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LOVE IS THE LAW OF THE NEW COVENANT

Holy Thursday
The Lord's Supper
12 April 1979

Exodus 12:1-8,11-14
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-15

Dear brothers and sisters, if we should try to sum up the meaning of the word of God this afternoon, I would say it comes to this: «Love Is the Law of the New Covenant». Holy Week is the celebration of the new covenant that God announced through the prophets: «I will be your God, and you will be my people» (Lev 26:12). A relationship of love was established between God and humanity, to which the people were expected to respond by loving God and loving one another. Those who do not know how to love cannot experience the new covenant.

There are three ideas in today's readings that help us to understand our theme that «love is the law of the new covenant»: first, Passover as the celebration of the covenant; second, the commandment of the new covenant; and third, humility and service as the roads to true Christian love.

Passover as a celebration of the covenant

Passover appears today as the celebration of the covenant. The first reading takes us back to the way the Passover was celebrated year after year in Israel. As a good Israelite, Jesus wanted to celebrate the Passover with his apostles on this evening since it was Israel's great religious and national holiday.

During the feast of Passover the Jews recalled how God had «passed over» them with his merciful liberation. It commemorated the night when God passed over the territory of Egypt and freed the people of Israel who had marked their doorposts with the blood of the lamb, while all the homes of the Egyptians mourned the death of their firstborn (Exod 12:13). God decreed that every year thereafter, as we just heard, the people should celebrate this passing of the Lord, the Passover, as a feast of liberation (Exod 12:2). It was a time when the Jews renewed their commitment to the law and their covenant with God. This was the covenant that God had made with his people on Mount Sinai, when the people had responded to God by saying, «We will do as he commands» (Exod 19:8). The people came together on Passover, as we are together here tonight, to eat of the paschal lamb. When the children or the young people asked their parents or grandparents, «Why are we gathered together?» they were told the history that had been passed down from generation to generation: «We were slaves, and God freed us» (Exod 12:26-27).

It is therefore a feast of thanksgiving. It is a feast characterized by a covenant of love and a rejection of idolatries because «God is a jealous God», as Moses said (Exod 20:4-5). God does not tolerate the adoration of other gods, and this was the day when the people renewed their faith in the one and only God. In today's reading Passover appears as a feast in honor of the uniqueness of the Lord—there are no other lords. Thus God punished the Egyptians and the idolaters because they adored creatures and despised the true God.

The Passover was also a sacrificial celebration in which the lamb, as a symbol of innocence, was offered to the Creator in reparation for the sins of the people. The Passover meal was a festive one in which the covenant of love was celebrated by families gathered round the dinner table. What is marriage or what is the love of parents and children if not a reflection of the new covenant of God with humankind? At every table where Jewish families sat down to eat, God's love was reflected and bread was shared for the life of the people.

The Passover was a feast of national unity. All Jewish homes longed for a united Israel. Even while the people were journeying in the desert, Moses had given them a sense of being a nation, and he had imparted a patriotic meaning to the yearly Passover celebration. Passover thus became the official holiday of Israel as a nation that recognized the sovereignty of God. In Moses and their other leaders the Israelites saw only the hand of the God who accompanied his people in their history.

This Passover celebration of the Israelites was full of significance. It was charged with history, with religion, with love, with family, with homeland, with returning to God, with obedience to the merciful love that freed them. Christ was carrying all these meanings in his heart on that Passover night when he said, «With great desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you» (Luke 22:14). At that moment the Passover was no longer just a Jewish feast. That night Christ brought together in the Passover of Israel all the prophetic announcements and gave them their true meaning and reality. Because of that, the new covenant is now here with us. We are now celebrating the new covenant. No longer is it prophecy; no longer is it symbol; no longer is it lamb; no longer is it journeying through the desert; no longer is it liberation of a people from slavery. Now it is true Christian liberation. Now it is the Eucharist.

The second reading and today's gospel help us Christians understand the meaning of our coming together this evening. We come together to receive a precious inheritance, as Saint Paul says, «I received a tradition that comes from the Lord, and I in turn have handed it on to you» (1 Cor 11:23). We are here tonight in the cathedral, dear sisters and brothers, as one link in a chain of twenty centuries. We have received a tradition: Christ becomes present in the bread, and then the chalice of his blood, poured out as a new covenant, is given to us as a sign of God's sacrificial love. And this tradition we have received we also transmit to later generations. How wonderful it is to see children here, children who are beginning to understand what their parents teach them about the meaning of Holy Thursday. We are a link in the chain, receiving a historical tradition that we will pass on to the children of the future. We have faith that Christ is present in this Eucharist whose institution we are celebrating this evening.

