

LOVE, THE GREATEST GIFT OF EASTER

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 20, 1979

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48

1 John 4:7-10

John 15:9-17

My sisters and brothers let us remember that today, Sunday, is the Lord's Day. The Church has organized herself around the Liturgical Year, the events that highlight the mysteries of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Let us not allow temporal and political circumstances to make us lose sight of the perspective and the itinerary of our pilgrimage. In the midst of the fluctuations of history, the Church, our Mother and Teacher, leads humanity with a more secure horizon and with the Word that she hopes will serve as our guide. Thus we can see that the Liturgical Year is organized and developed around a series of profound reflections on the saving mysteries of Jesus Christ.

Let us remember that we are approaching the conclusion of the Easter season. This season began on the night of the Lord's resurrection, that is, on Holy Saturday and continues until the feast of Pentecost, the day on which we commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is a word that implies fullness and refers to the fifty days after Easter. As Christians, these fifty days should be highlighted in our spirituality because they present us with the motive for our faith and hope and joy, and with the motive for continuing our journey in the midst of time. Christ has risen and lives in our midst.

This Easter season, these fifty day that are drawing to a close, presents us, in a summary manner, the richness of Christ's work and redemption which in turn is presented to us as Easter gifts, gifts that we have reflected on during the Sundays of this Easter season. Next Sunday we will celebrate the feast of the Ascension of the Lord and in two weeks we will crown the Easter season with the celebration of the feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit to inaugurate the Church and present the Church to the world. This is the Church that we are and that enables us to continue to walk with the certainty that Christ is in our midst.

Among the Easter gifts that have been presented to us and that we have tried to highlight here in our Sunday celebration of the Liturgy is the gift of love. And today the Liturgy of the Word speaks to us about this greatest gift of Easter: the gift of love. Love presents us with the life style and the spirit of the new covenant that God desired to establish with his people. The covenant and Easter are inspirations of God and under the Spirit of God who is love.

Remember that during Lent we studied the plans of God as outlined in the Old Testament: the old covenants that foreshadowed the new covenant. Our theme during Holy Week was: the celebration of the new covenant. On Holy Thursday, during the Mass in which we commemorated the institution of the Eucharist, we spoke about the love that characterizes this covenant that God established with all people and that also characterizes the person of

Jesus Christ. Today we return to this theme because all the readings speak about love. As I read the Word of God I was reminded of a synthesis that is found in the documents of Vatican II when the Council refers to the Church as the new People of God: *The new People of God has Christ for its head ... The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time* (1). We come together each Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist so that we might live with the dignity and freedom of the children of God and so that we might be able to collaborate in extending the Kingdom of God on earth. We were baptized and incorporated into the People of God for the same reason as mentioned above. We would not be good builders of the Kingdom of God if we did not understand that above all else our law is the new commandment of love.

Today the Liturgy of the Word of God speaks about all of this. In our time, however, there are many people who have lost faith in love. In the document of Puebla we read among other things: *At first glance love seems to be an expression lacking the strength needed to confront the grave problems of our age*¹. How true this is! For many people, the message that I am going to communicate this morning becomes marginalized by itself. It will be seen as unimportant because people do not want to listen to a message concerning love but want to hear us speak of violence and hatred and just demands and rights. None of this is the language of Jesus Christ or his Church. The just demands and social struggles that the Church accompanies, she accompanies with love and she proclaims to all the protagonists of history that without the power of love nothing can be solidly built. Again Puebla states:² *Many people think that love seems to be an expression lacking the strength needed to confront the grave problems of our age ... But we can assure you that no stronger word exists in the Christian lexicon. It is one with the very force of Christ. If we do not believe in love, then neither do we believe in HIM who says: "this is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you"*(2).

In light of our reflection on the Word of God that infuses love into us as the energy of all Christians, I would like this morning for all of us to reconfirm our faith in love. Love is not cowardice or passive. Love is power and strength --- power that can save the world. There is no other salvation than the love of Christ who brought us the redeeming love of God.

Today I entitle my homily: the greatest gift of Easter, the dynamics of love. I will develop the following three points: One, God is love and the source of love; Two, Christ is the revelation of God's love in the midst of humankind; Three, Christians are responsible for the dynamics of love. If the world is not saved in light of the fact that there are so many Christians, then the reason for this is that we have not accepted the tremendous responsibility that has been given to us: we are the depositories of the saving energy of love. This morning we are called to make use of this love, to make use of the energy of love that has been deposited in our hearts.

God is love and the source of love

Today the readings lead us into a profound contemplation. Today we have been lifted up like the eagle, lifted up to the highest heaven where love is born. In the gospel that we have just proclaimed Jesus tells us: *As the Father loves me, so I have also loved you* (3). Saint John also wrote the following words about Christ, words that seem to contain within them the very lesson that we are speaking about: *God is love and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him* (4).

