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LENT, PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE PASCHAL COVENANT¹

Fifth Sunday of Lent

1 April 1979

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:7-9

John 12:2-33

First of all, I thank the Somascan Fathers and the beloved youths who are being educated under their charism for the wonderful testimony they have brought to the cathedral today². Their statement coincides completely with the ideals we have been preaching, which include an evangelical preference for the poor and those who suffer, without excluding anybody. Saint Jerome Emiliani was a true son of the church, and he felt deeply this preference of the heart of Christ and of all true Catholics. Let us hope that this wonderful gesture of the Somascan Fathers, who are concelebrating with their archbishop this morning, is appreciated by all our dear priests, religious, and faithful so that together we can build the pilgrim church of Christ here in the archdiocese.

And that is precisely what the words of the Sacred Scriptures we just heard are inviting us to do. During these Sundays of Lent we have been developing the theme of covenant. On the First Sunday of Lent, we treated God's covenant with Noah after the great flood. On the Second Sunday it was the covenant with Abraham, which promised that he would father a people in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The Third Sunday presented us with that same people, gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai as they affirm the covenant with Moses and proclaim, «We will do all that the Lord says» (Exod 19:8). They declare they will abide by the Decalogue. Last Sunday that covenant went through one of its most difficult and dangerous periods, the Babylonian captivity, but the remnant of Israel was again restored and remained faithful to God. So today we arrive at the Fifth Sunday of Lent, always within this perspective of the covenant.

Today one of the most sensitive prophets raises his voice. It is Jeremiah, who has not only understood all the commitments of the former covenant—what the prophets called the «covenant of our ancestors»—but now looks toward the future and what the future will bring. He is the first prophet in the Bible to speak of a new covenant, which is precisely the covenant that will find its culmination in Christ, for Christ is the one that brings to fulfillment all God's promises. There are just eight days until Holy Week, sisters and brothers, and it is wonderful to have this prophet explaining to us the meaning of Lent and of Holy Week. He tells us how the old covenant is now being renewed with the promise of a new covenant which will be sealed,

¹ Since there is no recorded version of this homily, the transcript of the first edition has been followed. See ROMERO, O. A., *Su pensamiento*, Vol. IV, *Publicaciones Pastorales del Arzobispado*, San Salvador 1981, 239-254.

² Before the homily the Somascan Fathers read a brief message stating their loyalty to and support for Archbishop Romero.

not with the blood of animals, but with that of the immaculate Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, Jesus Christ (John 1:29). This is the new covenant that was foretold, the covenant that Christ is coming to ratify.

I encourage all of you who are listening to these words to try to understand your Christian religion not only as a bunch of truths that must be believed or a bunch of commandments that must be obeyed— or even worse, as a bunch of prohibitions: «Don't do this!» I can understand that when religion is seen simply as dogmas or moral laws or prohibitions, there are people who feel disgusted and turned off by religion. But we are not dealing with a theory. The beautiful and attractive part of the Christian religion is what we have been explaining during Lent: it is a covenant. And what is a covenant? It is life in communion; it is the history that unfolds when we live in communion with the One who possesses the fullness of life. People don't want to worship God just because of an abstract commandment; they don't obey laws just because the Decalogue demands that they stop doing things that are immoral. Rather all those theoretical concepts— of immorality and morality, of holiness, of truth and falsehood—become part of a vital, personal relationship. We feel that they correspond to a covenant that God has made with us, and we with him.

Now we can understand why the covenant is compared to a marriage. A husband and a wife do not obey the matrimonial laws as simple precepts or codes but rather as the expression of a loving relationship of dialogue and interpersonal commitment. It will be a beautiful day indeed when all Christians look toward God and try to please and delight him with the same love that spouses do. As is the way with spouses, if there has been some disagreement or misunderstanding or even infidelity, God is ready to forgive! This is how Lent and Holy Week would have us view our religion.

We are not simply spectators of this people of Israel who lived centuries ago and entered into a covenant with God through Abraham and Moses. They may appear to us to be existing on the distant horizon of history, but now we are going to look at ourselves. We are the people who have inherited the promises made to Abraham, the commitments undertaken by Moses, and the calls to renewal proclaimed by the prophets. But all that, Paul tells us, is just a foreshadowing of the great reality that is Christ and his redeeming sacrifice.

