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THE GREATEST GIFT OF EASTER IS THE DYNAMISM OF LOVE

Sixth Sunday of Easter
20 May 1979

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48
1 John 4:7-10
John 15:9-17

My sisters and brothers, let us not forget that Sunday is the Lord's Day and that the church has organized the whole liturgical year around the mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, we should not let political and other temporal circumstances make us lose sight of where we are going. The church is leading humankind through the tumult of history toward a well-defined horizon, and that is the substance of our message: the church, as mother and teacher, offers us wise guidance in our time-bound existence. So it is that the liturgical year develops around thoughtful meditation on the saving mystery of Jesus Christ.

Let us not forget that we have nearly reached the end of the liturgical season of Easter. The Easter season stretches from the night of the Lord's resurrection on Holy Saturday until the Sunday of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is a word that implies fullness and refers to the fifty days after Easter. These fifty days are important for the spirituality of Christians because they provide the main motive for their faith, their hopes, their joys, and their serene journey through time—that motive is Christ who has risen and is alive among us.

The aim of this whole Easter season, these fifty days that are now drawing to a close, is to offer us a synthesis of all the richness of Christ's work of redemption. We have been meditating on these gifts of Easter during all the Sundays since Holy Week. Next Sunday will be the feast of the Lord's ascension, and in two weeks we will crown our Easter season with the feast of Pentecost. That is when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to inaugurate the church and present her to the world. We are now that church, a church that keeps moving forward with the certainty that Christ is in her midst.

Among the many Easter gifts we have been presenting and describing in the liturgy of these Sundays, the greatest is love, and that is the theme of all our Scriptures today. Love is the style and the spirit of the new covenant that God has desired to establish with his people. The covenant and Easter are inspirations that come from the Spirit of God who is love.

Remember that all during Lent we studied the old covenants, God's projects in the Old Testament that served as models for the new covenant. We celebrated Holy Week precisely under the title of the new covenant. I recall that on Holy Thursday, during the Mass of the institution of the Eucharist, we spoke of the special love that characterizes the new covenant that God wants to seal with humankind in Christ. That same theme returns today because all the readings speak to us of love. As I read today the word of God, I remembered the synthesis

the Second Vatican Council made when it spoke about the church as the new people of God. «This new people of God», said the Council, «has Christ for its head. The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells». And take note of this next sentence: «The people of God has as its law the new commandment to love as Christ loved us, and it has as its end the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth» (LG 9). Note carefully what is the end of the church on earth. That is why we are congregated in this Sunday Mass. That is why we have been baptized. That is why we belong to the people of God: to live with the dignity and freedom of the children of God and to dedicate our lives to bringing about God's kingdom in the world. But we will not be good builders of that kingdom of God if we don't understand that our law is above all else the new commandment of love.

All of today's Liturgy of the Word refers to this. There are many people—a great many in our time—who have lost their faith in love. The Puebla document—which is now available in print—says among other things, «At first sight the word “love” seems to lack the strength that is needed to confront the grave problems of our age»¹. How true this is! Many people will automatically disregard my preaching this morning; they don't want to hear about love; they give it no importance. They want to talk only about violence, hatred, demands for justice, their rights. None of that is the language of Jesus Christ and his church. The church accompanies social struggles and demands, but she does so with love. She tells the protagonists of history that nothing solid can be built without the force of love. Many people think, as Puebla says, that the word love «lacks the strength that is needed to confront the grave problems of our age», but the document continues, «We assure you that no stronger word exists 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, “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12)»².

This morning I would like to reconfirm our faith in love with our reflections on the word of God, so that we are filled with that love as the source of Christian energy. Love is not cowardice; love is not passivity. Love is strong, so strong that it alone has saved the world. There is no salvation apart from the love of Christ who has brought us the redeeming love of God. Therefore today I'm going to title my homily «The Greatest Gift of Easter is the Dynamism of Love». This title sums up my thought this morning, and I'm going to break my idea up into three points: first, God is love and the source of love; second, Christ is the revelation of God's love among us; and third, as Christians, we are the depositories responsible for the dynamism of Christian love. If the world is not saved despite the existence of so many Christians, it will be because we have not responded to this tremendous responsibility. We are depositories of the saving energy of love. The call to us this morning, then, is to make practical use of this love-energy that is deposited in our hearts.

God is love and the source of love

The first point, then, is that God is love and the source of love. The readings today take us up into sublime contemplation; like the eagle, we are lifted into the highest heavens where love is born. In today's gospel we read that Jesus Christ himself has told us, «As the Father has loved

¹ *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, 8.

² *Ibid.*

me, so I have loved you» (John 15:9). And Saint John, who perfectly learned this lesson of Christ, wrote in his own words, «Love is from God. God is love» (1 John 4:7,8).