Since the Word of God offers us such lofty relationships we can only say that the origin of these relationships is divine. Since the Father begets the Son in the Holy Spirit for all eternity, the Son then becomes the revelation of the Father, the revelation of the Father's thoughts and love and charity for endless time. Thus Jesus reveals his Father to us. *As the Father loves me* means that the relationship between the Father and the Word, the relationship of *I am the Word made flesh* is a relationship of love. The power that unites the three persons of the Blessed Trinity in the great intimacy of God is the power of love.

Thus in the Second Vatican Council, keeping in mind the lofty perspective of Christ and his gospel at the Last Supper says: *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 sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself* (5).

As the Father loves me so I also love you and so also must you love one another (6). How does the Father love the Son? By giving the Son the nature of God. Our catechism tells us that there are not three Gods, but one God, one nature that in love is handed over to the three divine persons.

How beautiful it would be if people viewed their full development and all their lofty ideals as resting on their ability to give themselves to others. What diminishes the status of the human person and what, though impossible, is the only thing that could destroy God, is selfishness. The day when the Father says: *my nature is mine and I will share it with no one else*, then God would cease to exist. God is love and gives to others. God hands himself over to others and all of this is common to the three divine persons. *As the Father loves me, putting everything in my hands, so also I love you, giving everything to you.*

The second reading tells us that *love is of God ... and God is love* (7). Let us come down from the heights where the Word of God has led us and speak plainly about the fact that the initiative to come and redeem humankind springs from God's love. Today in the second reading Saint John tells us: *In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his only Son* (8). Love takes the initiative and does not wait for gratitude or applause but love is like a mother who does not wait for her children to become aware of her sacrifices or anxieties. God has loved us in the same way. He hands himself over to us even when we were unmindful of him, even when, because of sin, we were his enemies. God saw our miserable state and sent his Son to save the world.

Look at how in the school of God we are learning about the generosity that today is so lacking in the world. We should not wait for the beggar to extend his/her hand and ask us for help. Like God we should take the initiative and assist people even when they do not remember who we are. It is for this reason that we say that God is the source of love. When Jesus makes God's initiative explicit through his relationship with the apostles, he speaks to them the beautiful words that were spoken to us as priests on the day of our ordination: *It was not you who chose me, but I chose you. We are friends not because you looked for me, but because I looked for you. You have known how to respond to my initiative but it was I who took the initiative and called you* (9).

How wonderful to think that all of us are here this morning because of the initiative of faith. Today we have come together to adore our God, we have come together to look for God, but it was not we who took the initiative to come to Mass, but rather it is God who has given us health and good will and given us the impetus that leads us to believe that we are the ones who are looking for God. But Jesus has revealed to us the fact that we are not the ones who are looking for God. God has called us and given us the ability to respond. We know how to respond but God takes the initiative in establishing this relationship of love that exists between God and us.

It is wonderful to realize that God takes the initiative in this covenant of love and that we simply have to respond. We do not create love but rather God created love. If a mother is capable of loving her son it is because God has placed this love in her heart, the love of a mother. If married couples are faithful to one another, then it is because their love comes from God. If we love our country, if as priests we want to serve people, if we honestly love God and want to remain united with God, again this happens because God has gifted us with love.

This morning we should give thanks to God for the great love that is in our hearts. Who among us is not capable of loving and forgiving and understanding? What a treasure! We who are present here today and reflecting on the Word of God are like vessels filled with love. To think that all these vessels have been filled by God and that even though we might have different ways of loving, this is so because God has given us the gift of love. Saint John tells us: *Love is of God and God is love* (10). Let us respect this gift of love and not profane or prostitute this gift of love by changing it into some false kind of love. Let us persevere and grow in love, in God. God is love! (11)

Jesus is the revelation of God's love in the midst of people

The gospel begins by telling us: *as the Father loves me, so I also love you* (12). Do you want to know about the love of my Father? Then notice how I have loved you. Jesus is the revelation of the Father's love. When the Father communicates this love of the Redeemer to women and men, when he allows Jesus to be crucified and destroyed because of his love for us, we realize that this is the way that the Father loves Jesus and the way that God loves us: unselfishly.

Jesus reveals to us the love of the Father because the Father has sent him. The second reading states that the love of God has been revealed to us: *In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son to the world so that we might have life through him* (13). We might say that such a father must be mad to hand his son over so that some strange person can be saved and redeemed. But yes, this is the madness of God. He gives his only Son to save us who were his enemies. God takes the initiative and has revealed to us that the fact Jesus did not come of his own will but was sent by the Father. Jesus always presented himself in that way, that is, as one who was sent by the Father: *the doctrine that I preach to you is the doctrine that my Father commanded me to share with you* (14). Everything has its origin in God.

In Christ God establishes a series of relationships with humankind, relationships that in light of the Word of God that is proclaimed to us today could be summed up in the way that I have tried to summarize them.

