

## **138**

### **AT EASTER THE PEOPLE OF THE NEW COVENANT IS BORN**

**Easter Vigil  
14 April 1979**

Genesis 1:1–2:2

Genesis 22:1-18

Exodus 14:15–15:1

Isaiah 54:5-14

Isaiah 55:1-11

Baruch 3:9-15; 3:32–4:4

Ezekiel 36:16-28

Romans 6:3-11

Mark 16:1-10

Those who are not in the cathedral on this solemn night of the Easter Vigil cannot fully capture the beauty that is not only being seen but also experienced by all of you who have gathered here in the principal church of the archdiocese. The large candle shining in the center of the church represents Christ and his Passover, and all around it are gathered a great multitude, filling the nave and the choir and flowing outside the church.

To give you a synthesis of the long liturgy of the word that has just ended, I will title my homily «At Easter the People of the New Covenant is Born». As a way of structuring the multitude of thoughts that God's word has inspired in us tonight, I would sum them up with these three ideas: first, the two objects of tonight's celebration are the risen Christ and the baptism of Christians; second, Easter sheds light on the long history of God's covenants with humankind; and third, we ourselves are the people of the new covenant.

#### **The two objects of the celebration tonight are the risen Christ and the baptism of Christians**

What we celebrate tonight is not just the triumph of Christ as a single individual twenty centuries ago—it is our own triumph. We who are baptized are the Christ of today. In ancient times this was the night when Lent was brought to a close with a beautiful procession of catechumens who would receive the baptismal waters. All dressed in white, they were the magnificent symbol of the resurrection and of the new life that comes with baptism.

Since most of us had the good fortune of being baptized years ago, we will very soon renew our baptism. Let us be aware that this night we have understood the greatness of being Christians, the greatness of incorporating into our lives all the merits of Christ who died and all the glory of Christ who rose. Only then will we understand the significance of this mass of people who fill the cathedral: they are the risen Christ. Christ is not symbolized only by this glorious candle that we blessed in the initial session tonight; even more than the candle, Christ

is alive in 1979. Christ has risen in this Easter time in San Salvador, and you Christians are witnesses that Christ is still living. Blessed be God that our diocese understands better and better the commitment we have with Christ and our baptism, and blessed be God that we are paying honor to this history in which Christ continues to live! The church is the Body of Christ in history. We are the living Christ of 1979.

### **Easter sheds light on the history of God's covenants with humankind**

My second reflection will treat of that marvelous series of readings that the Holy Week commission has prepared with ecumenical sensitivity. Just as the paschal candle illuminates the whole of this cathedral tonight, so Easter illuminates our lives. You have heard this from the lips of Christians who belong to different denominations but believe firmly in Christ. The resurrection, as the Passover of Christ, sheds light on the long history of God's relations with humankind, which extends back to the first reading we heard tonight: «In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth» (Gen 1:1).

And then the covenants began. All during Lent this year we have been tracing the different covenants that God made with his people in order to win their hearts. His untiring love kept reaching out to men and women despite their refusal to respond. He made a covenant with Noah under the sign of the rainbow as a way to reaffirm his commitment to creation—the heavens, the earth, the animals, all that exists. God said, «I will not send another flood. I will preserve nature for humanity. I will continue to think of human beings as the head of creation as long as they adore me, for I am their God» (Gen 9:11). Noah gave thanks to God for preserving nature. The covenant of God with humankind involves not only adoration of the Creator of all but also respect for his laws, respect for nature and caring for nature, and justice in sharing the goods God has created for all people. God wants to rid us of this mania we have for destruction, for there is a tremendous risk that soon we will be left without water, without clean air, without forests. Our desire to destroy is like a new flood. When we see a rainbow, we should see it as a sign of God's determination to preserve nature, and we should remember that part of our covenant with God is the conservation of these resources that humanity needs.

As today's readings proceed, they move beyond the order of nature and tell us how human beings developed religion as a way of loving God. Abraham, a nomad of the desert, was given the privilege of making a special pact with God, and what great faith that man had! As an old man he left his homeland and set out on a pilgrimage without knowing where he was going—he simply obeyed God, who had told him, «I will make of you a great nation from which will come a blessing for all peoples» (Gen 12:2). So Abraham, without understanding how, became the father of our faith.