The word of God offers us these sublime revelations so that we can understand that the origin of the divine relations—the Father begetting the Son in the Holy Spirit from all eternity—is in God’s activity of thinking and loving through eternal centuries. When Christ says, «As my Father has loved me», he means, «The relation between the Father and me, the Word made flesh, is a relation of love». The force that unites the three persons of the Blessed Trinity in the supreme intimacy of God is love.

That is why the Second Vatican Council, keeping in mind this lofty perspective of the Gospel and of Christ at the Last Supper, states, «The Lord Jesus opened up vistas closed to human reason, for he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine persons, and the unity of God’s children in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that human beings cannot reach their fullness except through a sincere gift of themselves to others» (GS 24).

«As the Father has loved me, so I also love you, and you must love one another» (John 15:9). How does the Father love the Son? By giving the Son his divine nature, by handing himself over completely. There are not three Gods, the catechism tells; there is only one God, a single nature shared in love by the three divine persons.

How beautiful the world would be if one day people were to realize that their full development and their lofty ideals consist in giving themselves to others. What diminishes human beings is selfishness. Selfishness would even destroy God though God could never be selfish: the day that the Father would say, «All my nature is for me, not for anybody else», God would no longer exist. God is love. God is self-giving. Everything is shared among the three divine persons. «As my Father loves me and hands everything over to me, so I love you and hand everything over to you».

«Love is from God», the second reading tells us, and «God is love» (1 John 4:7,8). But let us now descend from that sublime height. The word of God authorizes us to say that every initiative for the redemption of humankind originated in God’s love. In today’s second reading Saint John has told us, «Love does not consist in our loving God but in his loving us and sending us his Son» (1 John 4:10). Love takes the initiative. Love does not wait for gratitude or applause but gives itself as mothers do, without expecting the child to be aware of their sacrifices and sleepless vigils. That’s how God loves us. He gives himself to us even when we are unmindful of him. Even when we were his enemies because of sin, he saw our misery and sent his Son to save the world.

Take note of how, in this school of God, we are learning about the generosity that is so badly needed in the world today. There is no need to wait for the stricken person to extend a hand to me. Like God, I should take the initiative in helping the person, even if I’m not remembered. That’s why we say that God is the source of love. When Christ concretized this initiative of God in his relation with the apostles, he spoke to them the beautiful words that are spoken when priests are ordained: «You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you. We are friends not because you sought me out but because I sought you out. You responded to my call, but I took the initiative in calling you» (John 15:16).

This is a wonderful thought for all of us who are here this morning by virtue of our faith. We have come to adore our God on Sunday. We are seeking after God, but we are not the ones who took the initiative in coming to Mass. It is God who has given us health, who has given us motivation, who has given us the very idea that it is we who are seeking God. But Christ reveals to us: «It is not you who have sought me out. I have called you. I have given you the ability to come to me. You have known how to respond, but I am the source of this relationship of love that exists between you and me».

It is nice to realize, then, that it is God who is taking the initiative in this covenant of love and that all we have to do is respond. We are not the ones who create love; God has created it. If a mother is able to love her child, it is because God has placed in her heart a mother's love. If married couples love one another with exemplary fidelity until death, then that love comes from God. If we love our country, if we priests love to serve the people, if we all sincerely love and want to be like God, it is because all love derives from God.

This is a morning for giving thanks to God for the tremendous capacity for love that we have in our hearts. Who among us is not capable of loving and forgiving and understanding? What a treasure! How filled with love are the vessels that are here making this reflection! Let us realize that all these vessels have been filled by God, and if we have different ways of loving, it is because God has given them to us. «Love is from God», says Saint John. Since it is from God, let us respect it and not profane it. Let us not prostitute it by converting it into false love. Let us preserve it and make it grow. «Love is from God. God is love» (1 John 4:7-8).

Christ is the revelation of God's love among us

My second point is that Christ is the revelation of God's love among us, as today's readings make clear. The gospel begins by telling us, «As the Father has loved me, so I love you. Do you want to experience my Father's love? Then see how I love you» (John 15:9. This is the revelation, and when this love of our Redeemer takes him and leaves him crucified, destroyed for love of us, then we finally understand: that's how the Father loves him, and that's how God loves us—selflessly.

Christ reveals to us the love of the Father because it is the Father who has sent him. This is explained to us in today's second reading: «In this way the love of God is revealed to us: God sent his only Son so that we might have life through him» (1 John 4:10). We might say that such a father must be mad to hand over his son to redeem some stranger. Well, that is the madness of God: he gave his own Son to save us people who were his enemies. God took the initiative, and Christ has revealed to us that he came not by his own will but as sent by the Father. He always presented himself that way, as sent by the Father: «The teaching I preach to you, it is the Father who commands that I do so» (John 14:24). Everything has its origin in God.