In Christ God reveals to us his love. Look at Jesus' concern for preaching! He wants to convince us of the reality that God loves us: *My Father loves you*. What a beautiful message! If Jesus had said nothing else, this would have been sufficient: *I have come to tell you that God who created you also loves you*. *In the difficult moments of your history --- moments like those that you now experience in El Salvador --- and in the bitter moments when family members are grieving or ill or sad, when it seems that you can cry out like Jesus: "My God, why have you abandoned me!"(15) --- know that you have not been abandoned but it is precisely at these moments that I draw nearer to you. This is the time to embrace the merits of the cross. You are being tested so that you do not abandon me in the time of bitterness. 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 the gold does not understand that when it is in the furnace it is the heat of the flame that brings the gold to maturity.*

In Christ, God forgives us. The second reading tells us: *God sent his son as expiation for our sins* (16). My sisters and brothers, we should not think that God is going to forgive us because of our human merits. God forgives us and despite our numerous sins gives us a share in his kingdom because Christ, our Lord, paid our debt. Remember the story that I told you about an artist whose sole desire was to gain the applause of others. As the hour of her death drew near she cried and told the priest that her hands were empty and that she had nothing to present to God. The priest then took a crucifix and placed it in her hands and told her: now your hands are not empty, present yourself to Christ! Christ provides merit for all those hands that are empty. Let us take unto ourselves the merits of the crucified Jesus. God sent Jesus into the world so that he might make amends for our sins. God does not forgive us because he is aware of our humility or weakness or prayer, God forgives us because he is attentive to the fact the Jesus allowed the burden of our sins to be placed upon his shoulders and that Jesus paid the price for these sins on the cross. When we, through an expression of solidarity, of faith and love, affirm and accept the death of Jesus on the cross, then God forgives us. We are forgiven not because of our own merits but because Jesus allowed himself to be crucified for our sins. Jesus atones for our sins. In Christ, God reveals to us his love and he forgives us regardless of how serious our faults might be.

What other relationship does God establish with humankind through Jesus Christ? My sisters and brothers, God establishes a most beautiful relationship with humankind through Jesus Christ --- a relationship of friendship. In today's gospel Jesus tells us: *I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father* (17). The Son enters into a relationship of trust with the family and we have become his brothers and sisters and friends.

I had the opportunity to visit the place (as tradition states) where Abraham is buried. There is one word engraved on the tombstone and that word says everything: *Kali*, which means *friend*. The Bible refers to Abraham as the *friend of God*, (18) as the person who spoke with God as a friend (19) or as the Bible says of Moses: one who spoke face to face with God, like a friend talking with another friend (20). This is the relationship that God established with Christians. In Jesus Christ we have been called together and told: *I no longer call you slaves ... I call you my friends*. What a beautiful liberation! We are free because God has made us almost equal to him --- we are his friends. There are no secrets between God and us. We can speak to one another as friends. Today, my sisters and brothers, all of us are able to enter into a friendly conversation with God. Christ reveals the love of the Father who wants to make us his friends.

If John Paul II was so moved by his trip to Mexico it was because he wanted to appear to the people as their friend. Thus he wore the 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 more than the Pope, God through Christ wants to become a friend of all people, including the greatest sinner if he/she is willing to repent.

In Christ the Father has revealed to us a relationship of comfort and happiness. In these pessimistic times in our country, when people believe that there is no solution to our problems, how wonderful it is to hear Jesus tell us today: *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete* (21). It is wrong to be sad. Christians cannot be pessimists. Christians must always nourish in their hearts the fullness of joy. Try it my sisters and brothers. I have tried it many times and in the darkest moments, when slander and persecution were at their worst, I have tried to unite myself intimately with Christ, my friend, and to feel a comfort that all the joy of the earth cannot give --- the joy of feeling myself close to God, even when humans do not understand me. It is the deepest joy the heart can experience. Jesus speaks these words of joy on the final tragic night of his life, knowing that the next day he would be abandoned by all his disciples. Yes, as he went up to Calvary during the bitterness of his passion he experienced in the depths of his soul the fullness of joy because he was doing the will of his Father. He did not feel abandoned by God even though it appeared that God had abandoned him. *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete* (22).

Finally, today's gospel reveals to us another wonderful thing that Jesus does in the name of his Father, namely, he personalizes our prayer. Jesus tells us: *whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you* (23). What more could we ask for? One who has given us his only Son, how could he deny giving us those things that are of lesser value than his Son? Let us not create our lives around the transitory things of this world. Let us ask the Father for the great Easter gifts! Let us ask the Father to intercede for our nation! Let us pray for peace and justice and love in our country! If we have not yet achieved these realities it is because we have not put in practice the promises of God. But the day on which all the people of El Salvador are convinced that Jesus Christ, the Divine Patron of our nation, the Divine Savior of the World --- are convinced that this Jesus has established with God and with the people of El Salvador a most profound relationship of love, then on that day the people will be converted to the Lord of love and will no longer bow down before the false idols of wealth, power, the flesh, money and so many other things of the earth. Unfortunately this is what happens: we have broken the covenant of love and we do not love God above all things. We put ourselves ahead of God and like the avaricious person say: *my god and my money*; or like the person living in luxury we say: *my god is the pleasure that I experience in my flesh*; or the politician who says: *my god is power*. El Salvador is in such a terrible situation because we make our prayers in the name of these other gods and not in the name of Jesus. Let us change our ways and return to the Lord of love! Let us believe in love. Let us believe in Christ who has revealed this love to us. Let us have no doubts about Jesus and let us place all our trust in him and then everything that we ask for in love will be given to us.

