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## **Lent Is the Triumph of God's Saving Plan in History**

**First Sunday of Lent  
24 February 1980**

Deuteronomy 26:4-10

Romans 10:8-13

Luke 4:1-13

Dear sisters and brothers, the holy liturgy of Lent has begun, and it has an intense message for all of us who call ourselves Christian. The Second Vatican Council summed up the substance of Lent with these words: «The two elements that are especially characteristic of Lent—the recalling of baptism and the preparation for it, and penance—should be given greater emphasis in the liturgy and in liturgical catechesis. It is by means of them that the church prepares the faithful for the celebration of Easter, while they hear God's word more frequently and devote more time to prayer» (SC 109).

We see here, then, that Lent is preparation for the celebration of the Easter event, the death and resurrection of Christ. Easter is the feast of our redemption, and to celebrate it worthily we have a long period of spiritual preparation, which is Lent. What means are used for this preparation? The Council tells us that it is by means of baptism and penance, the two great Lenten sacraments.

Those who have not received baptism prepare to receive it on Holy Saturday evening, and those of us who have the good fortune of being already baptized must take advantage of Lent to renew the serious commitments we have as baptized Christians. If we do this, then when we celebrate Christ's resurrection we will truly experience his death and his resurrection as our own death and our resurrection, thanks to baptism.

The second sacrament that is very important is penance, which means repenting for our sins through the official form of a sacrament in which we are told in God's name, «I absolve you from your sins».

The Council urges us to engage in intense prayer and reflection on the word of God since these are the best instruments for this grand period of preparation (SC 109). Lent is therefore a time of much prayer, much Bible, much word of God. And today, which is the day when we most need to have our beloved YSAX, the instrument that carries the word of God forth from our Sunday Mass, we are sorry not to have it.

You all know that this station's transmitter was destroyed on Monday by a bomb planted by an ultra-right group<sup>1</sup>. This new attack is a serious violation of our freedom of

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<sup>1</sup> «Comunicado de la Oficina de Comunicación Social de la Arquidiócesis de San Salvador» in *Orientación* (24 February 1980).

expression. (Applause) With this attack they are hoping to silence the prophetic and pastoral voice of the archdiocese precisely because it is trying to be the voice of those who have no voice. They want to silence it because it has been denouncing the systematic violation of human rights; it has been trying to speak the truth, to defend justice, and to spread the Christian message. (Applause) Since the time of Jesus this message has scandalized the powerful; it did so then, and it does so now. And as happened then, so also now, the message is heard and accepted only by the poor and the humble folk.

I take advantage of this First Sunday of Lent, when the church earnestly bids us to hear the word of God, to protest strongly against this new act of repression which not only harms the church but directly affects the people. (Applause) Those responsible for this attack want to prevent the people from knowing the truth and from having criteria for judging what is happening in the country. They fear the people will unite and forcefully cry out, «We have had enough! Let us put an end to the exploitation and domination of the Salvadoran oligarchy!» (Applause)

Contrary to the wishes of those who want to silence our radio station, its absence on the air only serves to give greater moral vigor to the word of the church. (Applause) The solidarity that this has roused in favor of our station is something marvelous, and I want to express my sincerest thanks for it.

I never imagined that on this Sunday of Lent I would find myself being supported by a distinguished group of Brazilian bishops who sent me the following telegram.

Archbishop Romero: We just read with great sorrow about the criminal destruction of the archdiocesan radio station. We see it as one more sign of persecution of your person, the priests, the religious, and the poor oppressed people of El Salvador. We stand in solidarity with your courageous and prophetic homily of February 17. We are grateful that you and your church are faithfully making the preferential option for the poor. [Signed] Your brothers in the episcopate: Helder Câmara, Archbishop of Recife, Brazil (Applause); José María Pires, Archbishop of João de Soá, Brazil; Samuel Ruiz, Bishop of Chiapas, Mexico; Jesús Calderón, Bishop of Puno, Peru; Pedro Casaldáliga, Bishop of San Félix, Brazil; José A. Llaguno, Apostolic Vicar of Tarahumara, Mexico; Jorge Hourton, Bishop in Chile; Tomás Balduino, Bishop of Goyas, Brazil; Marcelo Caballería, Bishop of Guarabira, Brazil; Mauro Morelli, Auxiliary Bishop of São Paulo, Brazil; and Alfredo Nowak, Auxiliary Bishop of São Paulo, Brazil. (Applause)