On this Sunday of love I have tried to summarize in the light of God's work the series of relationships that God establishes with humankind in Christ. In Christ God reveals to us his love. Christ's main concern in preaching was to convince us that God loves us: «My Father loves you». What a beautiful message! He needed to say no more! «I come to reveal to you that the God who created you loves you. He loves you in the difficult moments of your history». That is how our country is today. God loves us in the bitter moments of our sadness, our sickness, our desolate home life. God loves us when people are crying out as Christ did on the cross, «My

God, why have you forsaken me?» (Mark 15:34). He has not forsaken us! That is when he is closest! He is judging your merits; he is testing you, but in the hour of bitterness he will not abandon you. In the hour of your glory you will come to understand the meaning of these bitter moments that seem to make no sense today, just as gold does not understand when it is in the furnace that it is being purified by the heat of the flame. God reveals his love to us in Christ. That is the first work of Christ.

The second work is that in Christ God forgives us. That is what today's second reading tells us: «God sent his Son as expiation for our sins» (1 John 4:10). Sisters and brothers, we should not trust that God will forgive us for our human merits. If we are confident that God will forgive us and grant us heaven despite our many sins, it is because Christ our Lord paid our debt. Remember the story I told you one day about the artist who had worked hard to win applause and be thought marvelous. At the hour of her death, she cried out to the priest, «Father, I feel so empty! My hands are empty and have nothing to offer to God». The priest was thoughtful enough to place his crucifix in her hands and tell her, «They are not empty. Present yourself to Christ!» Christ provides merit for all whose hands are empty! Let us make our own the merits of the crucified Christ. God sent him to be the propitiation for our sins. If God does not forgive us because of our humility, our smallness, or our prayers, he forgives us because Christ carried our sins on his back and paid for them on the cross. When I, through the solidarity of faith and love, make the death of Christ on the cross my own, then God forgives me—not for my own merit but because Christ let himself be crucified for my sins. Christ is the propitiation for our sins. In Christ God reveals to me his forgiving love, and he forgives me my faults no matter how serious they may be.

What other relationship does God establish with humankind through his son Jesus Christ? What is most beautiful, sisters and brothers, is a relationship of friendship. That is what Christ revealed to us in today's gospel: «I no longer call you servants or slaves because that master-slave relationship does not inspire confidence. I call you friends because I have revealed everything that my Father has told me. The child enjoys the confidence of the family, and you are my friends as children of God» (John 15:15). I had the good fortune to visit the tomb that tradition says is the tomb of Abraham. And one word there says it all, *kalil*, which means «friend». That is what the Bible calls Abraham: «the friend of God» (Isa 41:8; Jas 2:23). He was a man who spoke with God as a friend, as the Bible also tells us was the case with Moses: «He spoke face to face with God, as one friend talks to another» (Exod 33:11). This is the relationship that God has established with Christians in Christ Jesus who told his disciples, «I no longer want to call you servants. I want to call you friends» (John 15:15). What a magnificent liberation! We are free because Christ has made us almost his equals, his friends. There are no longer any secrets between God and us. We talk as one friend to another. All of you, dear sisters and brothers, can this very day converse with God as his friends. This is Christ's revelation of the love the Father has for us. He wants to be our friend.

The main reason John Paul II was so moved by his trip to Mexico is that he wanted to appear as our friend. So he put on Mexican sombreros and embraced the children of the Mexican women and spoke with the workers and beggars. The pope was a friend in the midst of friends. But even more than the pope, it is God who in Christ wants to become a friend of everyone, including the greatest sinners if they repent and seek him out.

In Christ the Father has revealed to us a relationship of consolation and happiness. In these pessimistic times in our country, when many people think there is no solution, how wonderful it is to hear Christ tell us in today's gospel, «I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete» (John 15:11). It is wrong for us to be sad. Christians cannot be pessimists. Christians must always nourish in their hearts the fullness of joy. Try to do that, sisters and brothers. I have tried it many times, and in the most bitter situations, when slander and persecution are at their worst, I have united myself intimately with Christ as my friend, and I have tasted a sweetness that all the joys of the earth cannot give. It is the joy of God's intimacy, the profoundest joy the heart can experience, even when people don't understand you. Christ pronounced these words of joy on the tragic last night of his life, knowing that the next day even his disciples would abandon him. No doubt there was fullness of joy in the depths of Christ's soul even when he was ascending Calvary in the bitter agony of his passion, because he was doing the will of his Father and he felt that God was not abandoning him despite all appearances of abandonment. «I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete» (John 15:11).

