

## GRACE, THE DIVINE GIFT OF EASTER

**Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
**May 13, 1979**

*Acts 9:26-31*  
*1 John 3:18-24*  
*John 15:1-8*

My dear sisters and brothers.

I always believe that the best part of any trip is the return home<sup>1</sup>. On any trip one learns many things and has the opportunity for new experiences. One's life is enriched especially when one travels as a pilgrim and Pastor. All these experiences and all this wealth are assimilated relative to one's home, that place that has been entrusted to one. As I return from Rome and bring you these new experiences and impressions, my presence here with you is the most beautiful aspect of my journey and I thank you, all of you who have gathered here in the church of El Rosario that has become a home where we come together as a family. I thank you for the warm reception that you have given me and this in turn encourages and strengthens me to continue to share with you the joys and sorrows, the concerns and tragedies, the anxieties and hopes of our people who together are on pilgrimage.

As I told you at the beginning, the primary motive of my trip to Rome was in response to the invitation of the Dominican Sisters of the Assumption whose founder, Father Francisco Coll Guitart, was beatified fifteen days ago, that is, on April 29<sup>th</sup>. Two men were elevated and honored at the altar: Father Coll and a French missionary, Father Santiago Desiré Laval.

The Vatican Basilica, the largest in the world, was unable to hold the multitude that had gathered for this celebration. A great number of people remained outside the Basilica. They applauded with excitement when, after singing *Lord have mercy!* the postulators for the cause of beatification asked the Pope, in his exercise of the supreme authority of the Church, to proclaim these two men worthy of the honor to be raised up on the altar and placed before the Christian community throughout the world as models of virtue. In response, the Pope pronounced the words that decreed these individuals as Blessed. This brings them one step closer to canonization which ultimately enables such persons to receive the worship of the Universal Church. Father Coll is thus involved in this process that we hope will soon lead to his canonization. When the Pope read the decree of beatification, the cloths that covered the image of the two Blessed was removed. These images were in the back of the Basilica and were about seven meters in height but in proportion to the size of the Basilica they appeared so natural. These images were uncovered and illuminated and there was great joy as the congregation accepted the invitation of the Pope to sing: *Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.*(1) The Mass continued and was celebrated in front of the two new Blessed that humanity was able to offer to the Lord.

Even though all of this and the ceremonies that followed were beautiful, here I want to share with the Dominican Community the joy that I bring with me as a result of being able to

stay in the central house of the community and also to spend time in the primary church of the Dominicans, Santa María della Minerva where we celebrated a solemn Mass in honor of the newly Blessed. Later I was able to celebrate another Mass of thanksgiving in the Church of the Claretian Community --- Father Claret, the founder of the Missionaries of the Heart of Mary, was a good friend of Father Coll, the newly Blessed. Later I traveled through Spain and during this pilgrimage visited the birthplace of Father Coll and the place where he exercised his priestly ministry.

I conclude this pilgrimage now as I gather together here with all of you, my beloved sisters and brothers ... as I gather together here with you in this place that is under the care of the Dominican Fathers and the Sisters of the Assumption and who desire to come together in this Church that is dedicated to our Lady of the Rosary<sup>2</sup> and their Founder. The members of this Congregation that is now ministering in many places throughout the world join together with the rest of the world in honoring Father Coll.

While on my journey I received news about the sad situation of our country. It is painful to feel oneself pointed out abroad as one who lives in a country where violence seems like everyday breathing. Abroad you see versions of events that we cannot see back here. You have crueller impressions of the things we see here. At times the insensitivity of Europe toward Latin America makes my heart ache more and makes one from Latin America feel like a missionary in Europe, like an awakener of conscience, of universal brotherhood, begging for understanding and love for our huge and complex problems in Latin America.

In this sense I was able to fulfill my duty as a missionary when I was asked to be interviewed by the Vatican Radio, when I had the opportunity to speak with the Holy Father and with his collaborators who hold different positions in the central government of the Church. This occurred throughout my journey. I felt that through my faith and my great love for El Salvador I was able to bring new light and new strength to the people of Europe. As I return, how I want to share with you, my beloved sisters and brothers, the optimism, joy and hope, the new air that our Christian faith produces wherever it is implanted!

Therefore I believe that the message that we are going to draw from the Word of God puts to one side the trip to Europe and the wonderful impressions that I have lived because here we always have the source that nourishes the sanctity and the greatness of our worship, our liturgy, the Pope and the bishops throughout the world. Here in the present framework of El Salvador, the Word of God becomes ours and the message of God, which every Sunday and everyday is proclaimed from the altars of our Church, nourishes our lives.

I remember when the Pope described the two Blessed men. He spoke about the Easter season that we have tried to live during the time of Lent when we prepared for the Easter celebration. Now we gather together the values that the Redeemer Christ has left us as a result of his death on the cross and his resurrection --- he offers us new life, joy and hope. Despite tragedies and sorrows, the world is illuminated with hope and faith that flows from the Word of God and our hope and belief in Christ who lives and will never die again, our hope and belief in the Christ who has power to save all people throughout the world. The Pope said: *Today, as it happens, this joy finds a striking confirmation, since we are honoring two admirable Servants of God who, last century, shone forth on our earth with Christ's holiness and whom the Church is now able to declare blessed, to propose them to the special veneration and imitation of the faithful*<sup>3</sup>.