The sentiments they express in this telegram were also communicated to us by telephone. They told us about the indignation this news caused in the meeting the bishops were having in Brazil and how they felt moved to send this telegram. In responding to this, I want to echo the applause of the people and tell them how gratified we feel at this moment when our voice, which is blocked from the airwaves, needs to find continental support. Perhaps we wouldn't have found such support had our transmitter not been bombed! (Applause)

Among other expressions of solidarity there stands out this telegram of the Revolutionary Governing Junta: «We deplore and condemn the dynamite attack which yesterday destroyed the transmitter of YSAX, the PanAmerican Voice, the radio station of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. Through this medium we express to your Excellency, and through you to the Catholic Church of El Salvador, our deep regret regarding this senseless terrorist act

directed against an important means of social communication. Sincerely, the Revolutionary Governing Junta». (Applause)

The people have expressed their views with a wide range of emotions. Some are protesting, such as this lovely letter that says, «This radio station speaks for the people. There always are and there always will be Herods and Caiphases who don't want the people to know what they should know. It doesn't suit them! My contribution is small, but if twenty thousand Catholics decide to help this crusade, which begins right now with these five *colones* I am sending, then YSAX will quickly be on the air again. And if they destroy it again, we will rebuild again, let them be sure of that!» (Applause) This wonderful letter concludes with the words: «The people can do it because it is God's cause!» (Applause)

The gamut of emotions also includes the sorrow and anguish of many. Some are even weeping because the sounds of our station were like members of the family and now they miss them. (Applause) A beautiful letter from the Committee Promoting a Ministry of Health says this: «We make you know of our sadness because of the attack on our Catholic radio station, YSAX, which until now has been the voice of the church and of all the people who are seeking to build a kingdom of peace, justice, and love. But we believe that this attack will not silence the denunciation of the injustices that our people are suffering. We are in solidarity with the sorrow of all Christians who will not have the opportunity to hear the truth that is transmitted to us by our station». (Applause)

Also, many spontaneous gestures of support have been forthcoming. Yesterday I was in Botoncillal, a village in the parish of Colón, and I admired the spontaneity of a young man who made an appeal to the people to take up a collection. What was collected among those poor *campesinos* was money, yes, but what was most valuable was the affection with which they made their donations. Yesterday, as we were entering San Salvador and had to stop for a red light, someone shouted to me, «For the station!» When I looked out to see who it was, I saw a taxi driver who had five *colones* in his hand. This was the voice of the street, the voice of the people who are ready to help our radio station! (Applause) Some young people also invited me to Sonzacate (with permission of the bishop of Santa Ana), and the people attending the Eucharist there yesterday took up a collection with great spontaneity and affection. They offered it to me as the first fruits of the diocese of Santa Ana.

I want especially to thank the other media. All of them published the bulletin I put out, and some of them have published commentaries protesting the bombing. One of them even had an editorial praising our station<sup>2</sup>.

I also want to thank the technicians of the UCA, who have offered to restore our station as soon as possible. (Applause) I have personally assumed responsibility for getting the station running again, and with your tremendous support I am confident that we can set up an YSAX that will be much more powerful than the one they've destroyed. (Applause)

Right here we can see still another delightful gesture of solidarity: many dear sisters and brothers with their recorders will be bringing this message on cassettes to places where the station cannot reach. As long as this silence lasts, these recorders and cassettes will be providing a service! (Applause)

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<sup>2</sup> *El Independiente* (20 February 1980).