Finally, today's gospel reveals still another marvelous thing that Christ does in the Father's name: he personalizes our prayer. Today he has told us, «Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you» (John 15:16). What more do we want? If God has given us his own Son, how can he deny us what is of much less value than his Son? Let us not make our life consist of transitory things. Let us ask the Father for the great Easter gifts! Let us ask for peace, justice, and love for our native land! If we haven't achieved these gifts, it's because we have not put into practice the promises of God. May the day come when the whole Salvadoran people is convinced that Christ is the Divine Patron of our nation and that the Divine Savior of the world has forged profound relations of love between God and Salvadorans. May the day come when Salvadorans stop worshiping the false gods of wealth, power, possessions, the flesh, money, and the things of earth. Unfortunately, this is what's happening now. We have broken the covenant of love, and we don't love God above all things. Instead we love things above God; we are like the miser who says, «My god is my money», or like the profligate who says, «My god is fleshly pleasure», or like the senseless politicians whose god is their power. We direct our prayer to these gods and not to Christ. That's why El Salvador is doing so badly! Let us turn to the Lord in love, and let us believe in love. Let us believe in Christ who has revealed love to us. Let us put aside our doubts and have full confidence in him, and everything we ask for in love we will attain.

We Christians are responsible for the dynamism of love

Finally, sisters and brothers, my third point this morning: we Christians are responsible for the dynamism of love which God has given us to save the world.

The love of God in Christ gave birth to the church. This is the church: you and I. Why is this so? The Second Vatican Council tells us what it means to be church: «The church is in Christ like a sacrament; she is a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race» (LG 1). There is no more beautiful definition of the church than this one, for it defines both the love that ought to unite us with God and the love which ought to unite us among ourselves. This is the church.

When the hearts of Christians grow in love toward God and neighbor, then they are creating church. I would like to put much stress on this thought because there are many people who place more confidence in their political options than they do in belonging to the church or in being united in communion with God and other people. They believe more in the Popular Revolutionary Bloc and in FAPU and ORDEN. They believe in their earthly organizations and forget that the power of these things is fleeting, all the more so when based on violence and the force of hatred. So it is all the more necessary to place our confidence in uniting people together in love and uniting them with God in the communion of the church.

I want our beloved priests, the religious communities, the base communities, and the parish communities to be aware of what it means to be church. The effectiveness of a priest and a community is measured by the way that they bring about communion. What we mean by communion is the love that unites people together among themselves and also with God. No matter how brilliant the work of a priest or a community, if it does not produce loving communion, it has not created church; sadly, it has created only a fragile shell that is easily shattered. No trace is left by what does not sow love. What I want, then, dear Christians, is that we not let ourselves be deceived by the fireworks of politics and the fanatical forces of violence. What I want is that we finally realize, in the calm serenity of our faith, that our only mainstay is the communion that Christ has left us.

Our third point then is this: we are responsible for this communion that Christ has given us as a great Easter gift. Our commitment is based on a covenant that is also a command. The decisive word of Christ appears twice in today's gospel. He says, «This is my commandment», and then at the end he says, «This I command you» (John 15:12,17). He can command us decisively because he has bought us with his blood, and we are his. «This is what I ask», he tells us: «in exchange for my sacrifice and my gift of redemption, that you love one another».

Today's second reading is profound. It's from the first letter of Saint John. I would like you to reflect on it in your homes. If you don't have it in the handouts, read it in your Bibles. It is perhaps even more profound than John's own gospel for he says, «Everyone who loves is born by God. Whoever does not love has not known God» (1 John 4:7-8). That's why Saint John of the Cross wrote in one of his verses, «In the evening of your life you will be judged according to love»³. If you love, you are of God; you have known God and will live with God forever. If you do not love, you are not of God; you have not known God. How sad it is to think that many of our sisters and brothers have not known God because love never smiled on their hearts; rather, their hearts were always filled with the bitterness of violence and vengeance and hatred.

The first reading points out to us some of the dangers that can wreck our love. It tells us how Saint Peter, after receiving an invitation from the pagan centurion Cornelius, set out from Joppa because God had revealed to him through visions that he should do so. We are told that when he reached the house of the centurion, Cornelius knelt before him as if recognizing something divine in Peter, but Peter told him, «No, don't do that. I am nothing more than a man like you» (Acts 10:26).

According to the Jews, God had relations only with the Jewish people, and so the Gentiles were treated as dogs, as a people apart. Even in the temple of prayer in Jerusalem there was an atrium for the Gentiles that kept them apart. A Gentile could not pass from there

³ SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Obras Completas*, Madrid 1988, 94.

to the part reserved for the Jews—there was even a sentence of death for those who disobeyed. The people thought that God had an exclusive love for the Jews, and when Peter’s vision made them realize that the Holy Spirit was being given to Gentiles, they were amazed.

