

131

## LENT, RETURNING TO GOD'S LAW

**Third Sunday of Lent**  
**18 March 1979**

Exodus 20:1-17  
1 Corinthians 1:22-25  
John 2:13-25

We want to thank the German television network for the service they are rendering to our church. I take this opportunity to send a greeting through this medium of communication to our fellow Christians in that country who have understood our situation and have come to our assistance. May the example of this community— assembled here in the cathedral and extending to the whole archdiocese through the radio—carry a message of life, faith, and hope to those who visit us and always find a message of hope in the voice of the church, no matter how humble the minister who is speaking.

That indeed is the message of Lent, to which we are dedicating our best pastoral efforts during these Sundays. This is now the Third Sunday of Lent, and we shouldn't forget the goal toward which Lent is moving us. During Lent we accompany Christ as he carries his cross or as he fasts in the desert. We are on a pilgrimage that seeks the *consummatum est*, «It is accomplished» (John 19:30)—and beyond that, the glory of the resurrection. Be assured, dear sisters and brothers, that all our torments—our crosses and our Lenten fasts—are going to bear fruit. That's why we should not lose the perspective of Lent. The glory of the Risen One is also our glory and our inheritance to the extent that we are joined to the liberating force of his pain and suffering.

The goal is the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ. I want to express this using the eloquent words from the encyclical of John Paul II, which just came out this Thursday. This is his first encyclical and sets out his program and his ideals. The title of the letter, consisting of the first two Latin words, makes plain the faith the pope has in Christ, who is the object of all our hope and longing. The encyclical is called *Redemptor Hominis*, which means, «Redeemer of humankind». The pope begins with these words: «The Redeemer of humankind, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history» (RH 1). The introduction of the letter develops the idea of faith in Christ: «This act of redemption marked the high point of the history of humanity within God's loving plan. God entered human history and, as a man, became an actor in that history, one of the thousands of millions of human beings but at the same time unique!» (RH 1). These are the words of the encyclical. You can see, then, how appropriate it is to consider Christ as a fellow pilgrim with us through history. He is one among the millions of whom we are a tiny part, but he is unique among all those millions of people because he is the one in whom God carries his plan of salvation to its culmination.

Lent is nothing less than our journey toward the great event that has given real meaning to human history and to each and every human being. That's why we can't experience Lent and

Holy Week without thinking about what they mean for our personal lives, both as individuals and as members of a people. El Salvador is now at a crossroads but it is not lost. Every one of us Salvadorans, among the millions of us that there are, knows that God loves us with «an unrepeatable love», as the pope tells us. Your relation with God is totally unique. God respects your individuality, and he also loves you as a people and does not confuse our Salvadoran people with other nations. God has special designs for every people and for every individual in this history of salvation which we are recalling during this holy Lent as we make our pilgrimage toward Easter. That's why, during my preaching on these Lenten Sundays, I have tried to relate my ideas to the theme of the covenant.

On the First Sunday of Lent the biblical readings recalled for us God's covenant with Noah after the flood. The rainbow was the sign of that covenant which united God with human beings in the immense field of the natural cosmos. It's for that reason that the pope can say in the first line of his encyclical, «The Redeemer of humanity, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history» (RH 1). He is the rainbow that God placed in the sky after the flood as a sign of the covenant he was making with human beings in the realm of nature. The whole natural world was reborn after the flood and entrusted to human beings in a sparkling state. Christ is the true rainbow because through his resurrection nature is born anew and purified from sin, and it is given to humanity to be used better than it was in the past. During Lent, therefore, we prepare ourselves for the renewal of nature and of history and for the renewal of ourselves as part of that cosmos and that history.

On the Second Sunday of Lent we reflected on God's covenant with Abraham, which involved an election. From out of the great cosmos God chose a people that would be born out of the barren loins of the elderly Abraham and the sterile Sarah. From them was born Isaac, who would be the beginnings of a nation where God's promises of salvation would be realized through the birth of the Redeemer, the *Redemptor hominis*. This was announced to Abraham, who was chosen out of the vast reaches of the universe, but not so as to exclude or segregate others. The Jewish people who would be born of Abraham had a missionary role in history, which was to bring us God's blessing through a descendant of Abraham, who would be Jesus Christ. The destiny of that people was to bring us as a gift the Redeemer of humankind, but that destiny and that gift were not exclusive to the Jewish people, for as Saint Paul would say, «There is no longer any distinction between Jew and Greek» (Gal 3:28).

Since the Jewish people fulfilled their mission of bringing us the Redeemer, all the peoples of the world had a right to take part, so that what distinguished people from that point on was not whether they were Jews or not Jews but whether they believed or did not believe. What distinguished them was faith, the distinctive characteristic of the father of the people of God. «Whoever believes will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned» (Mark 16:16). The covenant with Abraham was the origin of the chosen people who were the source of blessing for all other peoples. When God made this choice, redemption was already coming about.