Christians are responsible for the dynamics of love

Finally, sisters and brothers, my third point: Christians are responsible for the dynamics of the love which God has left us to save the world.

The love of God in Christ gave birth to the Church. This is the Church: you and I. Why? Because this is stated by the Second Vatican Council when the Council Fathers make us aware of what it means to be Church: *the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race* (24). There is no more beautiful definition of the Church than that which defines it as the love which ought to unite people with God and unite people together as sisters and brothers. This is the Church.

When the hearts of Christians grow in love toward God and their neighbor, then these people are making Church happen. I want to highlight this thought because there are many people who while they belong to the Church with these perspectives of unity and communion with God and with others, yet they place greater trust in their political options. They believe more in the BPR, FAPU, and ORDEN. They believe more in the organizations of this world and forget that the power of these organizations is fleeting. Yet the more violent that people become the more people believe in the power of hatred. At the same time the more people place their trust in joining together with others in love and uniting themselves to God in the same love, then in this way they become Church and become united.

I want our beloved priests, the religious communities, the parishes and base communities of faith to be mindful of what it means to be Church. Indeed the effectiveness of a priest and the Christian community is measured by the way that they create this communion. Here *communion* is another way of expressing the love that unites people to one another and to God. No matter how wonderful a priest's or a community's work might be, if they do not leave signs of this communion in love, then they have not created Church --- unfortunately all they have created is fragile empty shells that can easily be destroyed. Those who do not sow love leave behind no trace of anything. My dear Christians, today when a certain fanaticism surrounds the realities of political power and the power of violence, I would hope that you would not allow yourselves to be deceived by the outward appearances of these realities. I would hope that in the calm serenity of our faith we would come to understand that the only reality that provides continuity is the gift of unity which has been given to us by Christ.

Therefore this third point tells us that we are responsible for this communion that we have inherited from Christ as a great Easter gift. We are committed to this because of a covenant that at the same time is also a commandment. In today's gospel the final words of Jesus are referred to on two occasions: *This is my commandment* (25)... and at the conclusion of the gospel: *This I command you* (26)... Jesus is able to give us this commandment because he has made us heirs, because he has bought us with his blood and we now belong to him and so he tells us: *this is what I ask of you in exchange for the sacrifice that I have made, in exchange for the gift of redemption: love one another.*

Today's second reading is very profound. I would hope that you would continue to reflect on this reading in your homes. If you do not have the printed copy of this reading you can read in it your Bibles. The first letter of Saint John is perhaps more profound than his gospel. Today we heard the words: *Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God* (27). It is for this reason that Saint John of the Cross writes in one of his verses: *In the evening of our life we will be judged according to love*³. If we have loved then we belong to God, we have known God and will live forever with God. But if we have not loved, then we do not belong to God and we have not known God. How sad to have to say that there are many sisters and brothers who have not known

God because the smile of love was never a part of their lives, because their hearts were filled with the bitterness of violence and vengeance and hatred.

The first reading provides us with some insight into some of the dangers and risks that can weaken our love. The first reading tells us that Saint Peter was invited to visit a certain gentile, a centurion named Cornelius. Peter traveled from Joppa because through visions God had called him and made this encounter with the centurion possible. We are told that when Peter arrived at the house of the centurion, Cornelius knelt before him as though affirming that there was something divine in Peter. Peter said: *No, don't do that. Get up, I myself am also a human being* (28).

According to the Jews, God established a relationship only with the Jewish people and thus the gentiles were treated as dogs, as people who were cast aside. In the Temple, the house of worship for the Jewish people, there was an atrium that separated the gentiles from the Jews, and under pain of death no gentile was allowed to move from their designated area into the area where the Jews were gathered. There was an attitude of exclusiveness and they believed that God loved only the Jews. Therefore in the first reading when the people saw that the Holy Spirit was given to gentiles they were astounded by this event.

There are many lessons that we could comment upon as we reflect on this message of love. If Saint Peter had not been humble and allowed the people to worship him as some god, he would never have done the wonderful thing that he did --- he would never have baptized in the name of God people whose faith was so different from his own. If the Jews had remained firm in their attitude of discrimination, they would never have allowed the gentiles to be baptized. Then the barriers would have remained between gentile and Jew and God would not fulfill the promise he made to the prophets: to create one people united by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is it that made it possible for the Church to embrace all people and not discriminate against anyone? We can only respond that it was because of the love that Christ taught. Saint Peter proclaims in the first reading: *In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him* (29). When the people who accompanied Peter witness these wonderful signs, Saint Peter asks them: *Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?* (30). Peter then baptized Cornelius and his family and the universal Church came into existence.