Let us approach Holy Week not with historical reminiscences but with commitment to the here and now. Let us feel that we are approaching this Holy Week just as we are, as individual persons with our particular names, with our sins and miseries, with our ambitions and hopes, with our projects and failures. We approach Holy Week as individuals, as families, as a people, and as this nation of El Salvador, a country with such difficult problems, with all its injustices and its violence, but also with its people that prays and has hope. This concrete history of 1979 approaches Holy Week to celebrate our covenant with God. The Lord has not abandoned us! Every year he invites us to celebrate the new covenant he has made with us.

Lent is preparation for the celebration of the paschal covenant. The first characteristic of the new covenant is its interior aspect. The covenant does not consist in exterior laws carved on stone tablets; it resides within the heart of each one of us. Holy Week calls us toward a covenant of intimacy in our spiritual life. Second, Christ is the author of the new covenant. Third, the new covenant becomes ours through baptism, and that is why I urge you all—and myself as well—to renew the grace of our baptism.

Interiority, a characteristic of the new covenant

We should take note of who this prophet is who speaks to us in today's first reading. The person and the mission of the prophet Jeremiah are an extremely interesting part of the biblical literature. He was a sensitive man who did not want to offend others, but the tragic circumstances in which he lived forced him to utter very harsh words. No one suffered as much as Jeremiah did when he had to rebuke the Jewish people for being unfaithful to their covenant with God. No one suffered as Jeremiah did when he had to announce that his people would suffer the consequences of their sins and the punishment of a stern God. But no one understood as well as Jeremiah did that the covenants God had made with Noah, Abraham, and Moses were asking for the hearts of the people. Yet all around him he saw only a pile of moralistic legalities and traditions that undid the whole spirit of the covenants. No one understood as well as Jeremiah the saying of Christ: «The letter kills, but the spirit gives life» (2 Cor 3:6).

The mission of Jeremiah must therefore be in accord with his charism. The word «charism» means the experience a person has had with God. Charism is the unique grace and mission that God gives to each of us through our temperament and our experience. God conferred on Jeremiah a special charism of intimacy because he was going to give the prophet the special mission that is expressed clearly in today's readings.

The verses that were read today are like the flower of the entire book of Jeremiah: «Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with your fathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt» (Jer 31:31-32a). This is the first experience that Jeremiah's message offers us to reflect on this morning. This is what we have been seeing all through Lent. Remember all that history of God's great love of humankind. God has always been faithful! That's a beautiful image: «I took them by the hand». It's like when a father takes his child's hand or when a mother finds a child who got lost—what tenderness they show! This is the faithful, untiring love of God. «But even though I was their Lord, they broke my covenant» (Jer 31:32b). This is the way we respond to God—such is the sad history of the old covenant.

The prophet therefore goes on to declare, «I will make a new covenant that will consist in this: I will place my law within their bosoms and I will write it upon their hearts» (Jer 31:33). Take note that it was above all an interior covenant. God was not going to load more stone tablets of laws on the already tired and burdened shoulders of the people of Israel. That's what the laws were like: stones. How heavy those laws were for people who were already exhausted! So God told them, «No longer will I write laws on stone. I am going to write them on your hearts. I am going to dwell within you and transform you from within». It is with this message of interior renewal that God's word today urges us to practice a religion that consists not of decalogues and dogmas and a bunch of theories, but of intimate personal options and interior practices. Our religion should not be a matter of exterior places and things. It should be a sincere search for God within us, a search that will bring forth fruits of love, justice, and truth.

This is something we are seeing every day, sisters and brothers. When we are friendly with a person, we don't pay attention to external matters. We don't focus on appearances but rather appreciate the person's sincerity, love, and esteem. That is the direction in which God's

relation with humanity is tending. Yes, there is a certain hierarchy in the relationship, and there are a few external structures, but they are not the substance of the relationship. All the beauty of our churches and all the magnificence of our rites would be of no use at all if we did not have hearts that spoke to the Lord as lovers and friends. That's the way I feel when I see you here in the cathedral. The main reason you come here is a loving relationship with God in which we place our hope. The only thing I would like my preaching to achieve is the nurturing of a hopeful, loving, faithful relationship of our people with their God. «In you, Lord, have I hoped. You are the reason for my hope». I am truly pleased when I see individuals and communities converted to this relationship of intimacy with their God.

Within this intimate interiority the word of God tells us something else: «No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsfolk to acknowledge the Lord because everyone, from the least to the greatest, shall know me» (Jer 31:34). Notice that not even the magisterium is enough, despite all the beautiful doctrine which guides us—from the words of the pope to the humblest catechist. Where is God? How must we serve him? In the new covenant God says that such teaching is a helpful aid, but what is important is that each person learn how to know God personally. This word «know» in its biblical sense means something vital. It signifies the delectable knowledge of something that delights us. It's the kind of knowledge that guides human life. It is the kind of faith that says, «I believe. I accept what God says, not as something theoretical but as a personal option for my God». It is the attitude of a person who says to God, «I believe in you, Lord. Not only do I believe what you say, but I turn my whole life over to you».

