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LENT AS A CALL TO TRUE RECONCILIATION

**Fourth Sunday of Lent
25 March 1979**

2 Chronicles 36:14-16,19-23
Ephesians 2:4-10
John 3:14-21

Dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio listeners, our people can be saved if we really experience Lent. That is why we celebrate this Fourth Sunday of Lent with a renewed hope. When it seems that all is lost, we can still find the Spirit of God and hear his word, calling us forth and orienting us toward our true salvation. Let us not forget that Lent is a journey toward Easter. Lent is always looking forward, toward the risen Christ who offers us new life. After paying off the misery suffered by humankind with his passion and death, Christ now offers us a better life. Let us not spurn his offer. Let us follow him as we journey toward Easter.

At the Second Vatican Council, the church of today stated that «the human person deserves to be preserved and human society deserves to be renewed; we are therefore talking of the human person whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will» (GS 3). Who among us does not feel comforted by these words as human persons, as family, as people? During this Lent God is offering us salvation. It is not just a matter of law or moralizing, as we commented last Sunday—it is above all a question of love. Who is not moved by love? The love of Christ who gave his life for me should be the best motivation for us to live holy lives and try to please him. How wonderful it would be if all of us allowed ourselves to be swept away by that love that sacrificed itself for our sake!

God's love has been calling out to us in ever new ways during the last four Sundays, but in today's readings we find a call to reconciliation. Therefore, for this Fourth Sunday of Lent the title for my homily will be «Lent as a Call to True Reconciliation», and I'll be developing my thought along three lines. The first will be Babylon as a symbol of the broken covenant but also as a call to reconciliation and hope. The second will be reconciliation with God in Christ; today's readings offer us a veritable theology of history under this heading of reconciliation with God in Christ Jesus. And my third point will be the two great Lenten sacraments that are richly treated in today's gospel and in the reading from Saint Paul; they are baptism and penance as paths toward reconciliation.

Babylon, a symbol of the broken covenant but also a call to reconciliation and hope

Babylon symbolizes the broken covenant, but at the same time it is a prophecy of the reconciliation that God offers us after sin. It is important, sisters and brothers, that we not disconnect our meditations during these Sundays of Lent, for the church has been setting before us each Sunday the great events that constitute the milestones of our salvation.

Remember the First Sunday, when we reflected on Noah and God's covenant with him (Gen 22:15-18). Through the rainbow symbol God called humankind to use nature properly—to preserve it and not abuse it—so that the goods that God has given us in creation redound to the happiness of all. Just as the rainbow extends from one side of our earth to the other, this was a cosmic reconciliation, a covenant between humans and the universe.

On the Second Sunday, the covenant was not with the entirety of nature but with a chosen people; it was God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 22:15-18). From that old, childless man God brought forth a people as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the shore. Abraham's faith became a model for all those who want to make a covenant with God. His was a faith of commitment and of «hope against all hope» (Rom 4:18). We all have great need of a faith like Abraham's! That was the second chapter of our Lent of 1979.

The third chapter of Lenten history was Moses. Last Sunday we saw Moses on Sinai, and it was no longer just the promise of a great people, as with Abraham—it was now a reality. Four centuries had passed, and Abraham was now represented by that great multitude that was advancing toward the Promised Land. The time had come for them to make a covenant with God as a people; they had to give a proper response to God for all the privileges he had bestowed on them in the desert and throughout their history. And the response they gave was their commitment to abide by the Decalogue (Exod 20:1-17). In those ten precepts God summed up all the right relations between human beings and God and among human beings themselves. This covenant contained a law, and from that moment a new phase in the history of salvation began, called the Mosaic era. It was the law of Moses that gave the Jewish people their characteristic orientation, but it was this law of which Saint Paul was to say, «The law is not enough. The law can be a dead letter. That law had value because it contained the promise of a man who would redeem us. It is Christ who gives meaning to the law» (Rom 4:13-17).

During that era of the Mosaic law, which lasted for several centuries, many good things happened, and many bad things as well. Today the Holy Scriptures present us with another important moment of Jewish history: Babylon. What was Babylon? Babylon represented the rupturing of the covenant. The people had brought on themselves the punishment of exile because they had not been faithful to God. The people felt overwhelmed and were almost despairing; they seemed to be a people without a God. Nevertheless, that besieged and broken people heard from the prophets a message of hope and salvation. Babylon, therefore, even though it represents for us a people who are being punished for abandoning their God, is also the symbol of a people that is going to be restored.