### **The people of God have a law**

Many centuries later came a third covenant, which is the one that today's Scripture readings call our attention to. It is the covenant with Moses. The book that sets the tone for this Third Sunday of Lent is the Exodus, the second book of the Bible. The first book is Genesis, and then

comes Exodus, which provides the dogma or central doctrine for this people that was descended from Abraham and the patriarchs. Because of famine they migrated to Egypt, and after four centuries in Egypt they were enslaved. But God had not forgotten his promise! The promise he had made to Abraham would be fulfilled.

The book of Exodus recounts the dramatic moment when God chose Moses to free his people from slavery and lead them through the desert for forty years toward the Promised Land. The liberation from Egypt was a definitive event for the people of God. Today's reading tells how the people, after being freed by God's marvelous works and after traveling for three months through the desert, found themselves before Mount Sinai. Something extraordinary was to happen there. God told Moses that the promise he had made the people was going to be renewed but that they had to be purified in preparation. In three days God would make himself mysteriously present to speak with Moses, the leader of the chosen people. Moses told the people to purify themselves and not to touch the mountain since it was God's holy mountain. The Bible then tells how on the third day the people experienced the presence of God, who spoke to them through Moses, «You have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagle's wings and brought you here to myself. Therefore if you truly hear my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession among all the nations, for all the earth is mine» (Exod 19:4-5).

Take note of this detail, sisters and brothers, which is why I told you that «people of God» does not mean the same as «people in general». A «people of God» comes into existence when God says, «Among all these peoples that are mine I chose one with which I will establish a very special relationship». This will be the people of God, and it's an interesting thing to observe. When we say that our church is the people of God here in El Salvador, we shouldn't confuse the concept with democracy, as if all Salvadorans formed the people of God. The people of God consists only of those who are baptized, or as God says, «the ones who have not forgotten my promises, the ones who remember how I bear them up on eagle's wings, the ones who have faith» (Exod 19:4). Those are the qualities of the true members of the people of God. Not all Salvadorans belong to the people of God, just as not all the nations of the world in the time of Moses took part in the covenant God made with the Jewish people. A portion of the people is chosen by God not out of caprice but because they are the ones who respond to God with faith and hope. Just before the great covenant with Moses was to be sealed, God told the people, «You shall be my special possession among all the nations; you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation» (Exod 19:5-6). This is what God is looking for when he chooses a people. It is a portion of humankind which is open to all those who repent of their sins and unite in faith with this God who no longer distinguishes between Jews and non-Jews. The only door by which we can now enter the kingdom is faith in the *Redemptor hominis*, the Redeemer of humankind.

When Moses called the people together and told them everything that God had said, the generous response of the people was this: «We will do everything that Yahweh has spoken» (Exod 19:8). Observe how the people have been prepared psychologically for the moment when God is going to speak. God has recalled their origins as a people, he has stated the conditions for being his people, and he has offered them the privileges of holiness, saying that they are «a priestly people, a holy people, a people who belong to me». And they responded, «We will do everything that the Lord has spoken».

The book of Exodus then begins to describe for us the extraordinary theophany. There was thunder and lightning and smoke as the glory of God descended upon Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16-18). Since Moses had been put in charge by God, he went up the mountain alone to speak with the Lord. There God dictated to him the Ten Commandments that we read in this morning's first reading, the Decalogue. From that moment on, the Decalogue would define the essence of the people of God. The Decalogue, together with the covenant code that is found in the subsequent chapters of Exodus, is the very soul of the whole Pentateuch. By Pentateuch we mean the first five books of the Bible, the ones that are called simply «the Law» by Christ, by the prophets, and by Jews generally. Recall how many times Christ talked about «the Law and the Prophets» (Matt 22:40). Here we are dealing with the Law, which is God's Law molded into the wisdom of that people.

The law of God which was given on Sinai has a preamble, and we heard it today: «I am the Lord, your God» (Ex 20:2a). It also has a historical prologue: «I am the Lord, who brought you out of slavery in the land of Egypt» (Ex 20:2b). We shouldn't forget these preambles if we want to understand the true meaning of the law of God, which many people make fun of today. But I want to remind you, sisters and brothers, that we are still on my first point, how God has given us a law for all time. It was not only for Israel. In the Decalogue God has created a summary of the natural laws, and these Old Testament laws are still valid in the New Testament. In his Sermon on the Mount, Christ recalled the giving of the Decalogue when he said, «I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it» (Matt 5:17). And when the young man came seeking the path of salvation, he told him, «Keep the commandments». The youth asked, «Which commandments?» and Christ listed the ones that we heard read today (Matt 19:17-19).

The preamble to the commandments of God's law is theological: «I am the Lord, your God» (Exod 20:2a). The Decalogue was different from other codes and laws of that time. Biblical scholars have found many legal texts of that period, but they observe an enormous difference. The law codes of the other nations presented the laws in casuistic form: if someone did such and such a thing, then a punishment or a reward followed. The law of Moses was quite different. It did not say, «If someone does something ...», but «You shall do this» and «You shall not do this». It was not casuistry but an expression of the absolute laws of a sovereign. That is why God first presented himself as a sovereign: «I am the Lord, your God» (Exod 20:2a). No human beings can rise up in rebellion against this Lord who has given them life and their very existence. Even if some people say they are atheist and don't believe in God, the fact that they are alive means that God is giving them their existence. No matter how much people claim to be incredulous or atheist, no matter how much they laugh at the church, God can tell them, «I am your God and your Lord. I have given you a law, and it must be fulfilled».