One thing has surprised me profoundly and made me very grateful. As I entered for Mass today, a representative of Radio Noticias del Continente, of Costa Rica, told me that he would be recording our celebration so that immediately afterward it can be retransmitted in Costa Rica on the 31-meter shortwave band. (Applause) So our homily will reach not just the small broadcast area of our station but all of Central America and the entire world, thanks to this shortwave station of Costa Rica, Radio Noticias del Continente. (Applause) Next Sunday, if we are still in the same situation, this generous Costa Rican radio station is going to transmit the celebration of our Mass directly. (Applause) When you leave Mass today, if you have a shortwave radio, you can look for the 31-meter band, and you will hear what people around the world will be hearing. Our poor homily will be reaching horizons we never even suspected before the bomb! (Applause) So you see, sisters and brothers, nobody can destroy the projects of God! (Applause)

So my third introductory reflection is to urge all of you to take Lent seriously. The essence of our message is, thank God, something that nobody can destroy, and it is more important than any of the technical, material things that the extreme right can damage. And there are many Catholics who possess more technical skill than do those who destroy with bombs. (Applause) We are concerned about the material aspect because we know the immense good accomplished by the radio. All the same, we say once again that the spoken word is useless if it just vibrates and sounds without incarnating itself in the lives of Christians. Christ's greatest concern is that we Christians be truly a living word, a light for the world, and salt of the earth (Matt 5:13). He wants our communities and our individual lives to bear witness to the Gospel that the church preaches. Even without radio and technical gear, Christians keep preaching the great liberating message of Christianity far and wide.

I urge you, then, to have an intense experience of this Lent as a journey toward Easter so that, as we celebrate the resurrection, we will be filled with new life and will be the men and women that El Salvador needs in these times. At the end of Lent our church wants to have the satisfaction of offering to the nation a renewed people and a church pulsating with the risen Christ. Let us be a church embracing the cross of the Lord and ready to carry out God's true project for saving our country. This, then, is the theme of our homily. (Applause)

The title for our reflections will be «Lent Is the Triumph of God's Saving Project in History». God has a project to save history and to save humankind, and Lent reveals to us how this project of God triumphs over the temptations of wickedness. I will present three ideas in today's reflection: the first will be Christ's victory over the enemy of God's saving project; the second will be the action of the Holy Spirit as the force of God's saving project; and the third will be our participation by faith in God's saving project.

### **Christ's victory over the enemy of God's saving project**

First of all, this Sunday speaks to us about the victory of Christ over the enemy of God's saving project. Today's gospel presents us with the confrontation between two powerful forces: Christ and the devil. Christ presents himself as a man who is going to learn by personal experience the value of temptation for strengthening one's convictions. His journey out into the desert evokes for us the forty years that Israel journeyed in the desert under the guidance of God's project; it reminds us of the temptations, the difficulties, and the adversities they suffered at the hands of the world and the devil. This whole passage evokes the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses

spoke to the people, reminding them of the marvels that God had done for them during the Exodus and how he expected the people to remain faithful. It is as though Christ was representing that people during this marvelous stay in the desert: Christ praying, Christ fasting, Christ confronting the temptations of evil. He matured as a man during this testing, and his victory would be so resplendent that during his three years of teaching, these principles by which he overcame the temptations that were seeking to destroy God's project would continue to shine forth.

For the ancients the desert was an uninhabitable area, a place for wild beasts and demons. As Christ entered into that lonely space, he was like a new Adam, but he was not entering into a delightful paradise; rather, his task was to recreate paradise from the desert. He was the second Adam, the redeemer of humankind, transforming the desert into a paradise for us if only we know how to follow his paths.

Then came the temptations: «If you are the Son of God and are hungry, why don't you tell that stone to turn into bread?» Christ answered him, «One does not live by bread alone; rather, every word that comes forth from the mouth of God is for the life of humankind» (Luke 4:3-4). Here two projects can be seen: the project of God and the project of the devil, the project of evil. Let us now observe very carefully in which of these projects we are personally involved. The devil promises Christ an easy solution to the problem: perform a miracle, turn the stones into bread. Such short-term solutions are the kind many politicians want; they want to fix things by doing what is nearly impossible. Their silly attitudes are a lot like the devil's temptation: just turn stones into bread and we are free of hunger!

But God's project wants to give meaning to fasting; it wants to give meaning to the cross, to the desert, to sacrifice. Bread will come soon. The word of God is justice, and bread is not made only from stones. The bread that should nourish all men and women must be the just distribution of goods; it must be the rich giving up what they have to share with the poor; it must be a society ordered according to the heart and the justice of God. «This is the redemption I bring», says Christ. (Applause) «There is no need to resolve matters easily with miracles, though they are certainly within my reach. Sometimes I will use them», says Christ, «as when I take five loaves of bread to feed five thousand people. For me it is not difficult to multiply loaves and give food and good wages and a good life to all who are forsaken, but we would not fix the world that way. The rich would continue to be selfish, and people would not be converted. We would not form the society that God wants, the society of intelligent people who love one another. With the possessions you have now, you have enough bread for everybody!»