For us this language is extremely interesting. There are many people in El Salvador who say, «There's no longer any remedy! Who can believe in love? The ways of violence abound: kidnappings, strikes, hatred, crimes, repression! It's as if God were beating us with a club to make us come together». But God has made us in the image of his love. We may be surrounded by violence, but that is not what God desires.

As the first reading makes clear, hope and love were still alive among the exiles in Babylon, but it was necessary for the people to recognize the sinfulness that had broken the covenant. The author of the book of Chronicles pulls no punches! Chronicles was a book written to fill in some of the gaps in the historical books; it narrates events or supplies details that are not mentioned elsewhere. With extreme bluntness the author describes the situation

during this period when the Pharisees and the secular and spiritual leaders of the people had turned the religion into legalism and hypocrisy. It was even then becoming the kind of religion that Jesus Christ would lash out against when he came centuries later. That is what the first reading says: «All the priestly leaders and the people multiplied their infidelities and polluted the house of the Lord. In his great compassion the Lord, the God of their fathers, sent them prophets, but they mocked the messengers of God and scorned their words» (2 Chr 36:14-16). This is what the chosen people of God did. They responded to the covenant of love with sin and contempt.

This sad relationship between human beings and God appears also in the other readings of today. The gospel has words from the lips of Christ: «People have preferred darkness to light so that their works will not accuse them» (John 3:19). In the second reading Saint Paul offers a more tragic image: «We were dead in our transgressions» (Eph 2:1,5). These are dark sketches of the history of humankind. On the one side is God creating us out of love, giving us a law that will save us, and making covenants leading to salvation. On the other side are human beings turning their backs, breaking the covenant, disobeying God, and believing instead in darkness, repression, and the idols of money and politics—in everything except God! They make no room for God—that is what sin is! And I am the first of sinners among you!

People prefer to seek happiness along their own paths instead of going by the one way God has pointed out to them. When are we going to understand, dear sisters and brothers that we will never find our way to true happiness by following our own capricious ways? When are we going to understand that «only you, Lord, have the words of eternal life» (John 6:68)? It is never too late for God's love, but the first reading tells us that «now there was no remedy» (2 Chr 36:16). That is when God's vengeance came. What an awful thing it is when God uses certain individuals not to bless his people but to afflict them! Nebuchadnezzar was the man God used as an instrument to humble the people by having his bloody boots trample over them. We shouldn't think that only human beings are responsible for repression, torture, muggings, and the exploitation of neighbor by neighbor. God uses oppressive rulers to thrash humankind. The poor things think they are conquering when actually they are punishing. Even so, the hour will come, says the Bible, when the lash is thrown into the fire. What a sad role is played in human history by the man with the lash!

What did these assassins under the command of Nebuchadnezzar do in this land of God that had sinned? Listen carefully to today's passage: «They burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword he carried captive to Babylon, where they were made slaves of the king and his sons until the savior came» (2 Chr 36:19-20).

Let us take a good look at this terrible epoch of punishment. It is what El Salvador is going through now. It is the epoch of bosses and those who impose their desires on all. It is the epoch of those who make laws and those who feel they own the land and people's lives. The poor things don't realize that they are the lashes of God! We are at a time when God is beating us down, and from the hearts of those who have been crushed a cry goes up: «Does God really exist?» To make matters worse, we see how those who are happy do not worship God but bow down before false idols. We believe that money is greater than the true God, that the power of despots is greater than the true God who loves us and saves us. The temptation to despair comes upon us, and the temptation to violence as well, as the pope said (PP 30). Many have

given in to this temptation; they think that they are going to find a way out of our country's problems by the path of bloodshed and hatred. That is not the way out! If there is more bloodshed, if there are more victims of torture, if there are more families suffering abuse at the hands of the powerful, it is because God is making use of these things as lashes, but it is not the final word.

The final word comes when God speaks again. The dawn of redemption is glimpsed in the words of the first reading, but redemption shines forth like the sun at midday in the second reading and in the gospel. An extraordinary thing happened! When Cyrus II, the pagan king of Persia, heard about the cruelties of Babylon, he became the «instrument of God», as the Bible calls him, «the anointed one of God» (Isa 45:1). How that turn of events must have scandalized the hypocrites among the Jews who paid no heed to God! A non-Jewish man, a pagan, was called «the anointed one of God» by the God himself! This Cyrus, king of Persia, was a mysterious personage. The first reading tells us, «In fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired Cyrus, king of Persia, to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: “Thus speaks Cyrus, the king of Persia: the Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah”». The king then addressed the Jews who were exiled in Babylon: «All those from among you who belong to this people, let them go up, and may their God be with them!» (2 Chr 36:22-23). This is a speech of liberation, all the more beautiful because it was spoken by a pagan who was more merciful than were many of the Jews themselves.