The things that can begin to impede our growth in love are attitudes of discrimination, selfishness, and mean-spiritedness. To one person we say *yes*, to another, *no*. To this group of people we say *yes* and to that group we say, *no*. It is people like you and I who have drawn the boundary lines that separate one nation from another. It is people like you and I who discriminate against other people. God does not discriminate against anyone. Hopefully our hearts would be as wide open as the heart of God so that we would not discriminate against anyone. Hopefully our hearts would be as humble as the heart of Saint Peter who did not allow Cornelius to see him as some form of divine being. What becomes dangerous and is evil is when we allow politics and money to become gods, when those who exercise political or economic power begin to believe that they are gods and thus they despise others. These attitudes are the root of the evil that we experience in our present situation. It is necessary to return to the simplicity of Saint Peter who saw himself as possessing nothing but God: *No, I am not like others and the gift that God has given me is meant to be shared with*

everyone (31). Let us go forth to share and live these gifts that the Spirit of God has given to all of us.

If only there were time! My sisters and brothers the time has passed quickly but I would like to once again stress some points from the *Message to the People of Latin America*. In this message all people --- consequently this includes all of those persons who are listening to me --- are exhorted to become builders of the civilization of love. I am going to use some of the concepts from this message to summarize my reflections on the Word of God. This will enable you to see that the Church that is preaching Good News here in Latin America, preaching Good News from the pulpit of the Church El Rosario in San Salvador, this is the Church of the gospel of love. I believe that no one, no matter how vile or slanderous, could say that today I have preached violence or am against someone. I have preached about love as it is found in the pages of Sacred Scripture. Reflecting on the words of the bishops who gathered together in Puebla, I want to share with you the following. What does the commandment of love impose on us? *Christian love goes beyond the categories of all regimes and systems.*⁴ Let these words be engraved in your hearts: *Christian love goes beyond the categories of all regimes and systems.*

I have had to smile this week when I was asked: *Is it true that you have changed your style of preaching? Are you now more in favor of one group than another?* Sincerely, I have never favored anyone, because I have been committed only to my God. I have always proclaimed my autonomy so as to be able to praise what is good in anyone as well as to be able to rebuke with total freedom what is evil and unjust in anyone. This is what the Church is here for.

The political circumstances of people change and the Church cannot be a toy of varying conditions. The Church must always be the horizon of God's love, which I have tried to explain this morning. Christian love surpasses the categories of all regimes and systems. If today it is democracy and tomorrow socialism and later something else, this is not the Church's concern. It is your concern, you who are the people, you who have the right to organize with the freedom that is every people's. Organize your social system. The Church will always stay outside, autonomous, in order to be, in whatever system, the conscience and judge of the attitudes of those who manage or live in those systems or regimes.

[...] *because it entails the insuperable power of the paschal mystery, the value of the sufferings of the cross and the signs of victory and the resurrection*⁵ My sisters and brothers, always look for this in the Church. Do not look for the political position of the Church. Look for the efficacy of the cross and the resurrection. Look for Christ in the Church. Look for the humiliated Lord at the time of the crucifixion and the glorious and victorious Lord at the time of the resurrection. Look at the Church for the Easter gift of love and you will find it. There are some things that you will not find in the Church: if people want to manipulate the Church for their own political interests, then they are looking for something evil and they will not find it here.

*Love begets the happiness of communion and inspires the criteria of participation. The civilization of love repudiates violence, egotism, wastefulness, exploitation, and moral follies.*⁶ I am not going to prolong this reflection but the document of Puebla is now available to you and in this document you will find the doctrine that enables you to come to a better knowledge of our Church.

Life of the Church

The Church becomes present in the community and certain events and situations occur within the community that must be distinguished from the political situation.

At the beginning I said that we are moving through the Liturgical Year which represents the life of the Church. Within fifteen days we will celebrate the feast of Pentecost and at the same time that we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit we will also celebrate Seminary Day. We are very concerned about having seminaries where young men can continue the mission of Christ and learn the criteria of the authentic Church. This morning I want to greet the wonderful group of young men from the Minor Seminary of Chalatenango. Chalatenango has been a continual source of vocations and has provided the Archdiocese with many priestly vocations. For this reason we want to make every effort to support the Minor Seminary there. This morning many of the seminarians have joined us here and we can hear their enthusiastic participation in the joyful songs that are being sung. Thus you can see that we have both a minor seminary and a major seminary and these institutions belong to you, my dear sisters and brothers. We are called to support these seminaries with our moral, spiritual and financial support. On Seminary Day we will take up a special collection to support this great work that is costly but that nonetheless inspires us to make sacrifices with great love.

I call upon the young men and women who have not been confirmed to prepare yourselves for this sacrament so that you might be able to be confirmed on the Feast of Pentecost. We will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit by celebrating the sacrament of Confirmation at 8:00am on Pentecost. Some groups have already informed us that they will be present here on Pentecost and we are hoping that other groups will join in this celebration. Those who have already been confirmed should take advantage of the feast of Pentecost and renew their commitment to the Holy Spirit.