When speaking about artificial methods of birth control, Pope Paul VI said the following: «How sad is the human situation when the banquet of life is denied to some only because we don't know how to share the banquet of life better. It is not a question of denying people entry into life but of preparing the table so that there is bread for all»<sup>3</sup>. We could say the same today: let us not seek immediate solutions. Let us not try to organize all at once a society that has been unjustly disorganized for such a long time. But yes, let us organize the conversion of hearts. Let us all learn to experience the austerity of the desert. Let us savor the powerful redemption of

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<sup>3</sup> The precise words of Paul VI are these: «Your task is to act in such a manner that there is abundant bread on the table of humanity; it is not to promote birth control, which is irrational since it diminishes the number of guests at the banquet of life». *Message to All Humanity*, 27. (Discourse to the General Assembly of the United Nations, 4 October 1965.)

the cross. There is no joy greater than earning our bread by the sweat of our brow, and there is no sin more diabolical than taking bread away from those who are hungry. (Applause)

Today's gospel has another detail about the project of God and the project of evil. It says that the devil then made all the kingdoms and glories of the world pass before Christ in a kind of vision. There were the great parades of troops and the chariots of emperors. All that was the glory of the world. «All this is mine, and I will give it to you if you fall on your knees and worship me». What pretensions and what sad possessions! I wouldn't want to have anything that came from the devil! So Christ responded to him with God's project: «It is written: "You shall worship God alone, and him alone shall you serve"» (Luke 4:5-7).

Christ suffered hunger in the desert, but he did not sell out to the idolatry of power. This is a tremendous and timely lesson for our day. Why are people fighting in El Salvador? For power? Doesn't the devil say that power is his and that it's easy to get it, just by kneeling down before him? But the project of God says, «No to idolatry!» In my pastoral letter I state that one of the services the church is providing today is the unmasking of all idolatries: the idolatry of money, the idolatry of power, and the attempt to get people to kneel before those false gods<sup>4</sup>. The truth is found in God's project: «You shall worship the Lord your God». This is the real solution.

The true liberation of our people comes from teaching them about the struggle that is going on among the false powers of earth, which are mounting constant assaults on human dignity and human rights. They establish political systems that deaden the consciences of the powerful. Woe to the powerful when they discount the power of God, the only powerful One! Woe to them when they torture and kill and massacre in order to subjugate people to power! What terrible sacrifices are being offered to the god of power, the god of money! There are so many victims, so much blood, that God, the true God, the Author of human life, will exact a high price of these worshipers of power! (Applause)

But there is a third vision related by Luke in this gospel. In the third temptation the devil, who never wants to let himself be beaten, carried Christ to the pinnacle of the temple, which is on the corner overlooking the Cedron Valley near Jerusalem. There he presented Christ with another temptation: «Look, throw yourself down from here because it is written: "God will send his angels to catch you". After that feat the crowds in the temple will hail you, and you will be the Messiah that this people is expecting and praying for». Responding to this temptation, Christ cited the project of God: «It is also written: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God". You want to test me to see whether I am a vain Messiah seeking applause from the people, winning the crowds over by providing them simple solutions and displaying myself as glorious before them. That is not the project of God!» (Luke 4:9-12). The project of God is to be found in the simplicity of those who live their ordinary lives with faith and so win the good will of God and cling to him.

There is no need to perform ostentatious deeds. There is no need for triumphalist religion or triumphalist politics—indeed, they can do much harm. What is needed is more honest simplicity and solid dedication to the service of God. The project of God consists in giving our simple, ordinary lives a spirit of freedom and love. How beautiful our country would be if we all lived according to this project of God! We would all work at our jobs without trying

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<sup>4</sup> *The Church's Mission in the Midst of the Nation's Crisis* (6 August 1979) 37.

to dominate anybody. We would be justly earning the bread our family needs, and eating it! There would be none of this terrible situation that now arises because people are seeking a false messiah, like the one Satan proposed.