In the historical preamble God says, «I am the Lord who brought you out of slavery» (Exod 20:2b), for the Exodus was the true origin of the people of Israel. The covenant that Moses was making here was God's covenant with a people, whereas the covenant that God had made with Abraham was a covenant with an individual, the father of a future people. Since that people was now already in existence, the covenant was with them as a people. The covenant had a corporate character since it was made with a community that arose by being freed from slavery. This is wonderful to think about, especially now when there is so much talk about liberation. What is the meaning of liberation? God as the great liberator can say, «I have given you freedom», but the freedom God gives us is given for a purpose, not just for dissolution. Saint Paul says that we are «free for Christ» (Gal 5:1). Whenever freedom exists, it exists for

some objective. If God freed Israel from Egypt, it was to establish them as his own people. Naturally, he would not rule them with the harshness of the pharaoh. Rather, his yoke is easy, and his law is light (Matt 11:30). But people cannot live without a law, and those who do not obey the law of freedom of the children of God will fall into the slavery of their passions. People who do not obey God's law think that they are free, but no one is more enslaved than those who rebel against God's law. They are always enslaved to something: to the flesh, to money, to political passion, to lust, to pride. The freedom that God offers us will always lead us by the path of God's law. We do well to remember this, sisters and brothers, since the church has asked us to reflect on the Ten Commandments of God's law. I would like all of us to enter into the depths of our hearts and to see how in fact we are fulfilling our covenant with God.

The law is a relationship, not just God's whimsical command. The law contains an ethics based on dogma, that is, on the truth of revelation. God has revealed himself as an eagle that bears his people up on his wings (Exod 19:4). God has revealed himself as the liberating force of his people. God has revealed himself as the principle of love for humanity. We cannot forget these revelations that are the basis of our dogma if we want to keep God's law from becoming something hateful. Why is it that many people do not fulfill God's law? Because they have overlooked this revelation of God's love. Who are those who fulfill God's law with the greatest diligence and delight? Those who have not forgotten that God has revealed himself as Father and that he gives us his laws for our own benefit. Therefore we will fulfill God's law when we keep in mind those dogmatic principles, for we as Christians are like the Israelite people and we have a great revelation in Christ.

I think we are touching here the roots of our Salvadoran situation. We are touching the roots of so many of the disorders in our social life. If we ask why there are so many strikes, why so many kidnappings, why so many divisions, why so much violence, why so much crime, why so many disappearances, why so many cases of torture, then there is only one answer to all this: human beings have forgotten God's law. I will also indicate one day, dear sisters and brothers, how rotten our system is. I'll point out the abuse of power that becomes thievery. We can describe quite shameful cases of people who should be giving us an example of honesty in their political posts, their businesses, and the finances. Why do they take advantage of their posts and their power? Why do they do nothing for the common good? It is because of their selfishness. What would happen if many accounting ledgers were audited? What would happen if many public works were investigated? Those who should be models have not respected the law of God, even though they are the legislators and the ones who give orders. Naturally, the bad example of the people in authority implants doubt and skepticism among the people and encourages them to seek their own advantage as well. As a result, we have a nation that is corrupt from top to bottom because all of us have forgotten about God's law.

We must now review those commandments one by one so that we can see how truly easy it would be if we returned to God's law. Pardon me for forgetting to tell the title of this homily, as I usually do. I am going to call it «Lent, Returning to God's Law». The three thoughts that I usually develop will be these: first, the people of God have a law; second, the law of God is necessary but it is not enough; and third, Christ is the fullness of the law and the power of God to save us. Understand the title of the homily, then, as a synthesis of what I want to communicate to you: Lent is a time to return to God's law.

In the first point I was telling you that the people of God have a law that was solemnly given on Mount Sinai and has been handed down to us. At this time, during this Lent of 1979, we are being asked to review our lives as a community, as a nation, as governors and governed, as a people, and as Christians. Only in this way will Lent be able to bring about the great task of renewal, which requires us to hold up a mirror in which our visage appears ugly because we have not been concerned about living according to the law of the Lord.

The Ten Commandments, which we heard in the first reading, are divided in two, as our catechism tells us. The first three treat our relations with God, and the other seven treat of our relations with our neighbors. What we have in today's first reading is a complete treatise of morality!

The first commandment is given in our catechism simply as, «Love God above all things». The Bible expands on this: «I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of slavery in Egypt. You shall have no other gods beside me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren of those who hate me, but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation» (Exod 20:2-6).

Some Protestants find here a way to accuse Catholics of worshipping images. This is not the time to speak at length of that, but in passing I want to tell you that God is not forbidding us the use of images of saints; what he is prohibiting is the use of images of God. The images of the saints are depictions of persons whom we know are in another life, and we use the images to make them present to us, just as my mother is present to me through the picture of her I have at my bedside; I know that she is not really there except through her likeness. In contrast, the images that are being prohibited here are idolatrous or cultic images. Modern investigators have discovered how very different the people of Israel were from the neighboring peoples who did not have this prohibition. In the excavations of Jewish towns not a single image of divinity has been found, whereas among the other peoples various gods were found that were represented by serpents and other animals. To avoid the danger of idolatry, God ordered that no images be made of the divine and that no efforts be made to represent God with visible images. If Jews were ever found kneeling before an idol, they would be accused of betraying the Decalogue: «I am a jealous God», says the Lord; «I want you to adore nothing apart from me» (Exod 20:5).