The response we gave today to God's word was Psalm 137, which tells us about the Israelites when they were captives in Babylon. This psalm of liberation could be something like our national anthem when we celebrate our independence on September 15. Our freedom is like that of the Guatemalan national bird, the *quetzal*, which they say cannot live encaged—if it is imprisoned, it dies. The Jews were enslaved on the banks of the rivers of Babylon, but their Babylonian bosses told them, «Sing to us one of the songs of your Jewish religion». To which the Jews replied, «How can we sing a song in a strange land? May my tongue stick to my palate if I should sing a song of joy in my exile!» (Ps 137:3b-6). They sighed as they remembered their homeland; they longed for the hour of return; they wept for the sins that had caused them to be carried away. But the hour of return finally arrived when a pagan king inspired by God issued that edict: «The captivity is at an end. Let those who are subjects of that God go up to Jerusalem. You are now free of all borders. Go forth!» (2 Chr 36:23b). And the Persians even accompanied the Israelites and helped them rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by God's scourge.

This is an example of how God uses some human beings to punish others and then to free them. The God of history plays with history. It's not just a case of human beings acting capriciously. It is God who is using our bad consciences to inflict horrible, hellish punishments on the nations. It is God who is making use of good human beings, even if they are pagans and lack Christian faith. Those people are instruments of God to bring us salvation, love, encouragement, and hope.

What would we like to be at this time, sisters and brothers? Do we want to be instruments of punishment or signs of hope for the Salvadoran people? The church rejoices in her role of giving the people hope, and she also regrets and censures the cruel actions of the

despots against our people. The church is the voice of prophecy in the midst of a Babylonian exile. Babylon was symbolic of all nations, for what nation has not sinned? Let us be humble and take warning from the words of the first reading: «All the priestly leaders and the people multiplied their infidelities» (2 Chr 36:14). There you will find the explanation for why we need conversion, and that's why I told you that Lent is a time when all of us, beginning with us priests and continuing with all of you, must be truly converted. This is the time for us to hear the call of our beloved homeland, as the Jews did when they were in exile. Only thus will we find the salvation we long for.

Reconciliation with God in Christ

Redemption arrived for the exiles in the person of Cyrus, so my second thought concerns reconciliation with God in Christ Jesus. It's like a drama in three acts: everything begins with God's love; everything becomes reality in Christ's sacrifice; and everything becomes ours by faith. God, Christ, and each one of us—that is the path of true reconciliation.

Everything starts off with God's love. In the first reading we saw how it was the Lord who moved the spirit of Cyrus, and we see now how God inspires love even in the hearts of those who have no faith. So often, dear Christian sisters and brothers, non-Christians have more mercy than we do because God has inspired them with the spirit of salvation and love. The inspiration that the Lord mysteriously and prophetically gave to Cyrus, the king of Persia, now becomes present to us more clearly in the face-to-face revelation of the New Testament. We should receive today very cordially these words of Saint Paul to the Ephesians: «God is rich in mercy because of the great love he has had for us» (Eph 2:4). That is the starting point for everything. It is not we who have brought ourselves redemption. Rather, as Saint Paul says, «Even though we were dead in our sins, God has brought us to life with Christ» (Eph 2:5). Christ draws near to the dead to restore them to life. It is not because the dead call out to him, for the dead are not alive and cannot act. Rather, it is the Redeemer's mercy that restores them to life. That is how God acts with a human race that is dead, numbed, unjust, and sinful. Humans no longer think about God, but God still thinks about humans, as Isaiah tells us, «Can a mother forget her child?» Such an attitude seems impossible, but God insists, «Even if a mother should forget her child, I will not forget you» (Isa 49:15). As complicated as our lives may be, how can we not feel surrounded and protected by a great tenderness? I am not on my own. There is someone who is more intimately concerned about me than I am about myself. God loves me.

And in today's gospel Christ himself, who has learned from all eternity the sentiments of God, speaks to us in words that should echo in our ears through all of Holy Week: «God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life» (John 3:16). Everything begins with God's love. If Christ came as the Savior of humankind, it was by the initiative of the Father. «God so loved the world that he sent his own Son». He told him, «Go, Son, become a man. Join them in their history. Enter into their sufferings. Carry on your shoulders the sins of all. Climb up with them to Calvary, and in your crucifixion I will behold the reparation of all their sins».