Christ triumphed over the projects of evil and clung to the authentic project that embodied God's ideal, and that is what all Christians must do. Jesus overcame the temptations in the name of all men and women. I am there with him also, and so is each one of you. We must learn how the project of evil can enter into us: for some it will be by pride, for others by greed, for others by vanity, and for others by easy victories. Take great care, sisters and brothers. Christ today has spoken words that must be on the lips of each one of us as we face the cunning temptations of life. We must be brave in defending the only project that saves and endures: the project of God!

The way of the cross is the only path that leads to true victory, and who doesn't carry the cross? Trying to get rid of the cross is to give in to the temptation of the devil. Embracing with affection the cross of my duty—that is the project of God! Lovingly living your own lives—that is how God wants to save humankind!

Christ now appears victorious, but I ask you not to forget during Lent this marvelous figure of Christ in the desert. He is surrounded by wild animals and tempted by the devil, but he is also recovering paradise. And he will recover it decisively when all men and women are, like him, faithful followers of the project of God.

### **The action of the Holy Spirit as the force of God's saving project**

My second reflection concerns the action of the Holy Spirit as the force of God's saving project. How insistently the Gospel of Saint Luke tells us that Christ was «driven by the Spirit» (Luke 4:1)! That is why the Gospel of Saint Luke is called «the Gospel of the Spirit». Christ was conceived as the Savior of humankind under the impulse of the Spirit of God, beginning even when he was in the bosom of the Virgin Mary. The Holy Spirit was the origin of the human nature that was intimately united with the divine person of God the Son. From that time on Christ was the work of the Holy Spirit, and all his work of redemption was the work of the Holy Spirit. We have to be very mindful of this in order to understand the other readings today.

The first reading is the creed of the people of Israel. Let us keep it in mind because the God in which they believed was not a disincarnate God but the God of history. Thus, when the citizens of Israel were harvesting their fields, Moses commanded them to take the first fruits to the temple and to offer them to God with that great prayer which is Israel's creed: «You shall declare before the Lord, your God, "My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt and lived there with a small household. Then he became a nation great, strong, and numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers. The Lord heard our cry and saw our oppression"» (Deut 26:4-7). The passage then describes how God delivered them from Egypt, led them through the desert, and gave them a country, a Promised Land.

Israel's creed is pure history. It begins with the incredible promise to the patriarchs. An old man who was sterile and had no children was promised a great many descendants. A people that had multiplied under slavery was told by God that they would be given a land «flowing with milk and honey». That people set out for the Promised Land, and when it became

a reality, the fruits that it yielded were the proof that God had kept his promise. The fruits were offered in Israel in a sort of «Mass», like our offertory, to give thanks for the land and the country and to commemorate God's faithfulness to his people.

This is a truly fine creed. It explains why the faith of Israelites was not something ethereal, as is that of many Christians today, who believe that when the church talks about these things she is meddling in politics. The faith of Israel was faith in their politics; it was faith and politics converted into a single act of love for the Lord; it was politics inspired by the graces and promises of God. And that is how the God of all people and the God of El Salvador must be: he sheds light on our politics. He is the one who gives us our fields; he is the one who wants agrarian reform; he is the one who wants a more just sharing of the goods that El Salvador produces. It is not just for a few to accumulate wealth in their coffers while the people are left without any of the gifts that God has given for his people. (Applause)

The creed of Israel was inspired by the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit that gives unity to the whole of Israel's history. That is why the Bible, which is the history of that people, appears as the book of the Holy Spirit. Although it was written by people of diverse cultures and diverse centuries, it was the Holy Spirit that was writing the pages of Israel's history. The Bible, then, is a model for all the histories of all the world's peoples. Everyone must therefore read the Bible and learn from it the relationship between faith and politics. The Bible is an instruction book that teaches us how to experience that marvelous relationship between faith and politics.

