constancia. Despite the strong pressure put on them by the military cordon, the workers did not want to abandon the premises before reinitiating direct

¹⁴ *La Prensa Gráfica* (10 March 1979).

¹⁵ *La Prensa Gráfica* (6 March 1979).

¹⁶ On 23 February 1979 the workers of the beverage industry union went on strike to require compliance with their labor demands. The workers occupied the installations of La Constancia S.A. and Embotelladora Tropical, where they held several managers of the firm captive. The Ministry of Labor declared the strike illegal, and the security forces cordoned off the premises of both factories.

conversations with the management. They say they refuse to leave because they have no confidence that there will be further negotiations or any reasonable solution.

Since they could not reach an agreement and since the union committee was not legally authorized to make decisions, I proposed that as soon as possible this morning they discuss the conditions for initiating negotiations directly with the negotiating commission. To that end I have asked the management to guarantee the safety of this commission. Today, with the aim of making a new effort to save the lives of the workers and the management employees who are in the workplaces, I invite the different parties of the conflict to meet together, mainly for the purpose of discussing the conditions of the negotiation. I hope that they will make the arrangements necessary for the negotiating commission to leave safely and to reach a positive agreement that will allow negotiations to restart. If no agreement is reached, I fear that there will be more casualties.

Just now I received news that the security forces want to seize the premises of La Constanca and the workers have threatened to set fire to the flammable substances inside. I want to issue a call to them. Yesterday I told them, «It seems to me that there are three interests at stake here: the interest of the owners, the interest of you workers, and the interest of the church. Negotiate about your own combined interests, but keep in mind the most important interest of all, that of the church, which is human lives!» This is what most moves me: human life. Let us not resort to legalities or other human reasons; rather, let us simply see what emergency measures need to be taken because this is an urgent situation. Since yesterday the people have been without food. I justify nobody. I just want this truly difficult situation to end. It has already left us one dead person here in the cathedral, and they say there are others who are dead and many wounded—I don't know for sure. Let this not continue.

Considering these three interests, I issue a call to the security forces: don't provoke them, but if you do provoke them, be wise. Don't let yourselves be provoked. Understand that life is worth more than mistaken honor or anything else. I think that they can negotiate an agreement. There is still time. If you are listening to me—security forces, management, workers—realize that I am speaking as if standing before you, united with this whole nation that does not want more bloodshed or massacres. We've had enough! Yield where you can and rescue what is most valuable, human life.

This is the transformation our country needs! This is the transfiguration of the Christ of today. He goes up the mountain not to distance himself from humankind but to give us an example and to tell us that the only thing of value is the heavenly happiness of being a child of God—«This is my beloved Son» (Mark 9:7). Being poor or being rich is not important; what matters is being a child of God, especially that child in whom God delights. I urge you all to be such a child, dear sisters and brothers. Let us use our Lent to prevail over the pain and the misery that surround us. Even if we have to continue on in poverty and tribulation, let us not be conformist. Rather, with our sights set high, let us work for a great transfiguration of all Salvadorans and all of Salvadoran society. Let it be so. (Applause)