The Pope began to outline the lives of the two persons beatified as great evangelizers and catechists, as men who in the political arena, difficult as our own, knew how to rise above despair. Even though these men had to suffer the consequence of persecution that in the case of Father Coll led to the closing of the Dominican houses and forced them to emigrate, nonetheless, he brought to the world his vocation as a member of the Dominican Congregation that became very fertile and produced this wonderful work of the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Assumption that has prolonged his spirit in the world.

Therefore we return to the pages of the Bible. There we open to the passage that was read today and we hear the words that provide us with the theme of our reflection. In the gospel Jesus says: *I am the vine, you are the branches* (2). Thus my homily is entitled: *grace, the divine gift of Easter that the Church distributes to women and men*. I will develop the following points: First, what is grace? Second, the relation between grace and the Church: the Church as the visible sign and administrator of grace. And in my attempt to reply to what is grace, the readings bring out three aspects of divine grace: grace which is the pardon of our sins, a more negative aspect which removes from our lives what separates us from God; secondly, there are two positive aspects: Grace, as Christ explains today, is communion with God's own love, with the truth God has revealed to us. All that is grace. And what is the relationship between this Easter gift we call 'grace' and the Church that we are and live? It is precisely the Church which is the sign and distributor of these gifts of the Lord.

### **What is grace**

Let us try to understand the meaning of grace. My dear sisters and brothers and beloved reporters who are here with us, I want to tell you that when you speak about the message of these homilies, do not only focus on the illumination that this message provides to the sad reality of our people because then the words of my homily appear to be some form of political discourse. I ask you to focus on the principal aspect of my message which is the theology of the Word of God. The reason we come to the church each Sunday is to reflect on the revelation of the divine Word of the Lord. This morning curiosity has brought some people here who want to hear what the Archbishop will say about the killings that took place during the week --- but this is not the primary aspect of my message. We are going to illuminate these events after we speak about the sublime theology of the transcendence of the Word of God. Thus, even if there were no descriptions of our reality, the Word of God must always be reflected upon and serve as a foundation for our life as Christians.

I ask myself: why does the Word of God lead us to speak about grace? What is grace? It is a word that summarizes and contains a great theological content. That is, this word gathers together the whole theology of grace. It is a word that joins together the values that Jesus in his gospel spread about and then distributed and placed in the hands of others. The work of theology is to bring some order to the words that Jesus proclaimed without any concern to do theology --- he spoke as the Good Shepherd whom the choir sang about as one who shares and gives to his flock the nourishment that they need.

The word *grace* does not appear in today's gospel and yet the whole gospel defines the meaning of this word. Jesus says: *I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned* (3). What is the meaning of these words of Jesus? A beautiful definition of grace!

I traveled through the fields of Europe at the beginning of spring. One of the most spectacular sights of spring is to see the vines come back to life. During the cold winter months of Europe, the leaves disappear from the vines. Those who cultivate the vines cut the branches and leave only the stump, the trunk. Then at springtime those trunks return to life. It was wonderful to see life return to those plants that had died during the winter season. Now in springtime the branches are tender and during the month of May begin to grow and the branches become larger. Supports are placed under the branches because soon the branches will begin to produce grapes. During the month of August, a very hot month, the grapes are harvested.

Thus we can understand Jesus' words and the comparison that he makes: *I am the vine. I am like the trunk that is in the earth, drawing in nourishment. I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain united to the trunk you will begin to produce large branches. My Father is the vine grower and he trims the branches so that they may produce even more fruit. Remain united with me because if you do not remain united with me you will die. Without me you can do nothing* (4).

Here we are not simply dealing with the natural order of things because we know there are many sinners who are doing many things. All the work of this earth can be accomplished without living in God's grace. We can even have the case of a professional, an artist or artisan, people who are good professionals, artists and artisan, but people who are not concerned about living in God's grace. Everything that they produce is like a plant that has been uprooted --- there is no circulation of life in the plant. Thus, if we are not united with Christ we can still produce much fruit on earth and build great organizations, but we do not produce fruit for eternal life. When Jesus says: *without me you can do nothing* (5), he is referring to those activities that bring about eternal life. These activities are seen when we reflect upon the life of Father Coll or other people who have been beatified --- so many people in our communities, humble women in the rural areas of our country, humble men in so many parts of our nation --- people who live and are concerned about remaining united with Christ. At the hour of their death they will be happy, their hands will be filled with branches of good works that will bring them into eternal life, to a life that can never be taken away from them. What purpose is there to spend one's life making money, to live comfortably or to obtain some high political office if when one least expects, life is taken away? What then remains of all the things that one has worked so hard to obtain? The only thing that remains is union with God.