This is the meaning of the first commandment, which as you can see has great significance in our time. What are the idols of our time? We have talked about them often, saying that there are many people sinning against the first commandment because they have erected idols of money, power, pride, and self-worship. This first commandment, then, gives us the opportunity to dethrone every idol that is not the true God. Lent is the moment when you can review your life and your criteria to see if you value anything more than you do God.

The second commandment in our catechism reads, «Do not take the name of your God in vain». The Bible presents it in a longer form: «You shall not pronounce the name of the Lord, your God, in vain, for the Lord will not leave unpunished those who take his name in vain». (Exod 20:7). This commandment prohibits swearing by the name of God to something that is

false or using God's name as a way of pronouncing a curse. The Israelites came to respect this second commandment so much that they would not pronounce the name «Yahweh» but instead said simply «Adonai», which means «Lord». The sacred name is not pronounced «Jehovah», as the Jehovah's Witnesses say. «Jehovah» is a corruption of the name of God and doesn't exist in the Bible. «Yahweh» is the correct name, but it was so holy and this second commandment was so revered that the Jews thought it better not to pronounce that name at all, and they used «Adonai» or «Lord» instead.

The third commandment also treats of the relations between human beings and God, and it concerns the Sabbath, the sign of God's covenant with Moses. The Sabbath rest was, like the rainbow, a sign of the covenant, just as Sundays are for us the sign of God's covenant with us as a people. That's why coming to Mass on Sunday is a sign that the people of God are renewing their covenant with God. It's a beautiful thing to see you all here on Sunday, sisters and brothers, and I thank you because your presence here in the cathedral makes this precept come to life. Some of you may ask, «Why not Saturday, as the Bible says?» «Sabbath» is a word whose root meaning is «rest». It's not really a day of the week; it is a day of rest. For the Israelites it was Saturday, but when Christ rose on Sunday, the first Christians changed the day of rest to the day for commemorating the resurrection, which is the basis of our hope. That's why the Council stated, «Catholics come and gather together for Mass on Sunday in order to renew the covenant with God and in order to give thanks for the hope of redemption that they bear within their hearts» (SC 106). That is the reason we come on Sunday, to renew our covenant with God. Coming on Sunday, keeping holy the Lord's day, is part of our covenant commitment with the Lord. I mentioned earlier that Moses brought the people together because God was going to speak to them, and when I look out upon you, dear sisters and brothers, I know that my humble ministry is no more than that of Moses, communicating to you God's word: «Thus speaks the Lord». What delight I feel when in the intimacy of your hearts you write me letters or tell me words that contain the same response that the people proclaimed to Moses: «We will do all that Yahweh has commanded» (Exod 19:8). The other day a priest told me about a man who had gone forty years without confessing, but now he wanted to go to confession because he had heard about conversion here in the cathedral and he wanted to be converted. When they say I preach politics, I tell them to listen to these testimonies of conversion to God. That is what I'm after: conversion to God! If I often mention politics from this pulpit, it's because our politics is corrupt and because the politicians mired in sin also need to be converted to the God who loves them.

There then follow the seven commandments that deal with the relationships of people among themselves. The fourth treats the relationship we have with our parents. In his letter to the Ephesians Saint Paul says that this is «the first commandment accompanied by a promise» (Eph 6:2). It is good to know that the only commandment that has a promise of blessing is the one in which God pronounces, «Honor you father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you» (Exod 20:12). I believe it is enough to appeal to the experience of good children and bad children. Good children bring great joy, while bad children bring so much grief! How tenderly the old woman says, «My son never forgets me!» With what bitterness the aging man says, «My kids never think of their dad!» If this commandment were observed, much happiness would return to many homes and many hearts.

The fifth commandment is short but powerful: «You shall not kill» (Exod 20:13). Here the sacredness of human life is proclaimed. Remember that all of these words are given under the heading: «I am the Lord, your God. I have given life and health to your brothers and sisters, and you are not to harm them». Just consider the bloodshed that is robbing us of the happiness and the holiness that come from this commandment! People are ordered to kill. People are paid to kill. People earn a living by killing. People are killed out of hatred. People are killed because they are political enemies who cause problems. How many of the corpses that appear are the result of hidden crimes? Often an arrest is made for official reasons, but what about the murder? Why was the person murdered? Who paid to have it done? What motives are behind that death? You shall not kill! It's a terrible thing. I hope my voice is being heard by those who have their hands stained with homicides. Unfortunately there are many of them! Because those who torture are also murderers. When torture is begun, no one knows where it will end. We have heard a thousand mendacious subterfuges about torture victims who have been taken to a hospital to die. The torturers are assassins and murderers also. They do not respect the sacredness of life. No one can put his hand upon another person because that person is the image of God! You shall not kill! I want to apply this short command also to the vast sea of ignominy that kills even in the bosom of the mother. Abortion, too, is killing, an abhorrent crime. In this case it is the mother herself who tortures and kills! You shall not kill! Christ brought this commandment to perfection when he said, «Even as you begin to hate another, you are also beginning to kill» (Matt 6:21-22). Christ brought the commandments to perfection with the evangelical counsels to keep harm as far as possible from human beings. Thus we will always be happy if we keep from committing offenses against the law of God.