Accordingly, the Holy Spirit led the history of Israel toward its fullness, which came with the birth of Christ by the Holy Spirit. At that moment Christ began to form for himself a new Christian people, and that is who we are. (Applause) We the people rise up again for we are the work of the Holy Spirit. God continues the history of salvation in the history of every people, and no empire should come and interfere with our people's way of being. (Applause) The God of the great empires is demanding justice of the powerful and defending the poor of the people. He already has plenty to do there! The God of our impoverished peoples is continuing the history of salvation with our Salvadoran history, not with fabricated histories. (Applause)

The history inspired by the Holy Spirit gives the Christian people the marvelous incentive of the resurrection. The Spirit who raised up Christ has given us the model for history in the risen Christ. It is in that direction that every history must tend, toward creating men and women who, after carrying the cross all their lives, receive the new life of freedom. We should enjoy freedom also on earth, but its fullness we will enjoy only in the kingdom of God. That doesn't mean that we're going to leave the people's liberation for the other side of death. What I am saying is that the risen Christ already belongs to our present history; he is the fount of human freedom and dignity. That is precisely why we celebrate Lent as preparation for Easter. After experiencing the Lent which is our Salvadoran situation, we will enjoy the new life of the risen Christ as we seek a more just and harmonious country, one where people will live with intensity the life of God that Christ brings with him and gives us through his paschal mystery.

Therefore, Lent and Easter are our own reality, and every people can say the same thing. And Christ is ours; Christ is Salvadoran for us Salvadorans. Christ has risen for us, here in El Salvador. And our history will be a history of resurrection and freedom and dignity in the measure that we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit who led Jesus. Let us search, by the force of the Spirit, for our own special character, our own history, our own freedom, our own dignity as a Salvadoran people.

## **Our participation by faith in the victory of God's saving project**

Finally, the third reflection of this homily is that we participate by faith in the victory of God's saving project. Today's first reading, as I told you, contains the profession of faith of the people of Israel, which consists mainly of the three great articles of Israelite faith. First, the calling of the patriarchs. God chose Abraham, an Aramean without special merit, and made of him a great people, starting almost from nothing. The second article of the Israelite creed professes that God made a people and delivered them from slavery to independence, from Egypt to Exodus. And the third part of the creed of Israel says that, just as God made a people, we have to continue to make this people according to the heart of God. This Israelite creed changes for Christians but without betraying its origins.

Today's second reading helps us to understand better the divine aspect of our history. Saint Paul gives us a marvelous description today of both the process and the content of Christian faith. The process is quite simple, says Saint Paul, «The word is near you. You have it on your lips and in your heart» (Rom 10:8). This is the first thing: proclaiming the word of God and bringing it closer to people. This is the mission of the preacher, and this is the mission of the radio. That is why we miss it, and we must have it again one day. (Applause) The carriers of the word bring the word closer to the people. Saint Paul says that faith begins when people feel the word close by. «How can they believe if they have not heard?» he asks (Rom 10:14). We must first hear in order to believe or not believe, but first comes hearing, when the word comes near. What a great mission we have in this process of faith, dear sisters and brothers, parents, catechists, teachers in our Christian schools! Ours is the mission of bringing God's word closer to the ears of the people.

After the word is heard, it is received in the heart; faith is accepted and interiorized: «I believe». But the interior reception of faith is not enough, says Saint Paul. It must be made explicit; it must be exteriorized, and that happens through the liturgical signs. The sacraments are the signs of the faith that we carry in our hearts and so are called the «sacraments of faith». That is why people should not receive a sacrament if they don't know what they are receiving. It's for that reason that we are insisting that children should not be baptized until the meaning of baptism has been explained to the parents and godparents. Similarly, no one should be married by the church without receiving an explanation of what the sacrament of matrimony means. People should not receive a sacrament unless it is an outward expression of the faith they carry within them.

The sacraments should proceed from faith. Coming to Mass on Sunday is a sacrament. The Eucharist brings us together because we believe that Christ is present as our leader guiding us on this pilgrimage. We come every Sunday, filled with faith, in order to feel more united with him. We are manifesting our faith. Those who are not Catholic do not attend Mass because it is not part of their faith, but when we come to Mass, we are saying, «Today I am going to holy Mass to share this interior faith I have with my sisters and brothers». As I was telling you before, we must become the microphones of God. This faith we have can be transmitted by our good example, by our honesty, by our friendly words, by the consolation we offer others. We should be models of the word of God that is fully alive in the depths of our being. That is faith!