This is what the new covenant is all about. It is a covenant in which we will no longer need anyone to tell us what to do or what to believe. It will still be necessary for us to know whether we are abiding by the true faith and the true morality, and that's why the pope and the church's teaching will always be necessary. They will be the touchstone to help us know whether the way we're going is the right way. But we won't obey for fear of punishment or excommunication, nor will we obey in order to be on good terms with someone. Rather, we will do it because we feel that God fills our being and that the church's doctrine truly matches our aspirations. We will try to live Christian morality because it provides us with the most authentic path to encountering our God. This is the interior dimension of our faith.

Finally, let us speak about the interiority of forgiveness. That's the way today's reading ends: «They will know me when I forgive their crimes and no longer remember their sins» (Jer 31:34c). Try this test if you have not already done so. During this Holy Week, go to confession! Encourage your conscience to repent. I can't explain with more words what the Bible has already said. There's no need for me or anyone else to say it. It is something experienced vividly only by those who feel it and do it. The greatest sinner who may be listening to me—it could be me!—need only repent before the confessor and express his pain: «Lord, I have sinned. I don't want to sin any more. Do not remember all my hypocrisy, my selfishness, my materialism, my pride, my sensuality. Cleanse me, Lord!» With this kind of gesture and a priest who says, «In the name of Christ, I absolve you of your sins», we feel what the Bible says today: «They will know me». We will know God with a simple and practical knowledge. It's like a friend who has lost the friendship of another person, and then they have embraced again. Nobody can explain that. Or it's like the boy who has broken up with his girlfriend, and then suddenly they renew their relationship. Or it's like spouses who have fought but later unite together again and make the family happy. That is what the Bible is saying, and there's no one

who can explain it. You have to live it! That where Lent and Holy Week are directing us: to that covenant of interiority.

Christ is the author of the new covenant

What is the basis for Jeremiah's certainty in promising that the new covenant will bring happiness? This was something he was just foretelling, but we have the privilege of seeing it made a reality in Christ Jesus. Following the tone set by Jeremiah, today's second reading and the gospel explain to us perfectly what Christ has come to do.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, I would like to include the Passover as another theme for Holy Week because the covenant was celebrated every year during a feast called the Passover, or what we now call the paschal mystery. The Jews celebrated the Passover by slaughtering a lamb and eating it together as a family, for that was what God had commanded on the night when the firstborn were to be killed in Egypt. The Jews were to kill a lamb and then mark their doors with its blood; this was the sign that would prevent the exterminating angel from doing them harm (Exod 12:3-14). This was a symbol of the blood of the Lamb that would later free us from punishment and grant us pardon. Each year at Passover, when the eldest person in the family broke the unleavened bread, he would recall, «We do this because we were prisoners in Egypt, but the Lord rescued us from there, and so we are committed to him» (Deut 6:20-22). Each year they relived their Passover and renewed their covenant.

It is for this reason that Christ also wanted to celebrate the Passover, which occurs during the months of March or April, according to Jewish custom. Christ joined with his apostles during this feast of the Passover because it was during this season that he was going to shed his blood. He told them, «This is the blood of the new and everlasting covenant» (Luke 22:20). It is Christ who is able to unite these two concepts that have now become inseparable: new covenant and paschal mystery. Christ shed his blood and then soon after was raised up. Death and resurrection—these are the two sides of the paschal mystery that seals the new covenant of Christians.

Christ is the author of the covenant. Here I want to recall for you a delightful phrase that John Paul II uses in his new encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*. When speaking of the sacrifice of Christ as the Redeemer of humankind, the pope states the following: «The redemption of the world is, at its deepest root, the fullness of justice in a human heart» (RH 9). This statement is too lofty to be understood in all its greatness. It means that Christ, in offering himself to the Father in the sacrifice of the cross, is offering him the fullness of justice in a human heart. From that moment, God must in justice forgive every sinner who asks him for pardon through Christ. Pardon is given not because of the merits of the repentant sinner but because of Christ, who brought about the fullness of justice.