«This is the tradition I have received from the Lord», says Paul during the first century of Christianity, «that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was to be handed over, took bread,

gave thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is given up for you. This is the cup of new covenant in my blood"» (1 Cor 11:23-35). Do you see how our celebration of Passover is the ideal Christian celebration? Passover for the Israelites was the passing over of God that freed his people. For us Christians, it is the passing over of Christ through a painful death to glorious resurrection. This is a much more difficult passage than the forty years in the desert or the crossing through the sea. This is the passage through the pain and suffering of the passion and the cross. This is the passing of the Lord. The new covenant is being celebrated this evening here in the cathedral on the altar of our Mass. Such is the love of Jesus.

All this has a resonance of love so profound that we can say that the host and the chalice this evening, as in all the Masses that are offered, are streaming with the living blood that love took out of the heart of Christ so that it could be given to us. Love means handing over oneself. Love means reserving nothing for oneself. Love means giving completely of oneself, even dying if necessary. Love means being nailed to a cross and telling one's enemies they are forgiven (Luke 23:34). Love means not knowing how to hate but knowing how to pardon. Love means returning smiles of blessings as Christ did on the cross.

The Christian Passover is also a meal. The body of the Lord is no longer the lamb with bitter herbs. Rather, the unleavened bread embodies the presence of Jesus Christ who is immolated for us, giving thanks to the Father for his blessing and his love for us. Who better than Jesus Christ to give thanks in our name for all the benefits we have received from God? Love is gratitude, and Christ, gathering together all human blessings, says to the Father, «Many thanks because you bless all my sisters and brothers» (1 Cor 11:24a). How expansive was the heart of Jesus Christ! How extraordinary is this new covenant of blood poured out so that he could sign with the blood of love the covenant of love that God has made with humankind!

The commandment of the new covenant

So my second thought taken from the readings tonight, dear sisters and brothers, is this: the commandment of the new covenant is love. When the Council wants to define the characteristics of the new people of God that has been born of God's new covenant with humanity, it uses these beautiful words: «This new people has as its head Christ who was delivered up for our sins and rose again for our justification. The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God» (LG 9). Nowhere are human dignity and human freedom so profoundly affirmed as in God's covenant of love with human beings.

No one defends human rights so firmly as God does when he makes his covenant with humankind. That is why those who want to be truly free and experience true human dignity must ratify tonight the covenant with the Lord. No one can make you free the way God makes you free. No one respects your freedom the way God respects it. The Council states, «This new people has as its law the new commandment of love: loving as Christ himself loved us. And finally, this new people has as its destiny the ever greater expansion of the kingdom of God» (LG 9). These are our commitments, but the greatest commitment that anoints our hearts this evening is the new commandment of love. In this setting of the new covenant Christ has given us the mandate: «Love one another. As I have loved you, so also should you love one another» (John 13:34).

In light of this divine word, I would like us all to grasp the rich content of the message that the pastors who met in Puebla addressed to the peoples of Latin America. I feel now that what I am saying is no longer just the poor speech of a single bishop. It now expresses the episcopal teaching of Latin America, which has received the approval of the pope. So hear in my words not the poor voice that the airwave pirates are even now robbing from our radio station, but the voice of pastors spread all over the continent and as the voice of the supreme pastor of the church. If they are now interfering with our broadcast, it is not the voice of the archbishop of San Salvador that they're impeding; they are offending against the voice of the pope himself and all the pastors of America. They are the ones who are addressing the dioceses of El Salvador from this cathedral, and this is what they say: «We invite you to be selfless builders of the civilization of love, a civilization inspired by the message, the life, and the total self-giving of Christ; a civilization based on justice, truth, and freedom»¹. What beautiful words! «We invite you to build the civilization of love». This is the true civilization. This is the civilization of the new covenant. This is the civilization that makes us truly human and Christian, truly children of God, because God is love (1 John 4:8). The civilization that God wants to exist among us is the civilization of love which also includes justice, truth, and freedom.

We want to examine with you the structure of this civilization of love. «Christian love goes beyond the categories of all regimes and systems». That is why the church does not identify with any political system. The church cannot identify with any political organization. The church cannot be a system. Rather, she surpasses all systems «because she brings with her the insuperable power of the paschal mystery», which is the death and resurrection of Christ. The message of the church, the civilization the church preaches, «bears within itself the value of the suffering of the cross and the signs of victory and resurrection. Love produces the happiness of communion and inspires the criteria of participation».