We could continue at length here because this fifth commandment is quite disregarded among us, tragically disregarded! Hopefully in light of my words, which simply repeat God's words, we will view human life with more respect, especially if some persons are in the hands of those who are making them suffer. Respect these people, please! Do not kill them! Don't keep killing them! Where are the disappeared persons? In what prison are they languishing? Or are they dead already? Did you already kill them? Tell us, please, if only so that their mothers know, if only so that those who are mourning can bring wreaths for their children. (Applause) You shall not kill, even if you possess tanks and high caliber rifles. Why did the bystanders die during the strike that took place just a few days ago? Is there no other way to disperse a crowd except by firing bullets?<sup>1</sup> At least nine families are now mourning the unexpected death of loved ones, even though there was imprudence on both sides. You shall not kill! May this command be engraved with a chisel on the conscience and the heart of those who deal harshly with others, especially those with authority to govern. You shall not kill! That is the command of God.

There is also much to be said about the sixth commandment, «You shall not commit adultery» (Exod 20:14). When we look at the situation of our country in the light of God's law, we are amazed that God still has so much patience with us and doesn't treat us worse, as we deserve. It is only in the holiness of the matrimonial bond that there can be sexual relations between a man and a woman. In order to safeguard the sanctity of this act by which we collaborate with the Creator in the reproduction of life, God strictly forbids all relations outside the marriage between man and woman. Here in El Salvador there is a healthy business of

---

<sup>1</sup> On March 10 the security forces and the army suppressed a demonstration of popular organizations in the vicinity of the La Constanancia factory. See «Communiqué of the National Association of Educators of El Salvador» in *La Crónica del Pueblo* (13 March 1979).



motels, bordellos, and houses of prostitution. So much grief and misery! So much exploitation of the dignity and the health of women and of the life of the nation! Yet the business is thriving, and you'd be amazed to hear about who is involved in it! Dear sisters and brothers, someday fire may rain down on this new Sodom. These are houses of sin, and they are occupied day and night. There is plenty of time to offend God, but there is no austerity of life. God's law serves no purpose. You shall not commit adultery! You shall not fornicate!

The seventh command of the Decalogue: «You shall not steal» (Exod 20:15). We could make quite an examination of conscience here, sisters and brothers, at this time when robbery has become so prevalent! Those who don't rob are called stupid, and those who close a business deal or sign a contract without receiving a bribe—sometimes in the millions—are thought to be naïve. You shall not steal! This country would be a different place if there were not so much thievery! (Applause) I also want to be just to the many people who have money and yet are honest. They complain that they are blamed for everything. We have to look at the whole picture and not blame only the fourteen families, for the surnames keep multiplying. Former government officials end up with their futures well provided for—they have abundant properties, houses, and businesses. Were these all legitimately acquired? If so, then, blessed be God, but if in reality the seventh commandment is broken, then the Lord cannot give his blessing. You shall not steal! The truth is that what you have you have stolen; you have stolen it from the people as they perish in their misery. (Applause) So many other things could be said about this precept on which people seem to place so little importance. Stealing, sisters and brothers, will always be a sin, and God's law will always tell us not to steal.

There follows the eighth commandment: «You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor» (Exod 20:16). This is the law of sincerity. I want to give thanks to God because the church has the language of sincerity. I want to thank God because in the midst of a world of lies, where no one believes any longer in anything, people still believe in the church. Thank God we have preserved a sense of credibility and the capacity for dialogue because people know that the church does not deceive them. The church can be harsh since it doesn't lie. If we really observed this commandment about lying, there are so many things we would have to cut out! Who believes now in what they read in the papers, especially when they are defending certain interests? Fortunately our people are learning to read wisely, and I congratulate them for that. They are learning how to listen to the radio and watch television. Not everything that is broadcast is truth. There is much untruth. There is much sinning against the eighth commandment. One modern author writes, «If all of us were to resolve one day to keep God's law, then when we reached home and looked at the paper, we would find many pages blank». That's what it would be like if lying were prohibited!

Certainly, if we stopped lying, we would relate to one another with more confidence. Where do we find ourselves now, dear sisters and brothers? At such a level of distrust that, whenever we're going to talk with anyone, we look around to see who's listening. Because being an informer is also a sin against the eighth commandment. (Applause) Often the information carried by spies is motivated by hatred and vengefulness. I have seen many people suffer because of wrong information and false testimony that was given about them. That's what is happening with the communities of our church: they are victims of this sin of false testimony. I remember when I was being given some of what they called «arguments» for the expulsion of a priest; I could see the disgraceful falsehood of the information that was the basis for the unjust decisions, and all of it was motivated by the sin against the eighth

commandment. Take a little thought, dear sisters and brothers! Take a little thought so that you always speak the truth. It is better to keep quiet. However, keeping silence is often cowardice when we should be speaking up to contradict those who are speaking falsely.