There are many lessons to comment on here as we reflect upon love. If Peter had not been humble but had let himself be divinized, he never would have worked the marvel of baptizing in God’s name people whose faith was far from his own. If the Jews had remained firm in their attitude of discrimination—«no Gentiles, only us!»—they would never have let Gentiles be baptized, and so God would not have opened the floodgate between the Jewish people and the Gentile nations. God would not have fulfilled the promise made through the prophets, of creating one people united by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

What made it possible for the church to embrace all races without discriminating against anyone? It was the love that she learned from Christ. The first reading tells us that Peter declared, «The Holy Spirit does not show partiality among persons. God does not make distinctions but accepts all persons who fear him and practice justice, no matter what nation they are from» (Acts 10:34-35). And when he beheld the wonders that God was working, Saint Peter asked, «Can we deny the water of baptism to these who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?» (Acts 10:47). So he baptized them, and the church became universal.

What impedes our efforts to love, sisters and brothers, are these feelings of smallness, meanness, selfishness, and discrimination—«this person, yes, but that other person, no»; «you people, yes, but you other people, no». There are those who mark off strict boundaries between the peoples of the earth. There are those who discriminate between the races. God doesn’t discriminate against anybody. We should have a heart as wide as God’s so as never to discriminate, and we should have a heart as humble as Peter’s so as never to allow ourselves to be divinized. When politics divinize politicians or when wealth divinizes those who have economic power, they think they are gods and so they despise other people. That is when the roots of evil show themselves, as is happening in our poor society. We must return, then, to the simplicity of Peter. Even though the people thought he was wealthy, he realized that he possessed only God: «No, I am just like other people. The gift God has given me is to be shared with everyone, and we’re going to share it out and enjoy it together. The Spirit of God will be given to you also» (Acts 10:26).

If I had time, sisters and brothers—I’m sorry the time has passed quickly—I would have liked to highlight more of the message of Puebla to the Latin American peoples. The message summons everyone—and therefore you who are listening to me—to become builders of the civilization of love. I’m going to take just a few concepts that can help us to sum up the word of God today; they will help us to see that the church that is now preaching in Latin America—as I am preaching today in this pulpit of El Rosario church in San Salvador—is the church of the Gospel of love. I don’t think anybody, no matter how vile or slanderous one might be, is capable of saying that I have preached violence or have been against anyone. I have preached love using the very pages of the Holy Word. And I want to tell you, quoting the words of the bishops meeting in Puebla, «What does the commandment of love require of us? Christian love goes beyond all the categories of regimes and systems»⁴. Engrave this sentence in your hearts: «Christian love goes beyond all the categories of regimes and systems».

⁴ *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, 8.

I had to laugh this week when they asked me whether it's true that my preaching has changed, whether I'm favoring some people more than others or whether I'm no longer favoring certain groups. Let's be honest, sisters and brothers. I have never been in favor of anybody because my only commitment is with my God. I have always proclaimed my autonomy so that I can praise whatever is good in any human being and also condemn whatever evil or injustice exists in any human being. That's what the church is for. (Applause)

The political circumstances of nations change, but the church refuses to be a toy at the mercy of changing circumstances. The church must always be the horizon of God's love, as I have tried to explain this morning. That is why «Christian love surpasses all the categories of regimes and systems». Today may be democracy, tomorrow socialism, and the next day something else—that is not the competency of the church. It is your business because you are the people! You have the right to organize freely as does every people. You can organize your social system, but whatever the system may be, the church will remain autonomous on the sidelines in order to judge justly the attitudes of those who run those systems or regimes and those who live under them.

The church «bears within herself the insuperable power of the paschal mystery, the value of the suffering on the cross, and the signs of victory and the resurrection»⁵. Always look for these qualities in the church, sisters and brothers. Don't ask what side the church is on politically. Seek the church's embodiment of cross and resurrection. Look for Christ in the church. Look for the humiliated, crucified Lord and also the glorified, victorious Lord of Easter. Always seek in the church the Easter gift of love, and you will find it. You may not find other things in the church. If some people want to manipulate the church for political reasons, they are looking for wickedness and will not find it.

«Love begets the happiness of communion and inspires the criteria of participation. The civilization of love repudiates violence, selfishness, wastefulness, exploitation, and moral follies»⁶. I'm not going to go on longer, but the Puebla document, which you can now have in your own hands, will teach you all this so that you can come to an ever better knowledge of our church.

Life of the church

The church becomes present in the community, and the community has its own happenings and dynamics that need to be distinguished from political factors.

As I was telling you before, we are moving through the liturgical year, which is truly the life of the church. In two weeks we'll celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the same day we will also celebrate Seminary Day. This is important for us: having seminaries where young men who want to continue Christ's mission can learn the criteria of an authentic church. This morning I want to greet the wonderful group from the minor seminary of Chalatenango, which is a rich source of vocations. The land of Chalatenango has given us many priestly vocations, and that's why we've made an effort to maintain a minor seminary there. This morning some of the seminarians are participating enthusiastically in the singing. Since here in San Salvador we also have our minor seminary and our major seminary, we depend on

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

all of you, dear sisters and brothers, for moral and spiritual support and for economic support as well. On this coming Seminary Day we'll take up a special collection to help maintain this great work which is very costly but which inspires much loving sacrifice.