When Moses was leading the people through the desert, there was a beautiful symbol that prefigured Christ, as is mentioned in today's gospel: «As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so too the Son of Man must be lifted up so that all who believe in him may have eternal

life» (John 3:14-15). What is this about a serpent? When the Israelites who were being led by Moses entered into the rough trails of the desert, they murmured against Moses. How difficult a job it was to lead a people who often preferred the slavery of Egypt! «We were better off there», they said. «We had food and drink, and everything there in Egypt was nicer than here in the desert, where we are dying of hunger and thirst» (Num 21:4-5). How difficult it is for the people to understand the path of liberation! Often it is those with whom one has worked most who understand least about the loving effort that inspires sacrifice and asks for the sacrifice of collaboration. The people's murmuring in the desert was punished by the appearance of poisonous snakes that bit the people, and all those who were bitten died. Faced with calamity, the people ran to Moses to tell him what was happening. As was his custom, Moses prayed to the Lord, and the Lord responded thus: «Make a serpent of bronze, and mount it on a pole. All those who behold the serpent with faith will be protected against the poison of those snakes» (Num 21:6-9). That was the image of Christ crucified that Christ now recalls since it will become real in himself (John 3:14-15). Just as Moses lifted up the serpent and all those who saw it were cured of those snake bites, so those who behold Christ crucified with faith will also be free because the Son of Man has come to give his life for the salvation of the world.

This morning I would like to take up again this mystery called the paschal mystery, that is, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For it is in that direction we are walking during Lent, toward celebrating the mystery of the Lord's death and resurrection. Holy Saturday evening is the great night of the paschal mystery. I'm hoping that all of us who have made this spiritual pilgrimage of Lent, meditating on the history of God's dealings with his people, will end the season together on that luminous night. I invite everyone, especially the young folk, to join us on that night in order to behold with faith the risen Christ. We will see him lifted up even higher than the serpent in the desert, and all the merit of his cross will give salvation and new life to each and every Salvadoran and to the country of El Salvador in general.

This is the mystery of reconciliation. The past doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how submerged we are in our economic, social, or political situation. It doesn't matter what we have hated; it doesn't matter how violent we have been. It doesn't even matter if we have our hands stained with bloody kidnappings and tortures. Let us hope that my voice is reaching those places where God is taking heartless, unscrupulous individuals and making whips out of them, so that the Lord will have mercy on them. And let us hope that this Easter they will no longer desire that sad role of being the scourge of God but will offer instead words of hope. (Applause)

Yes, dear sisters and brothers, from the president down to the police, those who enforce the structures that cause our people to live in fear and doubt should abandon their role as scourges of God. They should be a government of hopefulness; they should be agents of security and order; they should truly be God's instruments for the liberation of our people. My dear capitalist friends, let us not idolize money or use its power to exploit those who are poorest. You could make our people very happy if only you had a little love in your hearts. What wonderful instruments of God you would be—with your bank accounts, your ranches, your lands, your treasuries full of cash—if you used them all not for selfish ends but to bring happiness to this starving, needy, and malnourished people!

This is not demagogical speech seeking applause. The fact is the people have feelings, and they love even those who hurt them and exploit them. Our Salvadoran people are not made

for hatred; they are made for collaboration and love. They are hoping to find fraternity in all the sectors that make up this people so blessed by God. We have received such abundant gifts from God, but much sadness results from their maldistribution due to human sinfulness.

Life of the church

I will end this homily with my third thought, on baptism and penance as the two Lenten sacraments, but first I want to invite all of us who are baptized and all of us who need the sacrament of forgiveness to be reconciled with God during this Lent. So that we'll see the great need of doing this, I want to make a parenthesis here that will help us bring the word of God down to earth for this week.

More than Cyrus for the Jews exiled in Babylon and more than Moses for the Israelites traveling through the desert, this church was instituted by Jesus Christ to be the presence of God in the world. It is this church I am trying to serve, dear sisters and brothers, when I announce here news about her activities. Such news is of great concern to me because this is my church, my people of God; it is the church to which I belong and the church I serve as pastor. I'm not a politician; I'm not a sociologist; I'm not an economist; I'm not responsible for finding solutions to the economic and political problems of the country. There are already other people, lay people, who have that tremendous responsibility. From my position as pastor, I simply call upon them so that they will use the talents God has given them. Nevertheless, my job as pastor requires me to build the true church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that is what I'm trying to do. That is why I am filled with the joy present in this cathedral completely packed with the faithful. Many people are listening now on the radio—not as politicians or persecutors or out of curiosity, but as beloved Catholics who are trying to understand their pastor's message in order to take part in the building of the true church. I want all of us to resolve to make our church the true people of God, a flaming torch that will illuminate our country's paths and a force for the salvation of all our people. Let us be church!