What then is grace? Today in the first place I find this word to mean the forgiveness of sins. The great miracle of grace, the first thing that it accomplishes is that it changes the person --- it changes those people who find their pleasure and comfort in the things of this earth, in the pleasure of vice and the flesh; it changes those people who worship the idols of money; it changes those people who place their trust solely in political power. But there comes a moment when the truth of God uncovers the vanity of all these things and discovers the beauty of living united with Christ in grace, living united with Christ through love. This can be likened to Jesus' proclamation in today's gospel: *You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you* (6). If there is any profound joy for a preacher, then it is the joy of knowing that the hearts of women and men have been changed. Certain aspects of people's lives have changed because their hearts have been moved. It is as though Jesus had said to them *you are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you*.

My sisters and brothers, when I preach, the only thing I seek is conversion. When we denounce crimes and injustice we are not looking for vengeance or hatred but rather we desire the conversion of sinners. How many times! Oh so many times have we said that we must denounce the blood-stained hands of our people but again we do not do this out of revenge but because we pray for the conversion of all people: *Cleanse yourselves by repentance! Come back to the Lord! You have been pruned because of the words you heard!* Blessed are those who listen to the Word with an attitude of sincere conversion. This is the meaning of grace: the fact that people feel that a great weight has been lifted from them, a weight that oppressed them --- the weight of sin.

Here we proclaim the words of the second reading: *Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth* (7). These words exhort us to live with a clear conscience, to keep the commandments and do what God desires. All of this is the content of the word *grace*: to take away the sins of the world. All of this is in line with conversion and seeking happiness in the love of and in union with Jesus Christ, the true vine of eternal life, rather than seeking this happiness in the transitory goods of the earth.

I want to say here that grace is also a communion in love and truth. If Jesus had done nothing else than remove the weight of sin for the hearts of people, then that would have been more than enough. But Jesus did something more: he gave us the grace of Easter. The grace of redemption is something positive because Jesus not only takes away sin but also gives something new to people, something that they did not have before --- he gives them love and truth. In today's reading we find these two treasures in Christ's words: *"Remain united with me. Remain in my love. This is my commandment.* (8). The second reading states: *His commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us* (9).

These are the two aspects of grace. Let us believe in the name of Jesus Christ and let us love one another as he commanded us! Truth means that we believe in what Christ has brought to the world and that we believe in the name of Jesus and in all that this name implies. Thus we believe that Christ is God who has entered our world. We accept his gospel and we believe in the things that he did and preached. This is the supreme truth, the truth that makes us truly free and that provides us with a foundation for true love. Let us love one another as he commanded us. This is not some form of romanticism or sentimentality but is a love of deed and truth. It is a love that puts aside all selfishness in order to share joy and happiness with others. It is a love that is courageous and bold and able to forgive the hand that injures us and enables us to say like Jesus: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do* (10). This is a love that enables us to identify ourselves with all those realities that are opposed to hatred, a love that does not divide but unites, and a love that provides a basis for true peace.

This is the civilization of love that the bishops who gathered together in Puebla desire for all the people of Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Love is not weak. Many people have placed their trust in violence and hatred and believe that in this way they are going to be able to bring order to society. They forget that there is no power in hatred or violence --- these are signs of weakness. True strength and power is found in love and if we have not seen a transformation as a result of love then it is because we have not tested the true power of love. We want to see this love brought about without having to make any contribution to this authentic love.

When we speak about freedom we are in fact speaking a beautiful word, a word that is much loved in our own time. In his encyclical the new Pope wants to unite the concept of freedom and human rights to the concept of truth.<sup>(11)</sup> The Pope says: *Jesus Christ meets the man of every age, including our own, with the same words: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free".*<sup>(12)</sup> *These words contain both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship with regard to truth as a condition for authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world. Today also, even after two thousand years, we see Christ as the one who brings man freedom based on truth, frees man from what curtails, diminishes and as it were breaks off this freedom at its root, in man's soul, his heart and his conscience. What a stupendous confirmation of this has been given and is still being given by those who, thanks to Christ and in Christ, have reached true freedom and have manifested it even in situations of external constraint!* As the Pope speaks about Jesus he says that beginning with the Apostles and throughout the centuries, Jesus has stood beside people when they were judged because of the truth and that Jesus has died with people who were condemned to death because of the truth.<sup>(13)</sup> Is it possible that he would cease to be the spokesperson and the advocate of those persons who live their lives *in spirit and in truth* <sup>(14)</sup> ?

Let these words be a source of encouragement so that in an environment of lies and distortion and falsification of facts we might realize that these do not provide us with any breath of freedom. Freedom must be that which the Pope has just described: the product of truth. Christ will accompany those people of truth, even when they are brought before the courts and when they must stand face to face with people like Pontius Pilate who asked Jesus: *What is truth* <sup>(15)</sup>. Jesus said: *For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.* For this reason then grace is truth that communicates with the love that the Lord has revealed to us, communicates above all with the love that God has revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ. The gospel tells us: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life* <sup>(16)</sup>.