I would also like to issue a call to all the young people for Pentecost Sunday. Those of you who have not been confirmed, be sure to have yourself prepared in two weeks' time. If there are young people to be confirmed, we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit with this sacrament of confirmation at the eight o'clock Mass here. Some groups have already announced they are coming, and I'm hoping others will join them. And those of us who are already confirmed should take advantage of the feast of Pentecost to renew our commitment with the Holy Spirit.

Also, as a church community inspired by the love of God, we should not forget the loving presence of Mary, the mother of the church. As you know, May 24 is the feast of Mary, Help of Christians. The Salesian Fathers, thank God, keep this devotion strong.

We want everybody to intensify their prayer during these last days of May, and for that precise reason I want to make known the initiative of CONFRES, the Conference of Religious of El Salvador. They have expressed their solidarity with the archbishop's call for a solution to our problems in El Salvador, and they are calling people to take part in a prayer vigil whose date will soon be announced.

I want to express my thanks and my congratulations to the ecclesial base communities for their initiative in organizing a week of prayer. Let's hope there is much participation. It will start this week on Tuesday the twenty-second and will take place from seven to nine each night in different parishes. On Tuesday it will be in Soyapango, on Wednesday in El Calvario in Santa Tecla, on Thursday the twenty-fourth in El Despertar in San Antonio Abad, on Friday the twenty-fifth in Zacamil, on Saturday the twenty-sixth in San Francisco in Mejicanos, on Sunday the twenty-seventh in Miramonte, and on the twenty-eighth in Plan del Pino. Let us bless God that so much prayer is being inspired in our church! Let us all pray earnestly, asking the Blessed Virgin Mary to be our intercessor.

I also want to express my gratitude for the kindness that was shown me yesterday in the parish of Colón when I went to visit that rural area and to impart the sacrament of confirmation to some young people.

I also greet the new superior and pastor of this church of El Rosario, Father Rodríguez, who along with Father José Luis and the Dominican community will continue to provide magnificently for this church of Our Lady of the Rosary. While the occupation of the cathedral continues, they have been hosting our Sunday Masses here with a very hospitable spirit.

The life of our church has also seen some sorrowful moments, such as the outrage that was committed this week against the Guadalupe Sisters in Arcatao. Sisters Nicolasa Ramírez and Beatriz Velásquez were ordered into a vehicle by immigration officials. They were told that there was an immigration problem and that they would later be taken to the Guadalupe college here in San Salvador. That was pure trickery because they took them to the border post at Las Chinamas and left the poor sisters there with only three *quetzales* between them. At

midnight they were left alone there in Guatemala, where they had to make their way as exiles for the sake of our church.

I don't think this shows much of a sense of consideration for our church. Thank God, it seems everything will be straightened out and the sisters will return. I still can't pronounce a final verdict, but I hope that this is no more than an incident, though a very unpleasant one, to be sure. The church regrets this lack of understanding and of basic human relations⁷.

I also want to express my solidarity with Father Walter Guerra, the pastor of Armenia. He showed me his thumbs, which were still numb from being bound, and he told me how they had beaten his face. They accused him of instigating rebelliousness in Armenia. Thank God, the people in the town thought otherwise and defended him admirably. You can read about what happened in Armenia in today's *Orientación*⁸.

Last night I received news about an attempt to set fire to the convent of Tamanique. We don't know how it started, but it certainly was a criminal hand that poured gasoline around the convent and set fire to it. That's where Mother Juanita carries out her ministry, which is in complete accord with the pastoral guidelines of the church.

I also want to join in the concerns of the Colegio La Asunción regarding the murder of their watchman, Mr. Flamenco, who supervised traffic and collaborated in various ways with the college⁹. We offer our prayers also for him.

In Miramonte parish there was an attempt to intimidate and stop a candlelight procession that the parish had organized on the second anniversary of the death of Father Navarro. Dear sisters and brothers, I believe that all these events are signs of what can rightly be called persecution. This is in no way helpful to the church but rather impedes her work.

Events of the week

Let us now get some perspective on our community. The conflict between the government and the BPR remains unresolved. The cathedral is still being occupied. I want to thank Bishop Modesto López Portillo and his collaborators for faithfully watching out for the interests of our cathedral, and I also thank the laborers who are carrying out the construction work for their prudence in these circumstances.