As we were saying, this civilization of love is not something sentimental; it is justice and truth. «Justice is the sacred right of all human beings, conferred by God himself. It is imbedded in the very essence of the Gospel message». A civilization of love that did not demand justice of people would not be a true civilization, nor would it designate the true relationships between people. It is therefore a caricature of love when people try to cloak in alms what is due in justice or when they try to appear beneficent while social justice is lacking. True love begins by demanding what is equitable in relations of mutual love. But that is not enough; true love also demands truth. «Truth illuminated by faith is the source of discernment for our ethical conduct». If there is no truth in love, then we have hypocrisy. Often, nice words are spoken and handshakes are given, perhaps even a kiss, but there is no truth behind them. There is no foundation of love in a civilization where people don't trust one another, where lies prevail and truth is lacking. And truth is what is lacking in our situation. When the truth is spoken, it gives offense, and the voices that speak the truth are silenced. That is why people are disturbed by radio broadcasts that tell the people the truth. In this milieu of lies in which we live, the church, thank God, has been able to preserve that quality of love which is truth. The church is believed. There is credibility in the church. I want to thank the people for the honor they pay the church as she preaches the civilization of love. She is not afraid to unmask and denounce the injustices and abuses for she must always speak of truth and justice.

¹ «Message to the Peoples of Latin America», Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops (Puebla 1979). The texts in quotation marks are taken from this message.

«The civilization of love repudiates violence». We have never preached violence. On this Holy Thursday, when the Lord says to us, «Love one another», he is announcing the philosophy of the true church. Love, not violence, is the force that is going to repair the world. «The civilization of love repudiates violence, selfishness, wastefulness, exploitation, and moral folly». Take good notice of this, especially those of you who no longer believe in love and those of you who have more confidence in violence, in guerrilla warfare, in the Armed Forces, in kidnapping, in terrorism—there is no salvation there. «At first it seems that, in speaking of the civilization of love, we are using an expression that lacks the energy that is needed to confront the grave problems of our age. But we assure you; there is no stronger word than “love” in the Christian lexicon. It is united with the very force of Christ. If we do not believe in love, then neither do we believe in the One who said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another”».

When the church preaches non-violence, dear sisters and brothers, it is not because of cowardice. Pope Paul VI said that Christians know how to fight, but they also know that violence is not an effective remedy². The only force Christ has offered us is the non-violent force of love. Even when we are able to fight, we fight with non-violence, with the force of love. «Love one another» (John 13:34) is something more than conformism; it is something more than tolerating situations with the passivity of the dead. The church does not want that kind of passivity, and that is why she promotes human dignity and makes people aware of their own dignity. She promotes the equality of all human beings so that people don't allow themselves to be treated as masses, so that we all realize that we are persons, and so that we bestow true dignity on our human personalities. We should not arrogantly impose ourselves with violence and force, but should rather know how to give our personality the human qualities that are truly Christian.

Christ was strong and combative. Even when nailed to the cross, he told the Father: «Forgive them for they know not what they do» (Luke 23:34). This is the power of forgiveness. «The civilization of love proposes to everyone the evangelical treasure of national and international reconciliation. There is no gesture more sublime than pardon. “Whoever does not know how to pardon will not be pardoned”, said Jesus Christ» (Matt 6:15). In the evangelical power of forgiveness and love is to be found the possibility of our own salvation and the liberation of humankind.

The message of the bishops continues, but I don't want to tire you. What I've said is enough to help you understand the structure of this new command of Christ, found now on the lips of the pastors of Latin America. They have sent out a call that I repeat here this evening: «Let us be builders of the civilization of love! Let us know how to forgive». The civilization of love condemns absolute divisions and radicalization. I believe that this is the great evil of our society. We have become polarized. We have become radicalized in two extremes, and those on the extreme right view everything on the left as contemptible. For them it is just communism or terrorism and must be eliminated and repressed. But that is not true, brothers and sisters. There are many voices crying out for justice and urgently voicing the demands of the people, and they must be heard. Not every demand for social justice is communist or terrorist. Let us open our ears to a discerning, loving ethics that knows how to listen to the voice of the *campesinos* who are dying of hunger. They are not terrorists; they are sisters and brothers who need to be heard and who need help from those who can offer aid.

² JOHN PAUL II, «Message for the World Day of Peace», 1 January 1968, in The Vatican, 8 December 1967.

The same must be said to the groups who are aligned with the left. Don't view the right as though they were all reactionaries who are hateful and repressive. Here also a distinction must be made. There are groups that are seeking a solution to our present situation. There are people who want to dialogue. There are groups that are willing to search in every sector of our nation. The civilization of love is calling out to these two opposite extremes.