As a Church community that is inspired by the love of God we should not forget about the presence and the kindness of Mary, the Mother of the Church. As you may already know, on May 24th we celebrate the feast of Mary, Help of Christians. Thanks to God, the Salesian Community continues this devotion to Mary, Help of Christians.

We hope that during these final days of May everyone will intensify their prayer. Here I want to echo an initiative that was made by CONFRES (the Conference of Religious in El Salvador). The religious have issued a statement and together with the call that the Archbishop has made in seeking a solution to the problems of El Salvador, they also invite people to participate in a prayer vigil, details of which will be made known in a short time.

I want to congratulate and greet the base communities of faith for their initiative in organizing a week of prayer. Hopefully many people will take advantage of this time of prayer which will begin in several parishes on Tuesday, May 22 from 7:00pm – 9:00pm. Thursday, May 24th the prayer service will be centered in El Despertar, in San Antonio Abad; Friday, May 25th in Zacamil; Saturday, May 26th, in San Francisco Mejicanos; Sunday May 27th, in Miramonte and on May 28th in Plan del Pino. Thanks be to God that our church finds much inspiration in prayer. Let all of us pray and place our prayers before our intercessor, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I also want to express my gratitude for the kindness that was shown to me in the parish of Colón, a rural area of the Diocese where I administered the sacrament of Confirmation yesterday.

I greet Father Rodriguez, the new superior and pastor of the church El Rosario. Together with Father José Luis and the Dominican community, they will continue to provide wonderful attention to this church of Our Lady of the Rosary which today, with a wonderful sense of hospitality, allows us to gather here while the Cathedral continues to be occupied.

As we look at the life of our Church we also realize that we have experienced pain and sorrow. Here I refer to the outrage that was inflicted this week on the Guadalupana Sisters in Arcatao. Sister Nicolasa Ramírez and Sister Beatriz Velásquez were ordered into a vehicle of the Department of Immigration. They were told that there was a simple matter that had to be resolved and that the Sisters would then be brought to their school in San Salvador. There was no truth to any of these words because the Sisters were driven to the frontier, given three quetzals and at midnight were sent on their way to Guatemala. As exiles they sought refuge in the Churches of Guatemala.

Thanks to God it appears that things have been arranged and they will now return to El Salvador. I still do not have any final word concerning this matter but I hope that this is simply an isolated event --- surely a very unfortunate event --- which the Church laments because of the lack of understanding and the lack of basic human relationships.⁷

I also want to express my solidarity with Father Walter Guerra, the pastor of Armenia. He showed me his fingers that had been bound and the circulation of blood has not been restored. He was also hit in the face during an investigation into an accusation that he was creating a revolution in Armenia. Thanks to God the people of that area did not have the same view of Father and defended him. You can read about these events that occurred in Armenia in our newspaper *Orientación*.⁸

Last night I received news about the attempt that was made to set fire to the convent of Tamanique. We do not know the origin of this criminal action, but we are certain that this was a criminal act because gasoline was spread over the premises and then lit. There Mother Juanita was involved in a pastoral work there that follows the pastoral guidelines of the Church.

I also want to unite myself to the concerns of the Colegio de la Asunción (Assumption School). Mr. Flamenco, who watched over the movements in and out of the school and who was a humble collaborator in the ministry at the school, was assassinated. We ask you to keep him in your prayers.⁹

There was an attempt to block and intimidate a candlelight procession in the parish of Miramonte. This procession had been organized to commemorate the second anniversary of the death of Father Navarro. My beloved sisters and brothers, I believe that all of these events enable us to say that we are persecuted. This is not a stimulus for the Church but rather a hindrance to her pastoral ministry.

Events of the week

As we look at the present situation of our communities we see that the conflict between the government and the BPR is still unresolved. The cathedral is still occupied. I want to thank Msgr. Modesto López Portillo and his collaborators for their faithfulness in looking out for the interests of the Cathedral. I also want to thank the workers who are occupying the cathedral for the prudence they have shown as they confront the present circumstances.

The French Embassy continues to be occupied¹⁰ and the Special Ambassador has been pained by the lack of understanding and a pretext of dialogue. Within the embassy there is a seventy year old woman and others who have heart problems. All of these people are forced to sleep on the floor. We would like to see these people treated more humanely. Hostages are also being held in the Venezuelan Embassy.

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

The human suffering that has resulted from this conflict is most frightening. At least fifty-four persons have died, persons from both sides of the conflict. Seventy other people have been wounded, twenty-five arrested, three sent into exile and thirty vehicles have been burned. FAPU also suffered repression as they attempted to hold a demonstration. One of their members was killed and six others wounded. They occupied the church of El Calvario and the Church in Soyapango.