So Jesus, sent by the Father as a witness to love, speaks to us today and everyday the words that we will soon pronounce: *Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink this is my blood that is shed for you. I am going to offer myself up for the life of my brothers and sisters and for the glory of my Father.* <sup>(17)</sup> This is love! Love is to give of oneself, to give without any reservation. Love is to unselfishly desire the good of another, to serve and not exploit --- love is everything that religion teaches us. Therefore grace means that we are in communion with the love that God had for the world when he sent us his Son. To love one another as God has loved us --- this is the new commandment of the Christian law and is also grace. Therefore when a person is beatified or canonized it is precisely in this area of love that one's life is examined. Love is holiness and the measure of holiness. If a person knows how to forget oneself and love, then one is a saint. If one speaks about holiness but does not love, that person is not a saint.

In light of this truth let us reflect on how we will be judged in the evening hour of our life. Saint John of the Cross has said: *In the evening of our life we will be judged according to love.*<sup>5</sup> If we pass this test, we will be saved and we will be holy to the degree that we pass this exam. Hopefully we will pass this test with an excellent mark, with a glorious mark of 10. If, however, it is found that we have not lived lives of love, we will not be able to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who have hated, even though they were involved in struggles for the just demands of people on this earth --- but if these people have hated, then they did not build for true freedom. Those who act violently and believe more in violence

than in love are also not building true freedom but as the Pope said they are involved in illusions or appearances of freedom but not freedom that is based on truth and love. True freedom involves union with the Lord. Jesus invites us to that union when he says: *Remain in me* (18).

### **What relationship between grace and the Church ?**

Finally, sisters and brothers, our theological consideration this morning: the Church and grace. Here I want to focus on the first reading. What a wonderful description of Paul, the persecutor. Paul is still suspect in the Church community. He travels to Jerusalem but the book of Acts tells us that the people did not trust him. Even though he had spoken with the Lord, even though he preached to the gentiles in the name of the Lord, he now goes to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the apostles. Only after he presents his preaching and teaching to the pillars of the Church, only after he is accepted by these individuals --- only then is he a preacher. He then belongs to the hierarchy of Christianity and because of that position he is persecuted in the same way that every true preacher is persecuted. Some Greek philosophers attempt to eliminate him. This is the fate of all those who preach in the name of Jesus --- people will try to eliminate them and plot against them. In the case of Paul, the Christian community sent him to another place. To flee is not cowardice especially when one is able to do good in another place. There Paul begins to preach the great doctrine that has made him so holy and so famous: the doctrine of freedom in Christ, our Lord.

I want to talk about two other realities that are presented to us in today's reading. The first reality deals with being connected with the hierarchy. Despite the fact that Paul experiences the call of God in his heart (a vocation) and had seen the Lord, he nonetheless tells the apostles about this encounter with the risen Lord and how he had been knocked from his horse on the way to Damascus. He knows that he is preaching the Christ who had spoken with him but he needs this to be confirmed by those persons whom Jesus had installed as the guardians of his revelation. Only when his own vocation is joined with the mission of the Apostles, only then does Paul become an apostle, a bishop, a preacher of the Christian Church. All who are preaching God's Word need to pass through the same process: we need to experience the Lord's call (vocation). But this is not enough because this vocation has to be affirmed by the hierarchy that then unities us with the authorized teaching of the Church

I have lived the reality that I have spoken about because last Monday the Holy Father showed me his goodness by receiving me in a private audience. I greeted the Pope on the Wednesday before, on the occasion of a public audience that filled Saint Peter's Square. He invited all the bishops who were present to come forward and join him in blessing the multitude present in the Square. Then he greeted us one by one and when I told him my name and my responsibility here in El Salvador, he told me that he hoped to speak with me in private. His words were very helpful to me as I tried to schedule this audience that the Pope had spoken about. Finally on Monday at noon I had the pleasure of speaking with Pope and listening to his words of consolation and comfort as he said:<sup>6</sup> *I understand that the situation in which you have to carry out your ministry is very difficult, very difficult.*

Naturally as the supreme head of the Church he gave me guidance and advice which would be given to any collaborator who is in a difficult situation: *Be prudent! Be careful! But also have the courage to denounce those serious situations! You must also do this.* The Church has to fulfill her obligation of accompanying the poor and being the voice of the voiceless. In order, however, not to be burned in the mission, the Pope was prudent when he

counseled me to always maintain the authority of the Church. Many times the Pope spoke about his pastoral ministry in Poland and compared my situation to his. He told me: *In difficult environments such as Poland, where the government does not collaborate in any significant way with the Church, the Church must move in the midst of these difficulties in order to bring the message of Jesus Christ to the hearts of people.*

He spoke at length about you, my sisters and brothers. Through his bishops the Pope tries to love and listen to the voices of all people. A gesture of his has remained engraved in my heart, namely, the attention with which Pope John Paul II listens. When he had finished his sentences and I began to speak, he was very attentive to my words. He leaned closer to me to listen to my words, to understand what I was saying. I understand that the Pope was unexpectedly taken from the situation in Poland and placed in this very difficult role of being Shepherd of the Universal Church. He had no previous experience of the Roman Curia or of the universal work of the Church and so he is attentive and willing to listen to different perspectives of the world so that he can be the Shepherd of all people.