That is why, within this ecclesial perspective, I look first to the pope, the center of unity of this people of God. I feel great delight every week when I see some gesture or hear some word of advice to the church, which I try to follow. I am the one most in need of the pope. I cannot do without the pope. I thank God that I have sought to mark the whole of my priestly life with solidarity and fidelity to the Holy Father as the representative of Christ. My eyes are fixed on him. Never would I think of betraying him.

The pope has made a significant gesture toward Latin America this week: he approved the Puebla document. (Applause) In the letter he wrote to the bishops of Latin America he states that this document will undoubtedly stimulate authentic evangelization in the present and the future. «It will strengthen», he says, « the vigorous unity of the Latin American church in its own particular identity and in its readiness to respond to the needs and the challenges of this continent»¹. Even though the pope has a universal mission, it is extraordinary to see how he addresses a particular region as if he were thinking only of that region. He speaks of the «particular identity» of Latin America as if to say, «You have a very Latin American style, and you are very special. Your church has a way of being that is quite different from that of the church in Europe or in Africa or anywhere else. Try to grasp ever more firmly your identity as a

¹ JOHN PAUL II, «Message to the Bishops of Latin America», 23 March 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (1 April 1979).

Latin American church, with all the accompanying problems, needs, and challenges you may experience».

The pope also wrote that the bishops' job is to transmit the content of the Puebla document to the local communities «so that they may be quickly infused with the spirit of Puebla»². May God grant us, sisters and brothers, that the Puebla document not suffer the same fate as the documents of Medellín, which even now are suspected of being communist by some people. Puebla is nothing more than a step forward from Medellín. Those who have not accepted Medellín or who think that Medellín should be annulled are now going to have to move beyond Medellín and walk the way of Puebla. Now there is no other way to discern the identity of this pilgrim church here in Latin America and no other way to understand our problems. It is only natural that all those who see themselves as the scourge of God and want to continue to afflict our poor people would reject the existence of a God who announces to them, «Be careful, because the lash will be thrown into the fire when the people decide to pursue more just solutions to their problems!»

Another beautiful trait of Pope John Paul II is revealed in the discourse that he addressed to the ambassador of Bolivia. The pope ratified the church's special love «for the most needy» and stressed the importance of «arousing in them well-grounded hopes for improving the conditions of their religious, social, and cultural life». The pope expressed his desire «that this evangelical commitment be appreciated and supported by all those who feel the imperative of helping to improve society»³. So you see, the church of the poor is not a church of demagogy. Both the pope and the Gospel tell us that the church works preferentially on behalf of the most needy people because it is from them that she draws the strength she needs for seeking the conversion of everyone. For people will not be saved unless they are converted to Christ's words at the final judgment: «Whatever you do for one of these needy folk, you do for me» (Matt 25:40). Those who fail to act this way will hear the tremendous sentence: «Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire, because I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. You drew apart from this church that, speaking from among the poor, summoned all people to be converted» (Matt 25:41-42).

I want to ask your prayers for another event of continental character. This week in Caracas, Venezuela, the present board of CELAM will be meeting with representatives of the bishops, two from each country. Together they will develop programs for the next four years and will also elect the new president. CELAM, which is the acronym for the Latin American Bishops Conference, is an organization established by the Latin American bishops to coordinate their activities. It is an attempt to respond to what the pope calls «the vigorous unity of the Latin American church»⁴. Thanks to CELAM, the bishops of all Latin America are bonded more closely, and they can share their common concerns about the problems of these twenty countries, which are so similar and at the same time so different. Let us pray, then, that this meeting develops effective programs and that the electors choose a presidency in accord with the problematic situation of Latin America. We need to pray hard to the Holy Spirit so that good leadership is provided for the collegial body of bishops.

² Ibid.

³ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the New Ambassador of Bolivia to the Holy See», 17 March 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (25 March 1979).

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Message to the Bishops of Latin America», 23 March 1979.