The last two precepts are «You shall not covet your neighbor's house», and «You shall not covet your neighbors' wife» (Exod 20:17). These are precautionary commandments that keep us from violating the holiness of property or marriage.

As you can see, the commandments that the Bible tells us were written on Mount Sinai describe superbly what our relations should be with God and with one another. During this Lent, therefore, let us review our observance of them and see how we can do better.

After the end of the ceremony on Sinai, Moses had some animals killed to seal the covenant that had been established with God, and half the blood was sprinkled on the people (Exod 24:5-8). In this way the blood of the victims confirmed the promise that the people had made: «We will do everything that Yahweh says» (Exod 19:8). The Ten Commandments of God's law are the response of the people to the covenant that God desires to establish with humanity. Observing these commandments is how we ratify day by day the agreement signed with God: «I will be your God, and you will be my people» (Lev 26:12). We cannot make claims about being God's people as long as we trample underfoot the commandments and the law of the Lord.

### **God's law is necessary but it is not enough**

Therefore the second point of my homily is that the law is necessary, as we just saw, but it is not enough. Here I'm going to focus on today's gospel. What do we hear in today's gospel? Christ made a whip out of cords in order to drive from the temple those who had turned the law of Moses into a business. They had turned the temple, which was a sign of union with God, into a marketplace and a den of thieves. By lashing out, Christ wanted to purify the sacred symbols of temple and sacrifice and cult, but these had been turned into legalistic rituals because of all the laws that were killing the spirit. The Gospel of Saint John gives a good picture of all these different Jewish symbols. Today's gospel, for example, talks about the sign of the feast day, the sign of the temple, and the sign of the sacrificial institution. All those things were simply signs. They were the letter of law, but legalities are not the same as the spirit of the law. What God wants above all is the spirit.

Since I already mentioned to you the encyclical letter of His Holiness, John Paul II, I want to share with you some of its thoughts. In speaking of redemption and the present-day human situation, he says that the letter is not sufficient; the spirit is also necessary. «As is well known» he writes, «the first half of this century saw the growth of various state totalitarianisms, which led to the horrible catastrophe of war. The church clearly outlined her position with regard to these regimes, which appeared to be acting for a higher good, namely the good of the state, even though history was to show that instead the good in question was only that of a certain party, which had been identified with the state» (RH 17). He is speaking of the regimes that existed before the Second World War, especially in Germany and Italy. It was there that the ideas about the «national security state» were formulated, the same ideas that have inspired our regimes in Latin America. The pope says that the United Nations was created and the

Declaration of Human Rights was formulated precisely as a consequence of the tragic history of human rights violations in those countries that claimed they were seeking the common good.

This is what the pope is referring to in his letter: «While sharing the joy of all people of good will, of all people who truly love justice and peace, at this conquest [of human rights], the church is aware that the “letter” on its own can kill, while only “the spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6), and so must continually ask, together with these people of good will, whether the Declaration of Human Rights and the acceptance of their “letter” mean everywhere also the actualization of their “spirit”. Indeed, well-founded fears arise that very often we are still far from this actualization and that at times the spirit of social and public life is painfully opposed to the declared “letter” of human rights. This state of things, which is burdensome for the societies concerned, places special responsibility toward these societies and the history of humankind on those contributing to its establishment» (RH 17).

We take great satisfaction, then, that human rights are seen to coincide with the law of God. However, as the pope says, even though the Declaration of Human Rights is accepted by many countries as if a new Sinai had inspired a new respect for God and human beings, we need to question whether either God’s law or the Declaration of Human Rights is being observed in anything more than the «letter», while the «spirit» is far from being heeded.

Consequently, it is right for us to review the past week, but before looking out from the church, I want to look within our church so that each day she may be more faithful, more coherent, and more inspired by the true word of the Lord.

### **Life of the church**

I’ve already said quite a bit about the first item of news, which is the encyclical of His Holiness, *Redemptor Hominis*, which is beginning to circulate around the world. The pope has three great concepts deeply engraved on his heart: Christ, the church, and the human person. They are like the soul of this encyclical, which fully affirms the service the church must render to the word of God, the rights of God, and the rights of human beings. We are preparing an edition of the encyclical which will soon be available, and during my interview next Wednesday I’ll be giving more information about this very valuable document.

Today we are promoting the campaign of voluntary offering. The Ana Guerra de Jesús Center, which in previous years was in charge of this collection, will today accept offerings of fraternal aid in all the churches. Whatever you may wish to give will be donated to alleviate hunger in the world and to promote other aid efforts of the church.