Why is this so? Examine this concept closely. Sin is disobedience, whereas redemption is obedience, even obedience unto death. Christ is Redeemer because he obeyed his Father not only heroically but also divinely by bearing pain in his body so as to offer it in payment for the disobedience of all men and women. That is why the prophet Isaiah can say, «God laid on his back all our iniquities». Burdened with our own miseries, Christ climbed up Calvary and handed himself over in sacrifice.

This is not an impassive Christ. Listen carefully to the first reading, where Saint Paul says in his letter to the Hebrews, «With loud cries and tears he offered prayers and supplications to the one who was able to save him from death» (Heb 5:7). We need to get closer to this protagonist of Holy Week and see him as the Bible presents him. Today's second reading presents him to us as one offering prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears.

Let us complete this vision with what we read in the gospel, where Christ seems to be experiencing a crisis in his vocation; suddenly he exclaims, «Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour?" But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour!» (John 12:27). See how strong the instinct of self-preservation is! Christ was not an unfeeling being. Christ was a man of flesh and blood, nerves and muscles, just like us. He was a man who felt just the way anyone of us would feel if we were taken away to the National Guard and tortured there. What do those persons feel? I have heard some horrible testimonies. But what is that in comparison with Christ, who experienced all the torments of torture that ended up with his hanging on the cross? This Sunday, sisters and brothers, we are anticipating the night in Gethsemane. In our Christian reflection today, let us not forget the figure of Christ, his face bathed in tears as he cried out to the one who could save him (Heb 5:7). He cried out as one overwhelmed by what was coming upon him, «My soul is troubled. Father, save me from this hour!» But his final disposition is that of obedience: «But it is for this that I have come to this hour» (John 12:27). This is what is beautiful about Christ's sacrifice: he gave himself over freely in obedience to the Father.

We will contemplate this passion of Christ during Holy Week as we make the way of the cross, but let us probe deeper into it now with this thought: everything Christ went through would have been of no use at all if he were not motivated by obedience. The essence of Christ's passion was his obedient surrender to the Father. He offered himself with a sense of making reparation: «Father, if those lashes are necessary for you to forgive all the sins of the world, then let them fall on me. If the crown of thorns must be woven so as to pierce my temples, then let it cleave to my head so that you will forgive all my sisters and brothers. If there is need for the horror of having my muscles pierced with nails and my side opened by a spear, then let it be, Lord, because that means the redemption of my sisters and brothers». This is what is most beautiful and attractive in Christ: he took the place of sinners like me. I should have suffered, I should have been punished, I should have been thrown into hell, forever estranged from the Father. But Christ wanted to bear the fullness of my guilt so that I might find reconciliation. And now that same obedience with which Christ paid for all my disobedience is mine!

As I've said, Christ is the author of our covenant through his obedient death, but let us not forget the other side of the coin. We should be very aware that the reason Christ is the author of our covenant and the guarantor of all our hope is that he rose up again. The resurrection is the proof that the power of God has accepted this sacrifice. In the resurrection God gave Christ new life so that he would die no more. That means that those Christians who celebrate Holy Week only up until the procession of the Holy Burial are mutilating the paschal mystery. They fail to understand the whole mystery of redemption. So I am urging you right now to make Easter the most important celebration of Holy Week. Let us celebrate above all Holy Saturday night, the moment when our faith allows us to see Christ rising glorious from his sufferings, just as our readings today tell us.

In presenting Christ with his face bathed in tears and speaking about the outcome of his prayer, the reading uses paradoxical language: «With loud cries and tears he offered prayers and supplications to the one who was able to save him from death, and in his distress he was heard» (Heb 5:7). That's ironic because he was not heard! The Father allowed him to experience the height of pain. But in a way he *was* heard because the reading continues by saying, «When he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him» (Heb 5:9). Similarly, the gospel does not dwell long on that critical moment in the messianic vocation of Jesus, for even as he expresses his fear—«Now my soul is troubled, but it is for this that I have come» (John 12:27)—he utters the prayer with which today's gospel begins: «The hour has come when the Son of Man will be glorified» (John 12:23).

Take note of two biblical words used today: the letter to the Hebrews speaks of Christ being «made perfect», and the gospel speaks of «glorification». How can it be that Christ, who is horrified by the thought of his passion, is already talking about being glorified? It's important for us to understand this, sisters and brothers; otherwise, we cannot understand the mystery of redemption. Christ became the salvation of humankind, and now his glory is enormous. From heaven he now sends us his life and his Spirit. We place all our hope in him because he accepted the passage through death, but then from death he passed into life. This is being perfected, so that Christ can say that his glorification began in Gethsemane. The consummation of this work had already begun during the agonies of the passion. If Christ had risen without passing through death, he would not have all the merit he has now. Likewise, the passion without resurrection would be failure. The two things together make up the paschal mystery, which now gives us life. The church also draws its life from the paschal mystery, the obedient death of Christ and his resurrection, which is God's avowal that he has accepted this reparation. If the resurrection did not include Christ's death, it would not produce all the joy it does. The victory of Christ would not be so decisive if it had not left behind a blood-soaked Calvary and an opened tomb which witnessed him emerging victorious after seeing him enter humiliated. This is the mystery of Christian redemption: dying in order to rise.