Another item of news at the Latin American level does us great honor here in El Salvador. It concerns the CLAR, the acronym for the Latin American Conference of Religious, which is an organization that includes thousands and thousands of religious men and women who work in many countries of Latin America. Last week the CLAR had a meeting in the Dominican Republic to elect new leadership, to evaluate their work, and to launch new programs. The honor for El Salvador comes from that fact that a religious sister from among our Salvadoran people, Mother Juana Vanegas, an Oblate of the Sacred Heart, was elected vice-president of that Latin American Conference of Religious. (Applause) During their meeting in Santo Domingo, they wrote a letter that you can read on the first page of *Orientación*⁵. In the name of the thousands of religious in Latin America, the letter expresses solidarity with the archdiocese and the archbishop of San Salvador. I want to thank them most cordially. (Applause)

I also ask you to offer a prayer of thanks to the Lord for another bit of good news: today in Santa Ana they are celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the minor seminary there. Bishop Barrera was kind enough to invite me to attend, so I'll have the pleasure of accompanying him in the anniversary celebration. Let us earnestly pray to the Lord so that this seminary will always keep forming the priests that our world of today needs and wants.

I want also to congratulate the new priest of our archdiocese, and I think I should include here the prayers of all of you as well. Yesterday afternoon, in a picturesque outdoor setting in Suchitoto, we placed our hands on Ezequiel de Jesús Gámez to ordain him a priest. At this moment he is celebrating his first Mass at the Suchitoto parish church. We wish him a holy priesthood for the service of our Salvadoran people.

We send greetings also to the two new pastors of the archdiocese: Father Benjamín Rodríguez in Monte San Juan, Cuzcatlán, and Father Rafael Palacios in the parish of San Francisco in Mejicanos. May this change bring greater fruit to both parishes.

I want to express my gratitude and send greetings to several parishes for the warm reception they gave me this week. They include the communities of San Jose Villanueva, San José Cortés, San Francisco in Mejicanos, and Suchitoto.

If I haven't been visiting much this week, sisters and brothers, it wasn't because I was fleeing from difficulties. It was because I accepted the invitation of the International Institute of the Heart of Jesus, which organized a theological and pastoral seminar on devotion to the Sacred Heart; it took place in the Dominican Republic, in the beautiful city of Santo Domingo⁶. I brought back from there many theological and pastoral treasures for our community. Our people are very devoted to the Heart of Jesus, a devotion that is being adapted to the modern-day demands of the church. I want to tell you that there is no reason to restrict this devotion. To the contrary, we should try to imbue our devotion to the Sacred Heart with same renewed theological spirit that our other popular devotions have. We'll soon have an opportunity to treat this theme in greater detail. But yes, I want to tell you that my week in Santo Domingo has been very profitable for this pastoral work I'm trying to carry out with you.

⁵ *Orientación* (25 March 1979).

⁶ Archbishop Romero left for the Dominican Republic on Monday 19 March and returned Friday 23 March 1979. See *Monseñor Oscar A. Romero, Su diario*, San Salvador 2000, 127.

I want to send greetings to that part of Honduras where the people listen to all our homilies. I especially greet Father Luis Alonso Díaz, who was also there in Santo Domingo, and his parish of Cucuyagua in Copán, Honduras. May the Lord bless the communion that unites you beloved Hondurans with our archdiocesan community of San Salvador.

I am thankful for an invitation we have received to give a conference on the church in Latin America at the National University. Two other priests, Father Jesús Delgado and Father Octavio Cruz, and I will give the conference this Tuesday at five o'clock in the afternoon.

Events of the week

I invite everyone to experience our church community more intensely and in ever closer communion with the bishop and with the pope. We are the light that Christ has enkindled in the world to illuminate all the realities around us. While I was away this week in the Dominican Republic, some very serious things happened. My main reason for mentioning them is to urge you to reflect on them. The three things I would like you to think especially about are these: first, the labor conflicts; second, the murder of Ernesto Liebes; and third, the occupation of the cathedral.

First of all, I speak about the labor conflicts that have provoked a series of strikes. Of these, the strike at CEL has no doubt affected the country most since the workers interrupted the electric energy for twenty-three hours. There's no question that this action resulted in great losses for the country. It affected all the citizens who enjoy the benefits of electric light, and it forced everyone to live for twenty-three hours in the same way as do so many of our *campesinos* and our slum dwellers, who never receive electricity. (Applause)

The first thing I think we should all ask ourselves is this: how did we arrive at such a tense situation in labor-management relations as the one we're experiencing now? I don't believe that the tension is only the result of the events of recent days, nor has it been provoked only by the irresponsible desire of some to create unrest in the country. Even less do I believe that the archbishop has been the cause of all these strikes.