The French embassy continues to be occupied¹⁰, and the special ambassador has expressed his sadness at the lack of willingness to dialogue. Inside the embassy there's a seventy-year-old woman and persons who have heart problems, and they have to sleep on the floor. Please, we ask for humane treatment for them! Hostages are also being held in the embassy of Venezuela.

⁷ «CONFRES Reports on the Expulsion and Return of the Sisters of Arcatao» in *Orientación* (3 June 1979).

⁸ «The Events in Armenia» in *Orientación* (20 May 1979).

⁹ In the death notice published by the Parents Association of the Colegio La Asunción, the victim appears with another name: Alfonso Nicolás Hernández Pocasangre. *La Prensa Gráfica* (16 May 1979).

¹⁰ The French embassy was still occupied by the People's Revolutionary Bloc. *La Prensa Gráfica* (20 May 1979).

Other churches have also been occupied during these days: the church of María Auxiliadora here in the capital, the church of El Calvario in Apopa, the church of San Martín de Porres in Santa Ana, and the churches in Suchitoto, San Antonio de los Ranchos, and Aguilares. Other buildings have been occupied, such as the Escuela Joaquín Rodezno and the main factory of Pan Lido.

The consequences resulting from this conflict are dreadful. Already at least fifty-four persons from both sides have died; there are seventy persons wounded, twenty-five arrested, three deported, and thirty vehicles burned. The FAPU also suffered repression as they attempted to hold a demonstration that resulted in one dead and six wounded. The churches of Soyapango and El Calvario were occupied.

In view of this conflict the archbishop has issued a call in an effort to find a real solution to our present structural crisis¹¹. So here I would like to repeat briefly my views about how to seek a just solution. It is reasonable to recognize that a wrong was committed against three leaders who have neither been charged nor released; those responsible for the violation of their rights should be punished according to the law. My statement was published and came out in the newspapers¹². It read as follows: «It is not right to keep denying that [these leaders] are in the prisons of the security forces. There exist sufficient reasons to think that they have captured these three persons¹³. Other similar cases have been investigated, proved, and denounced by international organizations which have come to investigate this type of violation. In denying that they have captured these leaders, the authorities further undermine international recognition and the people's confidence. Recognizing blame and punishing those responsible would be a sign that the government wants to begin to resolve the serious problems of our country, and it would help people believe that this is possible»¹⁴. My statement continues:

Should the government remain erroneously and unjustly obstinate in denying their abuse of power, we propose to the leaders of the BPR that they put an end to this conflict soon. They have already achieved the objectives they proposed when they organized the pressure tactics they have been carrying out in these days. They obtained the freedom of their secretary-general and of the UCA student. They have made it known at the national and the international level that the security forces have disappeared three more captured persons. They have gained the support and solidarity of thousands of people who accompanied them as they buried the victims of the May 8 massacre.

If the government does not yield by either charging or freeing the three leaders, we fear that the reason is that a fatality has occurred. Most people are already convinced of this.

¹¹ «Let Us All Collaborate to Overcome the Crisis. A Call of the Archbishop to All Sectors of the Nation», 15 May 1979, in *Orientación* (20 May 1979). This appeal provoked calumnious reactions from several sectors, such as the statement of the Freedom or Slavery Patriotic Association and that of Félix A. Benavides titled, «Ayatollah Romero Thinks He is the Government». *La Prensa Gráfica* (18 and 19 May 1979).

¹² On 15 May 1979 Archbishop Romero held a press conference to announce his statement. *La Prensa Gráfica* (16 May 1979).

¹³ The captured leaders of the BPR were Numa Alberto Escobar Martínez, Oscar López, and Marciano Meléndez.

¹⁴ «Let Us All Collaborate to Overcome the Crisis. A Call of the Archbishop to All Sectors of the Nation», 15 May 1979, in *Orientación* (20 May 1979).

The government has other reasons of a popular and even humanitarian nature that should move them to be less intransigent and more reflective and considerate. There is a need to put an end to the burning of buses and the occupation of churches and embassies and the like. We need to create a climate that lets us explain, research, and resolve the structural problems that are at the root of the growing popular discontent. The people are especially unhappy about the burning of the buses because that hurts their own interests.

The persons being detained by the BPR in the embassies need to regain their freedom, and some of them need to recover from the tension they have experienced during these days.

The cathedral and the other churches that have been occupied need to dedicate themselves to the pastoral work for the people's benefit. The continued occupations and disturbances in the country seem to us out of proportion to the objectives that have yet to be achieved. We want to tell the BPR clearly that we do not approve of it¹⁵.

Given these circumstances, our office has received some expressions of solidarity from the national and the international community. I'm especially grateful for the letter from Adveniat, which stated, «We suffer with the families who are grieving for their husbands, fathers, and brothers who have been killed in those acts of violence. We want to accompany Your Excellency as you seek to be father and pastor in this painful situation. I personally will remember the souls of the deceased in the holy Mass and will pray to our Lord for the quick recovery of the wounded. Bishop Stehle, Director of Adveniat». Many other letters like this one have arrived.