Today the Bible tells us that *Paul went up to Jerusalem and spoke with Peter* (19). I was able to imitate this action of Paul as I went to Rome and spoke with the new Pope. Yet the same conclusions were made: we have to continue to move forward and suffer, we have to be misinterpreted, we have to confront boldly the difficult situations and we have to walk together united in this communion that connects us with the person who has been placed in the position of authenticating the doctrine that Christ gave to the world.

My dear sisters and brothers, on the other hand there is another side to all of this and I want to highlight this --- and here I speak of you. How beautiful are the concluding words of today's first reading: *The church throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers* (20). Believe me when I tell you that now I fulfill my obligation as I tell you that I was very proud of my Archdiocese as I traveled to different parts of the world because everywhere people speak about us and want to know more about the experience of our Church. In Europe, when I was at the tomb of Father Claret in Vich, a city near Barcelona, one of the Claretian Fathers reminded me that Father Claret was the bishop of Santiago, Cuba where he founded the Claretian Community. He spent some time in Spain but died in exile in France. He was fond of saying: *America is the new vineyard while Spain is the old vineyard*. He placed all his hope in America where he later sent his missionaries.

Now we speak about the vineyard, the vine and the branches and when the book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the church of the People grew in fervor and faithfulness to the Lord and was guided by the Holy Spirit, I believe, my sisters and brothers, that there is no danger that the Pope tried to contradict this reality when he spoke to us in Puebla about the Church as the People of God and said: *be very careful because we can easily convert the Church into a democracy*<sup>7</sup>. This would be the case if the situation were to arise where the people speak and the ministers and priests and others have to do exactly what the people say. We are not speaking about such a situation! This is a mistaken understanding of the Church. The Church that I refer to is that Church that is spoken about in the Acts of the Apostles, the Church that grows in fidelity to the Lord and is guided by the Holy Spirit. This is our Church: priests, religious, laity, communities of people in towns and villages who attempt to nourish their reflection on the Word of the Lord. I see that these people and communities are growing in faithfulness to the Lord. For this reason, following the example of the Pope who spoke to the bishops in Puebla, I also want to call your attention to the following: whenever

there is a danger of changing the Church into a political group then there is also the danger that everything will be lost. But when the Church maintains her fidelity to the Lord and is guided by the Holy Spirit, when the Church with her light illuminates and participates in political realities, then this becomes the Church that is needed in our time.

Thus the Church does not have to renounce the realities of the earth in order to remain faithful to the Lord and be guided by the Holy Spirit. This would be the opposite of incarnation and a form of religious alienation. Unfortunately there are many people who still cling to such a piety, a piety that involves no commitment. May our people learn how to balance all these realities, especially our people who experience so many problems and so much anguish and who need to receive a response to their just demands. People have to find strength in the leaven of the gospel and other Christians so that their lives might be transformed. Indeed the life of those Christians who are involved in politics will be transformed to the degree that they are faithful to the Lord and allow themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit. In their own vocation all people are called to be messengers of the Spirit and the Lord so that the society in which they live might be transformed.

This is the Church of my dreams! This is the Archdiocese that I ask the Lord to grant us: a people who continue to grow in faithfulness to the Lord and who continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit. The Church does not want to be a force of political opposition. Never! I have never said this and this will never happen! The Church does not want to be another subversive political party. It will never be that nor can it ever be that! If the Church is subversive, if the Church is restless, if the Church is called Marxist, political, communist then this is simply slander from those who do not understand that a Church that is faithful to the Lord and guided by the Holy Spirit must denounce all the injustices that are committed by whatever sector of society.

My beloved sisters and brothers, this is the Church that we must build! Every Sunday I invite you to build this true Church by faithfully following the Lord and I also invite you to continue to allow yourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that I say that the Church, the People of God, provides us, the Shepherds of the People of God, with the surety of preaching the true faith that Christ has revealed to us. Therefore, from this perspective of the Church, let us look at the perspective of the world.

### **Life of the Church**

In the first place this community that attempts to be faithful to the Lord and that I, as pastor, am responsible for --- this morning, during this Mass the Archdiocese unites itself to the joy of the Dominican Sisters and priests, to the joy of the Congregation whose habit Father Coll wore. I can almost feel his spirit alive among us. He was a Dominican, a son of Saint Dominic de Guzmán and the spirit of Saint Dominic animated him and he shared this spirit with the Dominican Sisters of the Assumption. They, the priests and sisters inspired by Saint Dominic, are doing so many good works among us and the whole Archdiocese rejoices with them in the same way that we rejoice in the diverse charisms of the many Congregations and parishes and communities that minister throughout the Archdiocese. Indeed it is the presence of all these entities that provides true spiritual treasures to our Church.