What is the content of this Christian faith? Saint Paul tells us two things today: believe that Christ is the Lord, and believe that God has raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9). Those are the two great articles of Christian faith. First, that Christ is the Lord. Saying «Lord» means saying «God». Only before Christ are we to bend our knees. Only Christ are we to seek, and never should we accept anything else in place of Christ our Lord. Second, that he rose and now is alive and waiting for us. We believe in a man who died but who is now alive, and death has no dominion over him. This is Christian faith. That is why Lent will prepare us for Easter, when we will be able to say not only with our lips but with our lives, «Christ is the Lord. We don't have to worship anyone else. We bend our knees only before him. Even if we die, we will die always kneeling before Christ! Never will we find life kneeling before humans!» (Applause)

As you can see, dear sisters and brothers, the contents of the faith of the New Testament are a little different from those of the Old Testament, but the meaning and the spirit of the faith are the same. When Israelites professed their faith, they said, «We believe in the God who chose Abraham. We believe in the God who formed a people and delivered them from Egypt. We believe in the God who gave us this land with all its fruits». What they were saying was this: «We trust in God. We believe in him. We dedicate ourselves to him and adore no other god». Now Christians say, «We believe that Christ is the Lord. We believe that Christ rose and is now alive». The contents are different, but the object is the same: we must believe in God; we must worship God; we must follow Christ. For the Israelites Christ did not yet exist; they had only the promise that God was to become human. For us Christians that great promise of history is now reality. Christ is God become man. For us, the whole history of Israel is changed by our belief in the One who personifies Israel. Christ is the personification of all that long history of salvation. Lent prepares us to be worthy to follow the true Christ.

So the conclusion is this, sisters and brothers: let us have faith. Let us truly believe, and with our faith let us shed light on our politics, let us work at history, let us fashion the destiny of our people. But let us not make a project that is merely human, much less one inspired by the devil. Let us make a project that is inspired by God and that leads us to believe in Christ. Let us make a project that helps us realize that the history of our country is a history of salvation because Christ is involved with our families, with the laws of our country, with our government, and with everything else that has to do with our country. Let Christ be the light that shines everywhere so that our country will become the entryway to that great kingdom of God.

## **Life of the church**

That is what we are working for. The work of the church is very different from that of the government, but both church and government should converge in worshiping the only true God. Our work as church must be what is specific to the church. I therefore take this opportunity to give you some information about what the church is trying to accomplish.

During this Mass today I want to express my gratitude for the solidarity that has been shown for different reasons this week. For example, solidarity was expressed on the third anniversary of my being named your archbishop. We celebrated the occasion with a wonderful Eucharist on February 22<sup>5</sup>. I want to thank you profoundly for the sense of unity you feel with

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<sup>5</sup> «Archbishop Romero: Prophet and Pastor: Words of Father Cristóbal Cortés on the Third Anniversary of Óscar Romero Becoming Archbishop of San Salvador», 22 February 1980, in *Orientación* (2 March 1980).

your bishop. Let us always continue to build in this way the true church, which has as its base the presence of Christ in a person who—by no merit of his own, only by God's will—has been given authority for teaching and unifying the church. All this leads me to deeper reflection and a greater attempt to be faithful, and so I ask for your prayers and your solidarity so that day after day we may build the authentic church of the Lord.

Solidarity has been expressed also because of the calumnies to which our beloved pastoral agents have been subject. A wonderful letter arrived here from the vicariate of Chalatenango, vigorously protesting the calumnies and insults against the archbishop, the priests, the religious, the Jesuits, and the sisters, as well as the attack on the radio station. It reads, «We condemn the defamatory campaign against the episcopal vicar of Chalatenango, Father Fabián Amaya. We bear witness to his work and collaborate with him in pastoral ministry that is based on evangelical principles and the documents of the church: Vatican II, Medellín, Puebla, and the Pastoral Week. The objective of our work, which is to develop the whole human person, is known to all through the communications media of the church». The vicariate of Chalatenango has expressed its views on other matters and given a testimony of solidarity.

I am also thankful for the expressions of strong solidarity that have arrived from diverse sectors in response to the letter we sent last Sunday to the president of the United States. Various sectors of our people and our church have affirmed their solidarity in this regard. I want to mention also that a letter was written in English by the American priests and religious who are working among us; in their letter they joined the archbishop in making the same requests of their own president that we made in last Sunday's letter. (Applause)

Expressions of affection and solidarity also keep arriving because of the honorary doctorate I received from the University of Louvain, and I am grateful for them. (Applause) I single out the telegram from the municipality of Santa Ana: «The Municipal Council of Santa Ana congratulates you for the honorable distinction conferred by Louvain University, Belgium. The Mayor and the District Chief of Santa Ana».