I also want to thank the references made in the newspaper *El Independiente*, which has initiated its third phase.

In addition to the statement of the Higher Council of the National University, to which I referred last Sunday, we have statements about the present crisis this week from the Central American University José Simeón Cañas¹⁶, the MNR political part¹⁷, the Conference of Women and Men Religious¹⁸, and also the president of the republic in the discourse we all heard¹⁹. We are glad that this time the president has not reacted by increasing repression, and we hope that his deeds will make him credible despite the skepticism with which many received his words. For our part we would like to have heard a concrete response to the petitions made regarding the disappeared persons, for these are the immediate reason for the fierce political tensions of these days. My own thoughts, in any case, I already read to you.

Regarding what that presidential message says in general, I only want to say that the church has stated her opinion and has expressed her good will in words that are available to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ «Statement of the Superior Council of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas on the Current State of Violence in the Country», 11 May 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (14 May 1979) and *Orientación* (20 May 1979).

¹⁷ «The National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) Party Addresses the Salvadoran People», 15 May 1979, in *Orientación* (27 May 1979).

¹⁸ «The Conference of Women and Men Religious of El Salvador Regarding the Situation of the Country», 16 May 1979, in *Orientación* (3 June 1979).

¹⁹ On 17 May 1979 General Carlos Humberto Romero, president of El Salvador, broadcast a message on radio and television: «Let Us Unite Together in This Crusade to Save Our Homeland» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (21 May 1979) and *ECA* 368 (1979) 463-464.

all. Second, there is a need for concrete actions to give credibility to the promises that are made there. Third, in all her relationships the church will always seek to promote the integral vocation of our people, in matters both personal and social. The recent conference in Puebla confirmed the option made in Medellín regarding a preferential option for the poor, and that is why we will continue to be faithful defenders of the just interests of the people (P 1134). We are convinced that the greater the marginalization and exploitation of people and the greater the structural injustices committed against them, the more tempted they will be to react with the violence of desperation. We repeat that, no matter what the political system or social situation, the church does not identify with any specific political option. Rather, she supports whatever justice there is in any option, just as she is always ready to condemn whatever injustice is there. She will continue to be the voice of those who have no voice as long as there are oppressed people who are denied participation in the planning and the benefits of the country's development. The church will not stop preaching love as long as greed, rancor, and hatred exist among us. She will offer every assistance she can and will cooperate in every effort to solve our great problems. We hope that all sectors of society will respond responsibly and generously. Let us not merely make a show of judgments, solutions, and contributions, but rather let us all collaborate effectively in order to escape from this crisis.

With regard to the statements of the UCA and the MNR, we leave it to the experts and the people to offer their opinions about their analyses and the solutions they offer. We want to stress especially several points in the UCA statement: the demand for an end of repressions, illegal arrests, and torture; recognition and support of the right of workers and *campesinos* to organize; and the clarification of the fate of all those who have disappeared after being captured by the security forces.

In solidarity with all human suffering and with the concerns of many families, we also want to present to the public gathered here in our cathedral for this Sunday Mass the complaint of the United Confederation of Salvadoran Workers concerning their financial secretary, José Guillermo Rivas Flores, who was arrested by the National Police. The other workers arrested have been released, but still nothing is known of him.

We also want to unite ourselves with the distress of the families who have seen their loved ones arrested and are hoping to hear something about their fate: José Armando Flores León of the city of Santa Ana; Andrés Molina Clímaco, *campesino* of San Nicolás Lempa; Héctor Antonio Benítez Castellón, Alejandro Humberto Alarcón, José Amilcar Matéu, and Nahún Choto of El Congo; Carlos Delgado and Blanca Alas, *campesinos* from the town of San José Las Flores, Chalatenango; Jorge Antonio Ascencio Álvarez, *campesino* of the church of Santa Lucía in Zacatecoluca; Pedro Ábrego of El Tablón, Dulce Nombre de María; Lucio Cándido Alfaro, *campesino*; and Juan Francisco Romero, captured near the railroad station in Zacatecoluca.

Let us end where we began, sisters and brothers, with a call to love. The situation of our country is very far from the message that the Holy Bible has left us with this morning. Still, let us reflect as true Christians on these concrete situations which are seething with hatred, vengeance, and worldly interest instead of being inspired by the great aspirations of Christ, who came to sow love in the world and to lift us up to union with God. From Christ proceeds the love that has come to save us Christians, and we are the recipients of this message of love. Let us therefore do everything in our power to fulfill this commandment that Christ our Lord

has given us in the Scriptures we heard this morning: «This I command you: love one another as I have loved you» (John 15:17). Let it be so. (Applause)