Tonight Christ is directly inviting us Salvadorans with all our problems, trapped as we are in a dead-end situation, to see what we have here insisted on so often: there is a way out. We can get out of this blind alley by love, by understanding one another, by appreciating one another. There are fanatics at both extremes because on the right also there are extremists who cry out for violence and want the government to do nothing else than repress and assault the people. Everywhere there are fanatics, and they are the ones who cause great evil. Fanaticism is antagonistic to love. True love discovers the good there is in the sinner in order to save it. As long as we are not in hell—let us hope that we will never be there—then there is always something good, even in the most evil of hearts. Let us save that «something good» just as Christ on his cross still loved and wanted to save people: «I have not come for the just but for sinners» (Mark 2:17). «In this we know God's love», says the apostle of love, «that when we were sinners and unreconciled with him, he still loved us» (1 John 4:9-10). When we were his enemies, God loved us. Let us receive this generous gesture of a God who is so good!

Sisters and brothers, today I experienced this civilization of love when I sat down at a table with some people to dialogue. We didn't share the same language, but we did have a desire to search for solutions. Today we have among us a United States congressman, Mr. Tom Harkin, who has been in dialogue with a group of Catholics. He has witnessed the gross action of those who have hijacked the radio frequencies that are carrying our message to people who anxiously await it. Despite their awful interference, they are incapable of rebutting what they disagree with, and they resort as always to repression. They have tried to silence this voice, and the United States has witnessed this disruption through one of its representatives. This information, and other he has gathered, makes him aware of the serious situation in our country, but he has also given us a word of Christian hope. On this Holy Thursday I found this dialogue with several people concerned about our present situation to be very significant. Let me tell you, dear sisters and brothers, that the construction of this civilization of love is quite possible if we only are willing to lay aside our attitude of bitterness and sit down with one another—if possible, with a smile. People are always able to smile. Only in hell are there no smiles. Perhaps the problem is that many people carry the hell of hatred and fanatical violence in their hearts. How ugly are the faces of those who hate! How beautiful the faces of those who smile and lovingly offer hope to others!

Humility and service: the paths of love

My final thought this afternoon is about humility and service as paths of love. Soon I will be trying to imitate the gesture of Christ when I kneel before those who represent the apostles and wash their feet. That gesture of Christ motivates us to follow the path of love. Love is impossible without humility. Forgiveness is impossible without a spirit of service in one's heart. Building the civilization of love is impossible without a foundation of serving our sisters and brothers humbly. We must open our hearts to our sisters and brothers and ask them, «What do you need and how can I help you?»

When Christ stood up again after washing his disciples' feet, he said to them, «I have given you an example. You call me "teacher and master", and rightly so, for I am indeed your teacher and your master. Therefore, do what I have shown you: wash one another's feet» (John 13:13-15). He meant this not in a literal sense but in the sense of serving others because in Jesus' time washing feet was the work of a slave. When a guest or a visitor arrived, the slave had to wash his feet—it was a duty of slaves. Jesus teaches us that nothing is humiliating when there is love. Peter was scandalized and said to Jesus, «How are you, Lord, going to wash my feet since you're so great and I'm so insignificant?» «Let it be», Jesus told him, «because unless I wash you, you will have no part with me» (John 13:6,8). Only then did Peter understand that this gesture of humility was the key to entering into communion with Jesus. Sisters and brothers, it is only with this key of humility and service that we can enter into the civilization of love. Those who are proud, greedy, and haughty only hate. Those who are humble and generous know how to love. Put aside pride, avarice and arrogance. Love humility and self-denial. When you have love and humility in your heart, you can be happy and you can be holy.

I have prayed hard to the Lord about what I will say during this Holy Week and how I will interpret God's Word for you this afternoon. I hope they let my words pass through the radio. I have asked the Lord not to make my words eloquent or filled with human wisdom. I want my own person and accent to be submerged so that the sweet and tender accent of Jesus himself may reach the heart of every person listening, for Jesus makes himself present here tonight in this assembly. Let us listen to him! If my person is so repulsive to some of you that you want to silence my voice, then don't take account of me! Take account of the one who tells you, «Love one another». The one you must hear is not I but the Lord of love, who loves precisely in this sign of his love.

As we celebrate in this Eucharist the law of the new covenant, I ask the Lord that we may all ratify the covenant with God and reaffirm our decision to abide by the law that marks the true allies of God. Only those who love can live out this covenant with the Lord. Those who do not love should not call themselves Christian. The law of the covenant is what Christ has dictated tonight: «By this they will know that you are my disciples» (John 13:35). Let us hope, sisters and brothers, that all of us leave here tonight with the Lord's mark of love. May we know how to forgive and how to love one another and how to celebrate on this Holy Thursday the great reconciliation that our nation needs. Let it be so. (Applause)