Be well aware of this: there exists in El Salvador an unjust social structure. This should disturb us all. This is the root cause of all these problems. The existing legal channels do not allow the workers to defend their interests because the labor code and other labor laws are mainly concerned with protecting the rights of management. Even the Ministry of Labor has confessed that these laws are useless for the present situation⁷. The conditions under which workers can legally call a strike are such that existing laws make it practically impossible to do so. The Ministry of Labor can be asked to make an inspection so as to prevent injustices from being committed against the workers, but in most cases such an inspection is ineffective. It's a disgrace that the people sent by the Ministry do not feel solidarity with the workers but rather often let themselves be bribed by the management. (Applause). The fact that we were without electric energy for twenty-three hours ought to make us realize that both the labor laws and the situation of the workers are intolerable. Both the laws and the workers' situation, therefore, need to be urgently reviewed and substantially improved.

⁷ *La Crónica del Pueblo* (15 March 1979).

The lack of electric energy for twenty-three hours has finally made the private sector aware of the (I quote) «indescribable pain and acute anguish that were felt throughout the country as the result of the lack of electricity»⁸. Those are the words of ANEP. I would add that we should hope that their solidarity is sincere and that it leads them to be truly concerned about solving the longstanding problems of so many people who day after day are denied the benefit of electricity and so many other vital services. Otherwise, their recent pronouncements will be seen as no more than an attempt to utilize the pain of the poor for the sake of protecting their own interests and preserving their positions of privilege and domination over the workers. (Applause)

Concerning the deaths that reportedly resulted from the blackout⁹, I profoundly lament the fact that innocent lives had to be added to the long list of the victims of the present situation. Also, the critical conditions affecting hospitals as a result of this strike are a clear indication of another problem, namely, the lack of adequate equipment for emergency situations such as the present one. I therefore express my agreement with the Medical College of El Salvador, which has pointed out the failure of both the Council on Public Health and the Regulatory Committee of the Medical Profession to fulfill their functions¹⁰.

The protagonists of the labor conflict at the CEL ought to reflect on their own responsibility for resolving this conflict in a peaceful and just way so as to avoid the need for such extreme measures as cutting off the electrical power for twenty-three hours. The directors of the autonomous institution CEL should abide by the agreement that resolved the conflict and not take reprisals against the union and its leaders. And the workers, now that they are more aware of the strength they have when they organize well and support one another, should not abuse their new power but rather should use it for the common good, which means for the interests of the working-class majority. In turn, they should take into due account the needs of management. In saying this, I do not mean that the legitimate right of workers to organize should be denied them out of fear that they will abuse the right, nor should they be subject to persecution or brutal repression. To act that way is also an abuse of power, whether by management or by the government.

What is needed is to channel these powers with just laws. That's why I urge the lawyers and all those knowledgeable in these matters, including unions and management, to collaborate with the government in proposing labor legislation that considers all the diverse interests and defends them impartially. I recognize that, thank God, the government has not reacted brutally in this conflict at the CEL, as it has on other occasions. I hope that they continue to resist the strong pressures that would have them take unjust repressive measures against the unions. The function of government should be to encourage open dialogue between the different parties and to create effective and just legal channels. (Applause)

There has also been a very serious conflict at the Delicia factory. I want to implore both sides to adopt constructive attitudes that will facilitate negotiations with the aim of arriving at a just solution. I have here a special request for you, beloved workers now striking at the Delicia factory. Please listen to me! An employee of the Delicia factory, Napoleón Mina, is being held hostage by the striking workers, and they refuse to free him even though his mother died

⁸ *La Prensa Gráfica* (21 March 1979).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ «Statement of the Medical College of El Salvador» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (24 March 1979).

yesterday. He is inconsolable because he will not be able to see her for the last time. My appeal to you strikers is to arrange it so that Mr. Mina can go and pay the final respect of a loving son to his beloved mother. «Do not do to others that which you would not want them to do to you» (Tob 4:15). For my part, I want to tell Mr. Mina that during this Mass in the cathedral we are going to offer a special prayer for the eternal rest of his mother, and if I have time and he cannot attend the funeral services, I will pay my respects to her in his name.

Let us now say a bit about the other cases, such as the tragic outcome of the four kidnap victims. I can only lament the killing of Ernesto Liebes by the FARN¹¹. I am pained that in El Salvador there is yet another family that is suffering because of the violence. I express my condolences to all the family of Mr. Liebes, and I offer my prayers for the deceased. Every violent death grieves me, including the deaths of the policemen who were killed by the bombs. I stated this in Puebla through a telephone dialogue that was broadcast on YSAX, and I will always stand by what I said at the funerals of Mr. Borgonovo and Father Navarro: «Every life is sacred, whether of the rich or of the poor». I repeat now once again that no one can make an idol of violence by making it the sole source of justice. Pope John Paul II said this past week that no one can be sacrificed on the altar of political interests, even if the interests are just. I hope the other kidnapped persons don't meet the same fate. To that end I unite myself with the petitions of their families, the International Red Cross, Amnesty International, and the Human Rights Commission, and I renew my call to the members of FARN, asking them to seek a solution that will not involve the sacrifice of human life. Enough is enough!