Remember that tomorrow is the feast of Saint Joseph. Several parishes and congregations celebrate him as their patron saint. I want you to remember with special affect our San José de la Montaña Seminary, which has been placed under his protection. We also want to revive the work of vocational promotion under the patronage of Saint Joseph. Among the parishes celebrating the feast are San José Villanueva and San José Cortés, where I’ll have the pleasure of taking part later—San José Villanueva this morning, and San José Cortés in the afternoon. With regard also to the seminary, I want to tell you about some wonderful meetings we had with three groups of young seminarians. These took place in Chalatenango, where we have a minor seminary, and in San José de la Montaña, where there are both major and minor

seminarians. Also, as part of our vocational work, you are all invited to attend the ordination to the priesthood of the deacon Ezequiel Gámez; it will take place in the parish church of Santa Lucía in Suchitoto on next Saturday, March 24, at four o'clock in the afternoon

I want to advise you ahead of time that on Good Friday, April 6, we want to intensify our prayer and penance throughout the diocese. Let us pray earnestly, for, as the pope says in his encyclical, prayer is the force that gives life to our church. At the same time, be alert to the bogus Holy Week celebrations, such as processions and Stations of the Cross that are often organized by people without the pastor's approval. I want you to know that the pastor is responsible for all these activities and it is important to be in communion with him.

I want to inform the different communities that are listening on the radio so that you can take advantage of the services we are going to broadcast from the cathedral. On Palm Sunday the blessing of palms will begin at eight o'clock in the morning at El Calvario Church; we will come in procession from there and then celebrate Mass outdoors in front of the cathedral. On Holy Thursday we want try to give some unity to the Procession in Silence since it is a revered practice in many communities. From ten o'clock in the evening until midnight there will be a radio broadcast to help to unify the message of the various processions. We hope that the Procession in Silence on Holy Thursday night will be kept orderly and devout. On Good Friday, starting at eleven o'clock, the Way of the Cross will start out from the cathedral, and the broadcast may serve for other parishes that are making their own Way of the Cross at that hour. As for the Holy Burial, it will leave from El Calvario at six-thirty in the evening and last until nine o'clock. If you want to unite your efforts with those of the cathedral community, you may do so. Likewise for the vigil of Holy Saturday, which is the final goal of our Lent; it will be celebrated in the cathedral at seven o'clock on Saturday evening and transmitted by radio.

I ask to be pardoned by the communities of San Pedro Perulapán, El Paraíso, and Monte San Juan because special circumstances prevented me from accepting the invitation they had extended to me. I hope to visit you in the near future. I want to denounce the sacrilegious theft in Villa San Cristóbal in Cuscatlán. I hope to join in the festivities of the Josephite Fathers of the Colegio Cristóbal Colón, where they celebrated a wonderful week in honor of Saint Joseph. I had the pleasure of inaugurating the week last Monday morning with a delightful Mass for the young people. I want to thank the Luisa de Marillac School in Santa Tecla for their donation of food, clothing, and other items for those in need, especially those in the women's prison. I was delighted that a school for poor children was helping other poor people.

### **Events of the week**

Let us now examine, from the perspective of our church that is witnessing these and other situations, two important events: the labor-management conflicts and the freedom granted the prisoners accused of violating the Law of Public Order.

Regarding the conflict at La Constancia and Tropical, you are all well aware of the work of our archdiocese. Nevertheless, I very much regret the lack of respect that the military authorities showed the two priests who were asked by the workers to be their guarantee as they came off their strike. The authorities didn't allow the priests to enter the site but kept them shut up in the bus of the Red Cross, without even letting them open the windows. The same thing happened during the occupation of the OAS and the occupation of the Mexican

embassy. I want to state clearly that the priests were not intruding themselves; they went there because their presence was requested by persons who have confidence in the church. They should have been allowed to enter just as the Red Cross and the Human Rights Commission were; they should have been treated with a little respect.

The newspapers have published part of a declaration I made, but I want to make a clarification since they mutilated my message a bit<sup>2</sup>. They did not mention that what I said was that the unrest will continue as long as people are not treated with greater social justice in El Salvador. They also omitted mention of my commendation of the workers at La Constancia for their serenity, their firmness, their courage, and their willingness to dialogue; I also congratulated the management for their openness and readiness to dialogue. I thanked both sides for showing confidence in the archdiocese, and recently I received a note of gratitude from the management side.

Even though this conflict has ended, thank God, the church will be very attentive to what happens now because our experience in another situation was sad: after an accord was reached, repressive measures were used to destroy the union little by little, and the whole thing ended with several labor leaders murdered. May the Lord keep the demon of vengeance far from our minds. Let us all rejoice in the return of peace after this conflict.

Other conflicts are still being negotiated: PRONAC, STECEL, the bus drivers on routes 5 and 28, and conflicts in other factories. We always appeal to the great capacity for dialogue that we Salvadorans have when we want to. The union of Social Security has complained that the board of directors violated their collective contract. The union of the coffee industry has denounced the dismissal of 2,836 workers from the factory of the Compañía Salvadoreña de Café.