The new covenant becomes ours through baptism

The baptism of each one of us, your baptism and mine, is what makes Christ's death and resurrection yours and mine. When we were baptized by the priest as a minister of God, our lives were marked forever with the obedient death of Christ and the glorious resurrection of the Lord. All baptized persons carry the mark of the death and resurrection of Christ. That is why it is during this time of Lent and Easter that we ought to return to our baptismal commitments. In the old days, as I told you, baptisms took place on Holy Saturday night. The whole of Lent was spent preparing the catechumens.

Today the church wants all of us baptized Christians to renew the beauty of our baptism during Lent. One of the most beautiful celebrations is Holy Saturday night, a time when we should renew our baptismal faith and promises. I hope that many Christians will attend, especially young people. From the altar we will ask, «Do you renounce Satan?» And you will answer, «Yes, we renounce him». «Do you believe in God?» «Yes, we believe». You who are baptized will be saying, «I take possession of Christ's redemption, and I make it mine. I trust in that alone and not in the passing things of life. I trust in Christ, the truly rich and truly powerful one. He is eternally young and beautiful; he is everything for everybody».

That is what today's gospel, written by Christians, tells us. We shouldn't forget that Saint John is here narrating for us an episode of Christ's life that is near the time of his passion. The gospel reflection occurred long after the events happened, just as a historian writes about the history of what happened years ago. John wrote his gospel in another period of time, and he wrote it for the Christians who were helping him to reflect on the commitments that come with baptism. Similarly, today we could say that we, as Christians on this Sunday in 1979, are reflecting on this mystery of our baptism, which incorporates us into the paschal mystery of Christ, and from this we draw conclusions. Therefore, when Christ speaks today, his words may be reflecting the deliberations of that community of Saint John's time. But still, we hear Christ say something that helps us understand the meaning of redemption through baptism: «I assure you that, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a kernel; but if it dies, it produces much fruit» (John 12:24). And the gospel continues: «Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will reward whoever serves me» (John 12:25-26). These words are meant for us; they aren't just some historical saying from twenty centuries ago. This is the paschal mystery incarnated in the Body of Christ, which is all of us here today, the baptized Christians of 1979. Christ is telling each one of us, «If you want your life and your mission to be as fruitful as mine, follow my example. Become a grain that lets itself be buried. Let yourself be killed. Have no fear. Those who flee from suffering will remain alone. No one is more lonely than those who are selfish. But if you give your life out of love for others, as I'm giving mine for all of you, you will reap a great harvest, you'll have the deepest satisfactions. Do not fear death or threats for the Lord goes with you».

When Jesus talks of those who want to save their lives (John 12:25a), he is using biblical language to describe people who just want to be comfortable and not make commitments. The ones who will lose their lives are those who shun conflicts and avoid situations that require a commitment from all of us. It's really a horrible thing just to live comfortably and without any suffering, not getting involved in problems, staying well connected politically, economically, and socially. Such people have lacked nothing; they've had everything. What use is it? They will lose their lives. But Christ says, «Those who out of love for me uproot themselves and accompany the people and share in the suffering of the poor and take on themselves the pain and abuse of the outcasts—these will save their lives because my Father will reward them» (John 12:25b-26). Brothers and sisters, this is where God's word is calling us today, and let me tell you with all the conviction I can muster: it is worthwhile to be Christian!

Life of the church

Since the church has given us guidelines about how to live as Christians in our own day, we cannot close our eyes and say, «Medellín, Puebla, Vatican II—they're all useless». Rather, we have to see what they are saying. Baptized persons of today have to be ready to understand these things, and that's why we need to bring our reflection and our teaching down to earth. You yourselves should be critical of what I'm going to tell you. That is why I've told you that you should learn to read the newspapers carefully. Where is the truth? Where is the lie? Or what is more serious—where is the deception they try to sneak into the message?