From Abraham was born a great people, and once they were a people, they looked toward the Promised Land. As they were being freed from Egypt, a third covenant was made: God spoke to Moses and instructed him about the exodus. That whole reading we heard today is about the God who walks with his beloved people because he wants to bring us a Redeemer.

Then came the time of the prophets who announced the Redeemer of humankind and the conditions that God required of his people until the birth of the Redeemer. Tonight, the bells were rung to symbolize the fullness of time that the biblical readings foretold. Christ is already with us, and he is a Christ who has died and has risen.

God's new covenant with humankind, as announced by the prophets, is a definitive covenant that «unites» us with God, as the priest sang at the beginning of tonight's long liturgy: «O blessed night, in which heaven is united with earth»<sup>1</sup>. That hymn even calls Adam's sin a «happy fault that gained for us such a great Redeemer». Now we as sinners can count on a covenant of reconciliation. By means of the cross and Easter the hour has arrived when we ourselves have become the new people, the new Israel born of baptism.

### **We ourselves are the people of the new covenant**

This mystery was unveiled for us in the reading we heard from Saint Paul. We are all born of the flesh, and through baptism we are incorporated into God's covenant with humankind. By baptism Christ's death becomes the death of baptized Christians, and Christ's resurrection becomes new life in the heart of Christians. From there arise our commitments as a Christian people, commitments that we will renew tonight. We are speaking about a commitment of solidarity with the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ.

Tonight, sisters and brothers, let us think seriously about how we can affirm our belonging to this people that has gathered in the cathedral to celebrate the Easter Vigil. If we want to be true to our baptism and pay honor to our incorporation into Christ's death by baptism, we must die to sin and every form of evil. We must slay our selfishness, our envy, our intrigues, and our worshiping of false gods. There is only one God, and Christians worship that God in Christ our Lord. Some people may be asked to die as martyrs because they reject false idolatries and remain faithful to the one true God. We should thank God that we have stories of martyrdom not only from ages past but also from our present time. There are priests and religious and catechists and humble country folk who have been killed, beaten, crushed, destroyed, and persecuted for being faithful to the one Lord and God, Jesus Christ. It is to him tonight that we must renew our baptismal commitments. The alternative is to tell him tonight, «Lord, I rebel. I cannot tolerate this total demand you make in asking me to follow you. You tell me, "Those who would come after me should deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34), but I cannot.» The Lord also said, «You cannot serve two masters» (Matt 6:24). We must not be Christians who promise fidelity to Christ and then betray him by worshiping the idol of wealth, the idol of power, the idol of lust, the idol of pride and selfishness, and so many other kinds of idols. Tonight is the night of fidelity to the one who showed that he was faithful to me until death. He loved me so! And even though love cost him death on the cross, he had no fear and handed himself over for me. «Let us no longer live for ourselves», says St Paul, «but for him who died and has also risen» (Gal 2:20). For «whoever loses his life for my sake will find it» (Mark 8:35). On this night of resurrection Christians comprehend the greatness of their faith and their hope, and they place all their strength and love in Christ.

I hope, dear sisters and brothers, that we will repent of our cowardice at this moment when we're about to renew Christ's incarnation in us. Let us not be two-faced Christians—with Christ and against Christ. Let us make up our minds. I thank you all profoundly for having responded so enthusiastically by attending this Easter vigil, but the best response to the Lord on this night of love is not just your presence here, as wonderful and encouraging as that is. As we leave the cathedral tonight, let us all feel the immense honor and the tremendous responsibility that comes of having been baptized. That is the way we will truly celebrate the

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<sup>1</sup> From the Easter Proclamation (*Exultet*).

resurrection of Jesus Christ—not as individuals but as the new people of the new covenant, a people who has the great honor of belonging to God, as we heard today: «I will be your God, and you will be my people» (Lev 26:12). All this comes about through Christ Jesus, who has sealed us with his blood and the glory of the resurrection. Tonight, like the Israelites at the foot of Sinai (Exod 19:8), we are telling God that we want to be his people, and that we will do all the Lord has said. Let it be so.