We want to decry other incidents besides those we've already mentioned, such as the exclusion of the priests and the deaths and injuries that have occurred. We call your attention to these things so that, please God, they will not occur again. A multitude of people have organized to demand that the police withdraw their cordon around La Constancia and Tropical; they took possession of the cathedral<sup>3</sup> and set fire to buses. Regarding these events, I want to make my own the words of a declaration that stated: «The popular movement led by the FAPU, the BPR, and other organizations should understand that, even if they can count on the sympathy and support of workers and the people generally, their radicalism hinders their progress. They end up inflaming passions that cause great harm instead of fostering union around causes in which the whole people should be united. Still, their contributions to the struggle have been helpful»<sup>4</sup>. In other words, using the language of the church, we say no to violence and no to identification with any specific group. It's regrettable that recourse has to be made to these means in order to counter the violence which these organizations oppose. In these difficult moments it would be worthwhile for us to reflect seriously lest we do more harm than good. Of course, I want to state I don't agree with the occupation of the cathedral, but I'm sorry that people have to resort to these tactics since they can find no other channels to

---

<sup>2</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (15 March 1979).

<sup>3</sup> The occupation was carried out by members of the People's Revolutionary Bloc (BPR) on 11 March 1979. See *La Crónica del Pueblo* (12 March 1979).

<sup>4</sup> «Manifiesto of the Union of the United Textile Industries S.A. to the Working Class in General and the People of El Salvador», 8 March 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (12 March 1979).

make their voices heard. Also in regard to the situation of labor, they have identified the body of labor leader Oscar Armando Interiano García. He was arrested on February 13 and then «disappeared»; on February 27 his body was found, as you already know.

Incidents like these strikes and other conflicts that are declared illegal often cause much agitation and discouragement among the people, and the Chamber of Commerce has declared that such strife also discourages investment and results in unemployment and the reduction of income to the national treasury<sup>5</sup>. The president, who claims that the strikes are only a pretext for subversives to create agitation, has asked workers to present their demands through legal channels<sup>6</sup>. Considering all these differing criteria, I would like to express the mind of the church. All these recommendations would be quite fine if there really existed legal channels, but the minister of labor has made it clear that the government is contradicting itself, for he confessed that legal channels were lacking and that labor codes would consequently be reformed<sup>7</sup>. It is important, therefore, to provide those legal channels so that potentially violent situations find legitimate escape valves. In my third pastoral letter I pointed out that the church is always willing to provide the services she can<sup>8</sup>. Our aim is not to foment agitation but to make sure that the escape valves exist so that these situations are managed and resolved according to the desires of all those involved in the conflict.

We are delighted, sisters and brothers, with the release of seventy-five persons who were being prosecuted under the Law of Public Order<sup>9</sup>. This is a part of what we have requested, but there still remains the situation of the others for whom the church and many other institutions have been pleading; they should not be forgotten, and their families should not be left in desperation. It is not enough simply to abolish a law if there is no desire to show greater concern for the welfare of the people. Why were the bodies of the Martínez brothers found in Chalatenango<sup>10</sup>? I personally have seen the tears of the mother and the wives of these Christian brothers of ours. Likewise with the body of the catechist Juan Antonio Fuentes that was found in Sensuntepeque; he was arrested on February 22 at the house where he lived, and several people witnessed this fact.

The police raids continue and the disappearances continue, so the abolition of the Law of Public Order is not by itself sufficient unless, as we said before, a serious effort is made to bring about true peace and true justice among our people.

We are also concerned about the news we received this week concerning the kidnapped persons, and we're hoping that negotiations will advance quickly so that those lives can be saved. We're happy to hear that the boy from San Miguel, Carlos Mario Villatoro, has been found. With regard to the kidnapping of that child, I want to express publicly my admiration for a Marist Brother, who offered himself as a hostage in exchange for the child's release. In the end it was not necessary, but the gesture of this brother retained its value. Likewise, here in the archdiocese, there was great value in the willingness shown by the priests and the sisters who responded to the call for volunteers to protect the striking workers from the military cordon. I

---

<sup>5</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (15 March 1979).

<sup>6</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (14 March 1979).

<sup>7</sup> *La Crónica del Pueblo* (15 March 1979).

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

<sup>9</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* (14 March 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Guadalupe Efraín Martínez and Alfredo Martínez. *Orientación* (25 March 1979).

commend and I thank them. In the end there was no need there either, but the gesture of those priests and sisters should evoke our admiration and appreciation. (Applause)

### **Christ is the fullness of the law**

We are going to draw near the altar with this third point, which I will only hint at. It is true that the law is necessary, but it is also true that the letter of the law does not suffice; the spirit of the law is also necessary. Since this is so, then Christ is the fullness of the law. We should not forget that.

As we continue moving during Lent toward Calvary and toward resurrection, Saint Paul tells us that humanity will be saved neither by the signs sought by the Jews, such as their temple and miraculous deeds, nor by the wisdom sought by the Greeks. Salvation will come only by the saving power of Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:22-23). The cross is the sign. We recalled this morning Christ's valiant gesture of removing from the temple those who were profaning that sacred place; in so doing, he was presenting himself as the new temple, as the true space in which God encounters humanity, as the perfect worshipper of God, and as the Savior of all people.

May all of these reflections about the covenant and our national reality help us to understand what Saint Paul tells us: we cannot hope in human laws or powers or in created signs. Our only hope is in Christ. Yes, we must keep working with human means and earthly things, but our hearts are set on the great sign of Christians: Christ crucified, and Christ raised up again. Let it be so. (Applause)