At this time I present to you something about the church that we are trying to construct with its center of unity, which is the pope. This week the pope has spoken about the true

meaning of sharing with others. Sharing is not simply giving alms, but opening our hearts to others, especially those most in need³. The pope has spoken these words to us because we often feel satisfied after tossing a coin to a poor person. That's not what God wants; he wants us to share. Even if it means sharing your poverty, share it with those who have less than you.

Our clergy are going to meet on Tuesday this week in San José de la Montaña. We will celebrate a penitential service during which all the priests will confess to one another. We will receive the sacrament of reconciliation as all good Christians should do. If we are sinners—and many will tell us we are—we are also repentant, and we ask for forgiveness. At this time and in the name of all my beloved priests, I ask the pardon of the people I am supposed to be leading for not having served them with all the dedication that the Gospel demands. I ask pardon for having left the people confused at times and for softening the hard message of the cross. For all this we want to ask forgiveness. I ask you to pray for your priests, especially next Tuesday, so that they will truly be authentic Christians.

I also want to speak to you about how we're going to celebrate our Holy Week. There will be a few changes. The first has to do with Palm Sunday, just a week away. We'll be doing the blessing of palms in the church of El Calvario, and from there we'll leave in procession. We'll have the Palm Sunday Mass in front of the cathedral.

Another change concerns the famous Procession of Silence on Holy Thursday, which many people treat not as an act of worship but as a profane event. If we truly want to pay homage to Christ on the tragic night of his trial, I urge you to make this procession a truly Christian celebration. To this end, with the help of radio station YSAX we will be guiding the procession from ten o'clock to twelve midnight. If any town or village wants to join in with these reflections, they can plan their Procession of Silence at that time. The parishes of San Salvador are also organizing their Processions of Silence and periods of reflection so that during those two hours we are all meditating together on the message of the passion of Christ. In this way we'll also be reducing a bit the congestion of the procession in La Concepción parish, where the excessively large crowds make it hard to keep order.

It will be the same for the Holy Burial, from six-thirty Friday evening until nine at night. With the help of YSAX we will accompany all the processions of the diocese that want to make use of this transmission. At eleven o'clock on Good Friday morning there will be a Way of the Cross inside the cathedral.

My biggest hopes are for Holy Saturday. Let us all come together in the solemn Easter Vigil at seven o'clock on Holy Saturday night to celebrate the triumph of Christ. It will be broadcast on the radio.

I want to thank UCA Editores for publishing my third pastoral letter, which is also the first one for Bishop Rivera. The book also contains other very interesting studies, including one called *The Church of the Poor and the People's Organizations*. I highly recommend this book to you because our pastoral letter, thanks be to God, has helped orient many people, and this commentary will now make it even better understood. You can find the book right here, at the entrance of the cathedral, when you're leaving today. Also, they're putting out a series of pamphlets that contain the pastoral letters in outline; the text of the letters are found there in

³ JOHN PAUL II, «General Audience of 28 March 1979» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (1 April 1979).

very simple language so that everyone can understand them. I thank the UCA and congratulate them for this work. I hope that this service they have provided the archbishop's teaching office will be blessed by our Lord.

This past week there were meetings of two organizations that are vital to our archdiocese. One is the senate of priest representatives, with whom the bishops consult regarding the problems of the diocese. The other organization is the pastoral council, composed of the priests, religious, and faithful who help the bishop in the great task of ministering to the whole diocese. It is through this organization, which is improving all the time, that we offer our services to the archdiocese.

I give special thanks to the National University, whose faculty of sciences and humanities invited me, along with Fathers Jesús Delgado and Father Octavio Cruz, to preside at a roundtable discussion on the theme, «The Role of the Church in Latin America». I am delighted to report, sisters and brothers, that the church was warmly welcomed in that great cultural center. The hall was overflowing with people, and many others were outside, all paying close attention. The questions they asked were very interesting, indicating that these very authoritative centers have the wisdom not to marginalize the church. Rather, they listen to her, and they do so by talking directly with us instead of allowing themselves to be influenced by slanderous misinformation. So on Wednesday the university really listened to the church. After the roundtable dialogue, we discussed with the rector and other personnel the difficulties they face in making the university a true center of culture for our people. And that is what it must be! I therefore ask all the university staff—professors, students, organizations—not to let themselves be manipulated so as to destroy this center which gives our country so much hope. Let us all be truly patriotic and make the university a shining center for our land. The church, for her part, is ready to do whatever she can in this regard.

At five o'clock this afternoon, as we do the first of every month, we will have an hour of prayer in the Divina Providencia Hospital. I ask that we pray there for our country.