In light of this conflict the Archbishop made the following call.¹¹ Looking more deeply at this situation and looking for a solution to the present structural crisis, I want to restate briefly my point of view and ask that a just and reasonable solution must involve the affirmation of the crime that was committed against these three leaders who have not been charged nor freed and that those responsible for the violation of the rights of these three leaders must be punished according to the law. I put my thoughts in writing and they were published in the newspaper:¹² *It is not enough to keep denying that they (the BPTR leaders) are in the jails of the Security Forces. Sufficient reasons exist to think that these three persons have been arrested by them.*¹³ *Other similar cases have been investigated, proven and denounced by international organizations that have come to our country in order to investigate this type of violation of human rights. As the Security Forces continue to deny the arrest of these three leaders, people have less and less confidence in them and they are discredited by the international community. To recognize their error and punish those responsible for this act would be a sign that the government wants to begin to resolve the serious problems of our country and would also be a way of acquiring credibility in order to make all of this happen.*¹⁴

I also wrote that: *In case the government should erroneously and unjustly remain obstinate in not recognizing this abuse of power, we propose to the leaders of the BPR that they soon put an end to this conflict. They have already achieved the objectives that they proposed when they organized the means of pressure that they have been carrying out during these days. They obtained the freedom of their secretary-general and of the student of the Central American University. They have made known to the national and international*

community that the Security Forces arrested three other members of their organization and these persons have disappeared. They have had the support and solidarity of thousands of people who accompanied them as they buried the victims of the May 8th massacre.

If the government does not yield by either charging or freeing the other three leaders, it is probably because something fatal has occurred --- which we fear. The majority of people already thinks this and indeed, is convinced of this fact.

There are other motives --- popular and humanitarian motives --- that ought to guide people so that they do not remain intransigent but become more reflective and begin to understand that the burning of buses and the occupation of churches and embassies etc. must cease. We need to create a climate that lets us expound, study and solve the structural problems that are at the root of the growing popular discontent

People, especially those who are not organized or aware of what is happening, are disturbed by the burning of buses because this has been harmful to their self-interests.

The people that the Bloque is detaining in the embassies need to rejoice once again in their freedom and some of these hostages will need time to re-establish themselves because of the tension and anxiety that they have experienced during these days.

The occupation of the Cathedral and other churches must come to an end so that the pastoral ministry on behalf of the people might once again be undertaken. To keep on with the occupations and to keep stirring up the country seems to us out of proportion to the objectives they have not yet achieved. We want to tell the BPR clearly: we do not approve of it¹⁵.

As a result of these events the chancery has received many expressions of solidarity from the national and international community. I especially want to express my gratitude to Adveniat who stated: *We suffer with the families who are in deep mourning for their husbands, fathers, brothers who have died in the violent acts that have occurred in your country. We want to accompany your Excellency in this painful situation. We want to accompany you as you continue in your role as Father and Shepherd of the Archdiocese. I will personally remember the deceased in the Eucharist and will pray to the Lord for the quick recovery of those persons who have been wounded.* (Signed) Mons. Stehle, Director of Adveniat. Many other letters like this one have arrived.

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

In addition to the statement of the Superior University Counsel of the National University which I referred to last Sunday, this week various groups have issued statements about the current situation: the Central American University José Simeón Cañas¹⁶, the political party MNR¹⁷, the Confederation of Women and Men Religious¹⁸ and the President of the Republic whose discourse we all listened to¹⁹.

We are glad that this time the president has not reacted by increasing repression, and we hope that events will proceed to give credibility in face of the skepticism with which many have received his words. For our part, we would have liked to hear a concrete reply to the

petitions made concerning those who have disappeared since this is the immediate motive for the strong political tensions of these days. For our part, I will read what we think.

I want to speak in general about the presidential address and say: the Church has stated her opinion and expressed her good will in her message that has been available for everyone to read. Secondly, we need to see specific actions that lend credibility to the promises that have been made. And thirdly, in all her relationships the Church will always look for ways to promote the integral vocation of the human person and here we refer to their personal as well as their social development. The recent conference in Puebla confirmed the option that we made in Medellin (32), a preferential option for the poor and for this reason we are concerned about being faithful defenders of the just interests of the people. We are convinced that the more people are marginalized and exploited, the greater the structural injustice that is placed in the path of people, then it becomes more likely that people will react with desperate and greater violence. We repeat once again that with regard to political systems and organization the Church does not identify herself with any specific political option but supports that which is just in all political options but also denounces those situations that are unjust. The Church cannot cease to be the voice of the voiceless as long as there are people who are oppressed and marginalized, as long as there are barriers that prevent people from planning and receiving the benefits of the nation's development. The Church will continue to preach love as long as there is selfishness, resentment and hatred and the Church will also offer all the means that are at her disposal in order to cooperate in resolving our difficult problems. We hope that all the sectors of our country will respond generously and responsibly. We need the collaboration of everyone in order to resolve the present crisis of our nation. Insincere offers and solutions and harsh judgments --- these will lead no where.

With regard to the statement of the UCA and BPR, we leave this to the experts and the people to offer their opinion about the analysis and the solutions offered in these statements. On our part we only want to underline the fact that in their statement they call for an end to the repression, to the illegal arrests and torture; they also recognize and affirm the right of workers and *campesinos* to organize themselves and finally they ask for the clarification of the situation of all those who have disappeared after being arrested by the Security Forces.