In the same way I rejoice that we are a community that can depend on priests and religious who (as I have been told) have been a model of what it means to participate in the anguish of our people. Here I am referring to the fact that on May 8<sup>th</sup> several priests and

religious sisters offered to go to the hospital in order to help wash, clothe and bury the dead who remained in the cathedral<sup>8</sup>. I feel truly proud that our Diocese is a community of religious from so many different congregations, a community of men and women who respond to the urgent needs of the world, a community of men and women who are willing to leave a pastoral meeting in order to serve others: *how can we serve our sisters and brothers?* These women and men accept as their own the problems that each one of us experience.

The day after tomorrow is the Day of Nurses. I wish to extend my greetings to this group of women and men who share our pain and suffering and if any of you are listening to me I want to invite you --- nurses, doctors, and hospital workers --- to join us tomorrow afternoon at 4:00pm in the Hospital de la Divina Providencia. I want to honor you, my beloved nurses, and I invite you to come together for a brief period of time to reflect in the presence of the Divine healer, Jesus Christ, on the mission of the nurse in the world.

In this Church of El Rosario we experience ourselves as a community that is under the protection of the Virgin Mary. I want to echo the words of the Pope who exhorted the Catholic community to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary and to pray frequently, if possible, the Rosary. Today, May 13<sup>th</sup> we celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Fatima. Today at 4:00pm in Planes de Renderos there will be a very typical and beautiful celebration: the procession of palms and the celebration of the Mass in honor of the Virgin. I invite you, if you have time, to go to Planes de Renderos and participate in this pilgrimage and pray --- please do not go there as a tourist but as one who desires to pray. Let us go there and pray to the Virgin for the needs of our country.

Our community is also aware of the approaching feast of Pentecost. In three weeks, on June 3<sup>rd</sup> we are going to celebrate this feast and in the last clergy meeting the priests reminded me that this feast is also Seminary Day. Thus we will make this celebration one of thanksgiving for the vocations that we have been blessed to receive and we call upon the faithful to support the work of the seminary. Like last year, on the feast of Pentecost, the day on which the Holy Spirit comes to the Church, we will confirm young men and women from our communities. I invite the different communities who are preparing young people for Confirmation to let us know the number of people who will be confirmed. We hope to administer this sacrament to many young people in the Archdiocese in the same way that we are going to celebrate this sacrament next Saturday in the parish of Colón where several villages are coming together to receive this sacrament.

As I remind you about our seminary I also want to take this opportunity to remind the community of the Archdiocese that the beloved priests who have died and are no longer with us are still in our memory and alive in our hearts. As you are aware Father Benito Alfaro died very tragically while I was outside the country. He was the pastor of San Rafael in Chalatenango and we remember him in a special way in our Mass today. I unite myself to the suffering and pain of his family. Four children were with him when his car crashed but thanks be to God the children were not injured. Yesterday and the day before, we celebrated the second anniversary of the tragic death of Father Alfonso Navarro. I want to thank all of those who took time to reflect on the message that he gave to the world. We also remember fondly Father Segura who died one year ago on May 1<sup>st</sup>. The seminary community was deeply moved as they remembered the work of this priest and celebrated a wonderful Mass in which he was remembered in a special way.

I unite myself with the pain of so many families who are in mourning during this time. I ask you to pray for the deceased because so many events have brought suffering and pain to so many people. Among the families in mourning I ask you to remember in a special way that of Don Andrés Orellana Mejía from Cancasque on the anniversary of his death. I ask you to pray for all the deceased, may they all be found in the glory and the joy that Christ has promised.

I want to make you aware of a new service of social communication in our Archdiocese. We will begin to publish a weekly bulletin called *Noticias y Comentarios* --- the object of this publication is to speak about the life of our country in a truthful way especially since the media present so many issues in a distorted way. I therefore ask for your support of this project and for your continued and enthusiastic support of our newspaper *Orientación* which each week attempts to communicate the situation of our nation and the message that the Church wishes to bring to this situation. I am also grateful for your support of our radio station YSAX which is certainly carrying out a great mission and it is because of this that it is persecuted just as the whole Church in the Archdiocese is being persecuted.

We are also making every effort to make available the encyclicals of the Holy Father and the homilies that are proclaimed here in the Cathedral. All of this material that is useful for your reflection on the meaning of a Christian life can be obtained in the office beside the Cathedral.

This community of the Archdiocese unites itself in solidarity to the Diocese of Santa Ana where the faithful have been celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the episcopal ordination of Bishop Benjamín Barrera y Reyes, the bishop of Santa Ana. He has been the pastor of this sister diocese since May 5, 1954.