I extend an invitation in the name of the family of Jaime Apolonio Baires, for whom a month's memorial Mass will be celebrated on Wednesday in the cathedral. I don't want to deprive you of the beautiful words his mother wrote me in this letter: «Our family is keeping its spirits up. We are united in pain and feeling strong. Our son has died, horribly tortured, but we fervently hope that his death will contribute to justice and peace for our people, whom Jaime loved and whose struggle he embraced. Even in our sorrow, we consider ourselves fortunate because we were able to offer our son loving attention during his final moments and to accompany him to his final resting place. There are so many families who do not even know the whereabouts or the state of health of their children after they are arrested, nor do they know where their remains are buried. This inspires in us sympathy and solidarity with these anguished families».

Prayers are also asked for Óscar Armando Interiano, who was found dead in Lake Güija on February 26. I ask the prayers of all of you for him.

Events of the week

As church we are called to reflect upon three aspects of our civic life. The violence we have experienced this week could be called selective violence. On the one hand, in Santa Ana the FPL assassinated a retired major of ORDEN⁴. Also found assassinated this week were a liaison official of ORDEN in Cabañas⁵, a former justice of the peace and assembly member in San Miguel⁶, and two Treasury Police agents⁷.

In addition we need to add other events that perhaps cannot be classified as selective violence but are still related to it. For example, they informed me that in Tres Calles, a village in the Diocese of Santiago de María, there was a new military operation similar to the one that took place on 21 June 1975, when I was living there. A nineteen-year-old youth, Juan Francisco Ostorga, was tortured and taken to an unknown location⁸. This story is related to the event I just recalled because Juan Francisco was just a boy when they arrived at his house four years ago and killed his father, Alberto Ostorga, and his three brothers, Jorge Alberto, José Alfredo, and Héctor David. Who could have told the poor fellow that now his time had arrived? At that time I asked the government to compensate this family, but naturally it never happened. Instead, the torture keeps happening, as if the family had committed some awful sin.

Also, a university student named Fidel Nieto Laínez was captured by the National Police. In Cinquera a very cruel act occurred: a pregnant woman who was unable to flee with others in her group was killed.

Several sorrowful letters have arrived from *campesinas*: «I am the mother of Carlos Martínez Carranza, who was arrested on 17 May 1978. Until now I have learned nothing about him even though we have searched everywhere». Two mothers write from Upatoro saying, «We are the mothers of Julio Ayala Mejía and Víctor Manuel Rivas, who were arrested on 24 April 1977 by five Treasury Police officers. Until now we do not know their whereabouts. We ask that they be set free soon because we are certain that they have not committed any crime. Or if they have, they should be brought before the courts». Another letter says, «I am the mother of Miguel Ángel Rivas Mendoza, who was arrested on 30 March in Ciudad Arce». Nothing is known about him either. At the last minute, here in the cathedral, they brought me the names of other persons; I'm sorry I don't have them at hand.

All these cases, sisters and brothers, and others that have not been mentioned are telling us something about the extreme excesses of violence. This week I have counted twelve murders and homicides, and those are just the ones reported in the papers.

I want to invite everyone, even the extremists, to pause and reflect. Those who are on the right see everything on the left as terrorist, and those who are on the left see everything on the right as reactionary. A more thoughtful perspective would try to make distinctions. Not everything on the left is terrorism; many of the objectives they seek are just and right. It isn't

⁴ Fernando Moreira Rodríguez. *La Prensa Gráfica* (27 March 1979).

⁵ Rafael Sibrián. *El Mundo* (29 March 1979).

⁶ Tadeo Alberto Ayala Villanueva. *El Mundo* (29 March 1979) and *La Prensa Gráfica* (30 March 1979).

⁷ Juan Esteban Reyes Henríquez and José Humberto Torres. *La Prensa Gráfica* (31 March 1979).

⁸ «Press Bulletin of the Salvadoran Commission of Human Rights», 30 March 1979, in *La Crónica del Pueblo* (31 March 1979).

terrorism simply to ask for social justice and better wages. There shouldn't be repression of labor unions and other legitimate movements and leftist organizations as if they were all terrorist. Distinctions must be made. As we've already said, we are not in agreement with any kind of fanatical violence, but if just claims are made, then they must be attended to. Likewise, on the right not every pronouncement is coming from the FALANGE⁹. There are also some venerable voices, and there are good capitalists who are trying to dialogue and to understand the difficulties; they want to do their part in putting the church's teaching into practice. That would certainly be salvation!