In solidarity with every form of human suffering and in solidarity with the concerns of our families we bring before the people gathered here this Sunday for worship the complaint and concern of the University Confederation of Salvadorian Workers, namely that their financial secretary, José Guillermo Rivas Flores, was arrested by the National Police. Other workers have been released but nothing more has been heard concerning the situation of José.

We also unite ourselves with the affliction that is experienced by those families who have seen their loved ones arrested and who now await word concerning their fate: José Armando Flores León in the city of Santa Ana; Andrés Molina Clímaco, a *campesino* from San Nicolás Lempa; Héctor Antonio Benítez Castellón and Alejandro Humberto Alarcón from Santa Ana; José Amilcar Matéu and Naún Choto from El Congo; Carlos Delgado and Blanca Alas, *campesinos* from San José Las Flores in Chalatenango; Jorge Antonio Ascencio Alvarez, *campesino* from the Church of Santa Lucía in Zacatecoluca; Pedro Abreggo from El Tablón, Dulce Nombre de María; Lucio Cándido Alfaro, *campesino* from El Carao and Juan Francisco Romero who was arrested near the railroad station in Zacatecoluca.

My sisters and brothers, we conclude in the same way that we began, with a call to love. The present situation of our country is far from reflecting the message that the Sacred Scriptures have presented to us this morning. Hopefully as Christians who are participating in this reflection and live in the present situation where hatred and vengeance and the interests of the world seem to be more predominant than the aspirations that Jesus communicated to the world --- hopefully we do our part. Hopefully as Christians who have received the gift of love and been brought into union with God from whom proceeds the love that saves us --- hopefully we do our part. Hopefully as Christians who are the beneficiaries of this message of Jesus' love --- hopefully we do our part and do all that we can in order to fulfill the words that Christ the Lord has spoken to us this morning: *This is my commandment: love one another as I love you* (33). So be it.

¹ *Mensaje a los Pueblos de América Latina*, 8.

² *Ibid.*

³ See St John of the Cross, *Obras Completas*, Madrid, 1988, p. 94.

⁴ *Mensaje a los pueblos de América Latina*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See "La CONFRES informa sobre expulsión y regreso de religiosas de Arcatao", *Orientación*, 3 June 1979.

⁸ See "Los sucesos de Armenia", *Orientación*, 20 May 1979.

⁹ In the death notices published by the Asociación de Padres de Familia del Colegio de Asunción, the victim appears with another name: Alfonso Nicolás Hernández Pocasangre. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 16 May 1979.

¹⁰ The French Embassy continued to be occupied by the Bloque Popular Revolucionario. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 20 May 1979.

¹¹ See "Colaboremos todos a salir de la crisis. Llamamiento del señor arzobispo a todos los sectores del país" (15 May 1979), *Orientación*, 20 May 1979. This appeal provoked calumnious reactions from several sectors, such as the statements signed by Asociación Patriótica Libertad o Esclavitud and by Félix A. Benavides, this last under the heading: "El Ayatolla Romero se considera el Gobierno". See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 18 & 19 May 1979.

¹² On 15 May 1979 Mons. Romero offered a press conference to announce his statement. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 16 May 1979.

¹³ They are Numa Alberto Escobar Martínez, Oscar López and Marciano Meléndez, leadres of the Bloque Popular Revolucionario.

¹⁴ "Colaboramos todos a salir de la crisis" (15 May 1979), *Orientación*, 20 May 1979.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Pronunciamiento del Consejo Superior Universitario de la Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas sobre el actual estado de violencia en el país (11 May 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 14 May 1979 and *Orientación*, 20 May 1979.

¹⁷ See El partido Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) al pueblo salvadoreño (15 May 1979), *Orientación*, 27 May 1979.

¹⁸ See La Conferencia de Religiosos de El Salvador ante la situación del país (16 May 1979), *Orientación*, 3 June 1979.

¹⁹ On 17 May 1979 General Carlos Humberto Romero, presi9dent of El Salvador, broadcast a message on radio and television: "Unámonos en esta cruzada para salvar a la patria", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 May 1979 and *ECA* 368, (1979), pp. 463-464.

Marginal References (1) LG 9; (2) Jn 15,12; (3) Jn 15,9; (4) 1Jn 4,7-8; (5) GS 24; (6) Jn 15,9; (7) 1Jn 4,7-8; (8) 1Jn 4,10; (9) Jn 15,16; (10) 1Jn 4,7; (11) 1Jn 4,8; (12) Jn 15,9; (13) 1Jn 4,10; (14) Jn 14,24; (15) Mk 15,34; (16) 1Jn 4,10; (17) 1Jn 15,15; (18) Is 41,8; (19) St 2,23; (20) Ex 33,11; (21) Jn 15,11; (22) Jn 15,11; (23) Jn 15,16; (24) LG 1; (25) Jn 15,12; (26) Jn 15,17; (27) 1Jn 4,7-8; (28) Ac 10,26; (29) Ac 10,34-35; (30) Ac 10,47; (31) Ac 10,26; (32) P 1134; (33) Jn 15,17.