### **Events of the week**

My sisters and brothers, as I conclude this homily I want to share with you my impressions as I return home. How painful it is to undertake a pilgrimage and represent a Diocese that is part of a nation that is in upheaval! At the same time how much good can be done as a missionary of this diocese, as one who clarifies distorted information and awakens peoples' sensitivities, as one who promotes a unity in prayer and a spirit of solidarity with other communities! These days during my absence from the Diocese, this has been my pilgrimage. As I return, I am greatly comforted to be with my family, the family of this diocese. But this comfort has also become a participation in the anguish and the tension that exists in our family. I have tried to become informed about this situation so that I might use just and gospel criteria when speaking about the reality that is occurring in our midst.

Because of the reality of our situation we are saddened by certain events that you are all aware of but I want to take the time to briefly call to mind the events that have filled the days of this past week: the occupation of the cathedral and other embassies<sup>9</sup>, the assassination of police officers<sup>10</sup>, the boycott of public transportation, the cruel massacre that occurred during a peaceful rally that was broken up with violent gunshots resulting in many dead and wounded<sup>11</sup>. Today four more people will be buried after funeral rites are celebrated for these persons in the Basilica at 11:00am this morning. We have also received an official report from the National Police who do not recognize their own error and instead place the blame on the demonstrators and state that they are the ones who provoked the violence<sup>12</sup>. The

President has promised to investigate the massacre<sup>13</sup> and also threatened that a state of siege might be decreed<sup>14</sup>. What are we to think about all of these events? Above all else I ask: why have we arrived at this situation? What are the ultimate causes of all of this?

I want to express my solidarity with the prudent and wise statement written by the Superior University Council of the University of El Salvador, which states: *It is a generally accepted fact, both nationally and internationally, that the crisis that periodically touches the Salvadorian society ultimately finds an explanation in the great inequality of participation among the different sectors in the process of the production and distribution of the national income. It cannot be denied that in recent years production has increased appreciably. At the same time it also cannot be denied that the economic expansion has not generated a parallel process of social democracy that allows the larger sectors of the population to rejoice in the benefits of said economic expansion.*

*These sectors are not only marginalized by the present form of social organization of production but also suffer the consequences of the economic crisis which began in the mid 1960's and continues up to the present time.*

*At the same time we have experienced the development and the consolidation of authoritarian forms of government that have denied organic forms of expression of the interests of all sectors of society, thus leading to a crisis of representation and legitimacy of political power and the right of the state to govern.*

*Within this general framework, denying the popular sectors effective possibilities of organic participation that would enable them to rejoice in the benefits of the production process, conflicts arise with greater frequency and greater intensity. This in turn obliges said sectors of our society to seek alternative methods, such as mechanisms of social pressure, in order to have their interests attended to. This, then, has generated reactions and responses that have become more authoritarian and repressive from those sectors that control political power.*

*This process is irrational and only fueling the land so that social and political conflicts tend to be settled with inconsistent methods, methods that the University of El Salvador definitively rejects --- yes, we reject violence!<sup>15</sup>*

The statement continues with a description of the events that occurred in the University and concludes by once again affirming that the path of repression leads nowhere and thus the demands for a more rational order become urgent and imperative. The Church agrees with this statement and believes that there we find the ultimate cause of this situation.

As everyone knows the proximate cause of our present situation is the illegal arrest of five leaders of the Bloque Popular Revolucionario. Two of them have been released but nothing has been said about the other three who were arrested by the Security Forces. They have not been brought before the courts.<sup>16</sup>

The only reasonable and just way to resolve the conflict that presently afflicts the country is to respond to the just demands that this group has made and not to repress them or threaten a state of siege. What have these three leaders done that they have not been released? Not only is the BRP asking this question but all people of good will in El Salvador are asking the government to respect the law and grant freedom to these brothers of ours! (Applause).

Many thanks for your affirmation but I want to add here that we are not only speaking about these three people who have disappeared. We have a list of thirteen people who have been arrested and disappeared between the dates of February 22<sup>nd</sup> and May 8<sup>th</sup>. If we add to that list the names of those who were arrested and disappeared before February 22<sup>nd</sup> then we have at least one hundred twenty-seven names<sup>17</sup>. They are our sisters and brothers and we want to know where they are!

An exhaustive investigation has been promised. How that would please us! It is only just. But we fear that if an investigation is to suffer the fate of the investigation that the Inter-American Human Rights Commission was asked to make last September 14<sup>th</sup>, when it was asked to observe and investigate the human rights situation in El Salvador, then there is not much to hope for. Certainly, it is the right thing to do, but with the purpose of accepting responsibility, of punishing the guilty, and of correcting mistakes. For me, this is what is most serious: mistakes are made and are not admitted. We must all recognize our mistakes and not distort the truth for an apparent saving of honor.

At the same time I want to speak with candor. It is my duty to reject the forces of violence and such violations of liberty of action as the burning of vehicles, the machine-gunning of residences, the occupation of offices and locals set aside for the people. There is an unshakable moral principle that says one cannot do evil in order to achieve good. In my Third Pastoral Letter I speak about violence and outline a series of moral principles that should always be kept in mind when resorting to strategies of pressure. Otherwise those who carry out these actions run the risk of doing that which they themselves condemn.<sup>18</sup> With greater reason, then, those individuals charged with promoting the common good must ward off and prevent these excesses that we now shamefully lament. This can be done if they enact just laws and act honestly and impartially.