All types of extremism, especially those that myopically view everything in black and white, are very dangerous. I want to tell both sides what Medellín said about peace: «We want to direct our call first to those who have a greater share of wealth, culture, or power. We know that there are leaders in Latin America who are aware of the needs of the people and try to remedy them. They are also aware that the privileged sectors often join together and use every means at their disposal to put pressure on those who govern, thus obstructing necessary changes. In some instances, this resistance to change takes on drastic forms that result in the destruction of life and property» (M 2,17). Here the document cites the words of Paul VI about «those who provoke explosive revolutions of desperation».

Another aspect of our civic situation this week is the petition to reform the labor code. A more broad and comprehensive law is needed to help resolve our conflicts. The Ministry of Labor, the CUTS, and the Chamber of Commerce¹⁰ have already spoken about the need to reform the labor code. I am happy to say that the church is in agreement with this petition, and I repeat my call to the lawyers and the unions. Neither unions nor management should be neglected in any reform of the code because it is only by reconciling the interests of all involved that a truly just law will be created.

Many of the conflicts continue. The strike on bus routes 5 and 28 was resolved by arbitration, and the strike at La Delicia is in the process of resolution. However, a new strike was called by the miners of San Cristóbal.

Finally, there is news about new legislation for the leasing of lands in rural areas¹¹. We'll have to study the contents of this law, but we have reason to be hopeful if it is truly a law with eminently social aims, as the Assembly claims it to be. All the same, we are concerned because, in the same week that this news was announced, a group of *campesinos* was refused an audience when they wanted to present their petitions to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Bank for Agricultural Development. The *campesinos* are asking that credit be made more easily obtainable and that costs be lowered for leasing land and buying raw materials. With anticipation they had asked for meetings in both institutions, but they received no response.

⁹ The Authentic Anti-communist Liberation Front/War of Extermination (FALANGE) issued a statement which said, among other things: «The FALANGE has decided to ask the mass media, employees, workers, housewives, students, and all the people of El Salvador and Central America to give their full support to our struggle. We will act outside the framework of the law, just as the communists do in their own sphere, because this is the only way to stop them quickly. FALANGE announces that it does not wish to cause damage to property or to legitimate businesses, nor to harm workers or the mass media, as long as they collaborate in the destruction of the common enemy: the communists». *La Crónica del Pueblo* (27 March 1979).

¹⁰ *La Prensa Gráfica* (28 March 1979) and *La Crónica del Pueblo* (30 March 1979).

¹¹ The «Law for Leasing Agricultural Lands» was approved by the Legislative Assembly on 27 March 1979. *Diario Oficial* (4 May 1979).

They have tried to publish their petition in the newspapers, but for them there is no space in the papers¹². This is a clear example of what Medellín calls the «institutionalized violence» that prevents the *campesinos* from expressing themselves and defending their interests (M 2,16). Our hope is that just laws will take into account the deepest desires of large portions of our people, just as we also want the requests of the landowners and large farmers to be heard in true justice. They should even be given subsidies when necessary. What we want is that justice be done for everyone.

There are other aspects of our national life that I'd like to focus on, sisters and brothers, especially the news this week regarding matrimony and sexual morality. There are now in the child protection services fourteen children between the ages of two and fifteen who have been abandoned by their parents¹³. So far 737 workers have had to travel to Saudi Arabia to obtain work¹⁴.

We have seen a demographic explosion¹⁵, but no solution will be found to this problem unless there is good sex education and a proper understanding of the customs of our people. I call upon everyone to consider God's law regarding the duties of marriage and conjugal fidelity and also the need for our young people to lead worthy lives. Let us not live dissolute lives, for what is at stake is not only our personal well-being but also the well-being of the whole nation.

Here we find ourselves, then, incarnated in this very complex reality of our nation with all its violence and love, with all its prayer and vengeance. Such is the complexity of our people's lives. The new covenant will have much to tell us during the coming Holy Week. Let us get ready, dear sisters and brothers, and let us now take part in this Eucharist alongside Christ who gave his life for us. By his example of obedient and loving surrender he invites us to seek solutions for our problems, not on paths of hatred and vengeance but on the paths of the crucified One. Love will make us free!

¹² The petitions of the *campesinos* of the Christian Federation of Salvadoran *Campesinos* (FECCAS) and the Union of Rural Workers (UTC) were published only by the *La Crónica del Pueblo* (30 March 1979) and *Orientación* (1 April 1979).

¹³ *El Mundo* (29 March 1979).

¹⁴ *La Crónica del Pueblo* (29 March 1979).

¹⁵ *La Prensa Gráfica* (25 March 1979).