I believe that I should also express my solidarity with the mothers and the relatives of the 113 disappeared persons and insist again with the government that it put aside its attitude of secrecy. Here I could add the names of many mothers and wives who continue arriving at our offices with tears on their faces, denouncing the assaults by the security forces, especially in the villages.

I am asking the government to free all the disappeared persons that are held in its power and to inform us what it has done with them. It seems to me that this is what the government must do out of a sense of honor, not out of weakness; it is a question of justice, not of compromising with terrorists. (Applause) The government can no longer deny that it has captured these persons since there exists clear evidence which has been recognized by international organizations such as the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the OAS, Amnesty International, and others.

I can attest that most of the families of these disappeared persons have done everything possible to learn the whereabouts of their loved ones. They have filed for writs of habeas corpus without success since the Supreme Court of Justice turns a deaf ear to them. They have written letters to the president, they have requested international support, they have mounted demonstrations and hunger strikes, and so on. Now is the time for them to be heard, so as to invalidate completely the excuse of those who want to use violence to obtain the freedom of the disappeared persons or else information about them. Up until now, sadly, not only has the government refused to give information, but people continue to disappear. In less than a

¹¹ The body of Ernesto Liebes was found on the night of March 21 in a car in the Montserrat district of San Salvador. *La Prensa Gráfica* (22 March 1979).

month, from February 15 to March 11, five more persons have disappeared. Their names can be found *Orientación*¹².

Finally, a few words about the occupation of the cathedral. Recently different organizations have been using this method in order to make their voice heard or to protest against something¹³. Don't they realize that by so doing they are impeding and obstructing the work and the prophetic ministry of the archdiocese? Don't they see that, thanks be to God, the church is already fulfilling her mission by doing what the pope called for: «calling injustices by their proper name»¹⁴? You know what they say about the person who destroys the umbrella that is protecting him from the rain—let's hope that doesn't happen here. I therefore ask all Christians and all persons of good will to refrain from this type of action. Occupying the cathedral is not an effective recourse.

I hope that from now on there will be no more twenty-three hour blackouts and no more murders of kidnap victims. We do not need such actions to make us more aware of the structural evils that bedevil our country. There is only one effective way forward, and it is the call to reconciliation that is found in this Sunday's word of God

Baptism and penance: paths to reconciliation

At the beginning of Lent I told you that it was during this season that three groups of Christians used to walk together in faith: the catechumens, who were preparing to receive baptism; the penitents, who had been unfaithful to their baptism and so covered themselves with ashes and asked for mercy; and the faithful, who could thank God that they didn't have to repent for betraying God's law. All three groups, however, felt that they formed one single people in need of God's singular mercy. That is why the Council urges us to make of Lent a celebration of the unity that exists among all our people, both righteous and unrighteous. Whether baptized or penitent, we are all sinners and we are all sisters and brothers. Like the Jews in their Babylonian exile, let us listen for the voice of the Lord who draws near to liberate us, but let us also do our part by having great faith.

«God so loved the world», says today's gospel, «that he gave his very own Son so that the world would be saved and so that all who believe in him...» (John 3:16). This is the condition for salvation: believing, having faith, placing our hope in God. May all the people of El Salvador place their faith in Christ and participate in the pilgrimage of Lent so that this coming Sunday of Resurrection will bring us not only the memory of the Risen One of twenty centuries ago but also the true resurrection of our people, a people that now lies prostrate but is called to rise up again by the same voice of the Lord. Let it be so. (Applause).

¹² The newly disappeared persons were Daniel Coello Flores, Óscar Jiménez Ruiz, Eleuterio Hernández, Marciano Meléndez Dueñas, and Atilio César Franco. «Where Are They?» in *Orientación* (25 March 1979).

¹³ On 11 March 1979 the cathedral was occupied by the Popular Revolutionary Bloc and on 21 March 1979 by the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners and Disappeared Persons. *La Crónica del Pueblo* (12 March and 21 March 1979).

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to Youth in the General Audience», 21 February 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (25 February 1979).