Allow me to make a courteous call to our friendly neighbors whose embassies have been affected by the present situation and who have used the power of their diplomatic relations in an attempt to obtain within our country a more humane situation. I believe that the frankness of a Senator from the United States is a recent example that deserves to be imitated especially when there exists a situation of true international solidarity.

After placing before you the perspective of our recent history, I repeat what I said at the beginning of my homily: this is not the primary objective of my homily. Remember that the central point of our preaching and reflection today is: *I am the vine, you are the branches. Remain united to me!* (21). Only this can give us true dignity and true freedom. Let us not be deceived by the illusion and the appearance of freedom. Let us seek that freedom in the truth and the truth is only found with Jesus who said: *I am the truth!* (22).

Jesus, who offers us this great Easter gift, the gift of his grace, the gift of participating in his life and truth --- this Jesus is waiting for us at the altar. Today he wants to receive us together with the Dominican Sisters of the Assumption and the Dominican Fathers who with great gratitude offer to God a brother, a flower of holiness. Therefore, I want to proclaim to the Diocesan community the beautiful words of today's first reading: *The Church was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers* (23). So be it.

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<sup>1</sup> Mons Romero left for Rome on 27 April and returned to El Salvador 12 May 1979; for this reason he didn't preach in the cathedral of San Salvador on the Sundays 24 April and 6 May 1979. See *Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, su diario*, San Salvador, 2000, pp. 151-170.

<sup>2</sup> The Cathedral of San Salvador was occupied by members of the Bloque Popular Revolucionario since 4 May 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Homily of John Paul II in the Mass for the beatification of Francisco Coll and Santiago Laval (29 April 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 6 May 1979.

<sup>4</sup> See *Mensaje a los pueblos de América Latina*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> The original phrase is: “A la tarde te examinerán delo amor, aprende a amar como Dios quiere ser amado” in *Dichos de luz y amor*. St John of the Cross, *Obras Completas*, Madrid, 1988, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> See Pontifical Audiencies, *Osservatore Romano*, 13 May 1979. In his pastoral diary Mon s. Romero offers more details of his audience with Pope John Paul II. See *Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, su diario*, San Salvador, 2000, pp. 160-162.

<sup>7</sup> See Discourse of John Paul II at the inauguration of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (28 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 February 1979.

<sup>8</sup> On 8 May 1979 ther security forces repressed a demonstration of the Bloque Popular Revolucionario in front of the Cathedral which left 20 dead and 70 wounded, with an unknown number of those arrested. See Boletín Informativo n° 62 of the Secretaría de Comunicación of the3 Archdiocese of San Salvador (9 May 1979), *Orientación*, 13 May 1979.

<sup>9</sup> On the 4 May members of the Bloque Popular Revolucionario occupied the embassies of Costa Rica and France and the Cathedral of San Salvador; and on the 11 May the embassy of Venezuela, to demand the freedom of five of its officials captured during the last days of April. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 5 May 1979 and “Cronica del mes de mayo, 1979”, *ECA* 368, (1979), pp. 450-452.

<sup>10</sup> From 4 to 11 May four officers of the National Police were assassinated. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 5, 7 and 11 May 1979.

<sup>11</sup> See *Orientación*, 13 May 1979.

<sup>12</sup> See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 9 May 1979.

<sup>13</sup> See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 13 May 1979.

<sup>14</sup> See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 11 May 1979.

<sup>15</sup> El Consejo Superior Universitario de la Universidad de El Salvador ante la crisis política y social que vive la nación (9 May 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 12 May 1979.

<sup>16</sup> Ricardo Mena and Facundo Guardado, general secretary of the Bloque Popular Revolucionario were freed respectively on 10 and 11 May. However the security forces denied having captured Numa Alberto Escobar Martínez, Oscar López and Marciano Meléndez. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 11 and 12 May 1979.

<sup>17</sup> See “Informe sobre los desaparecidos”, *Orientación*, 20 May 1979.

<sup>18</sup> See *La Iglesia y las organizaciones políticas populares* (6 August 1978), pp. 46-51.

*Marginal References* (1) Lk 2,14; (2) Jn 15,5; (3) Jn 15,5-6; (4) Jn 15,1-6; (5) Jn 15,5c; (6) Jn 15,3; (7) 1Jn 3,18; (8) Jn 15,9) (9) 1Jn 3,23; (10) Lk 23,34; (11) RH 12; (12) Jn 8,32; (13) RH 12; (14) Jn 4,23; (15) Jn 18,37-38; (16) Jn 3,16; (17) Lk 22,19-20; (18) Jn 15,4; (19) Ac 9,26; (20) Ac 9,31; (21) Jn 15,5; (22) Jn 14,6.