We already spoke about the attack against the radio station, but we also want to express our solidarity with the UCA regarding the bomb attack that caused great damage to their library. It's very significant that those who have no use for culture are treating culture in this way, with bomb blasts. (Applause)

Since we are trying to build this church in accord with God's project, I take delight in mentioning the life of our seminaries, where I have begun my visits. We received a marvelous letter from more than a hundred young men who could not enter the seminary because they exceeded the number that our seminary could hold. Since many of them have finished secondary school, they are asking that their desire not be forgotten and that they be taken into account for next year. I want to use this occasion to answer this magnificent letter publicly and to tell you not to be discouraged. Keep preparing yourselves spiritually, and visit the seminary often even though it cannot hold all the abundance of vocations we are now receiving, for which we thank God. Still, in your homes and school you can continue to mature so that, when the moment comes, you will be ideal candidates and the bishop will place his hands on you and make you priests of our people.

But I need to stress how grateful we are to the Holy Spirit for this abundance of vocations, to the point that it's impossible to accept them all into the halls of our seminaries. For those who are now in the seminary this should serve as a stimulus; since they have been selected, they have to strive to excel. Let it be a stimulus also for those who are outside the seminaries since God wants to prepare them in another manner. The ways of the Lord are quite varied, and the service that a priest offers will be even richer if it comes from an abundance of other experiences.

This week I visited the communities of the Belgian sisters who are working among us in Quezaltepeque, Cojutepeque, Santa Cruz Michapa, and Santiago Texacuangos. I brought them warm greetings from their families in Belgium, who feel very close to the communities where these admirable communities are working.

In the village of Botoncillal we had a ceremony for the blessing of married couples. It was filmed by an English television crew that was there; they're trying to convey some idea of the life of the church in our rural parts. They were quite impressed by the group of married couples whom the lay catechists had prepared in that place. This afternoon in Colón there will be another group of married couples who have also been prepared by the catechists.

Another aspect of church life I want to announce is that next Saturday, the first of March, at ten o'clock in the morning, we will be ordaining in this church the deacon Jaime Paredes, who is already working in our seminary. So next Saturday at ten in the morning, here in the basilica.

On next Sunday will begin the Week of Voluntary Offering. You can read what it's about in today's issue of *Orientación*. The idea is to ask everyone to join together in moral and economic solidarity to fight the hunger which our people are suffering in various ways. I want to make an appeal, then, for all of us to lend a hand. Next Sunday some of those who are in charge of this campaign will give a short message here.

I am also thankful that many centers of Catholic education have issued a statement of solidarity with the people who are suffering. They express their protest against the repression, and they offer prayers for all the dead, especially the teachers and other victims of violence<sup>6</sup>. There is also the wonderful news that on Ash Wednesday many Catholic schools made acts of reparation for the distressful situation our country is experiencing.

## **Events of the week**

Finally, sisters and brothers, I want to consider the country's politics from the church's viewpoint. I do this not as a politician, for I am not one, but as a pastor guiding his people by the light of Christian principles. Since all of you experience these political realities in your lives, and I also experience them as pastor, we must know how to judge them and criticize them by Gospel standards, and we must learn how to collaborate and commit ourselves to making our history conform to the project of God.

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<sup>6</sup> «Statement of the Federation of Centers of Catholic Education of the Archdiocese of San Salvador», 15 February 1980, in *Orientación* (2 March 1980).

I want to begin with the event we mentioned at the start: the attack on our radio station. It doesn't matter to us what organization claims responsibility. What is important is that ultimately the ones responsible are the members of the oligarchy. It is they who right now are trying desperately and blindly to repress the people. (Applause) This act of dynamiting YSAX is very symbolic. What does it mean? Those in the oligarchy realize that they are in danger of losing their near total control over investment and agricultural exports, as well as their almost complete monopoly of the land. So they are defending their selfish interests, not with arguments or popular support but with the only thing they have: their money, which allows them to buy weapons and pay mercenaries. It is these that are massacring the people and quashing every legitimate claim for justice and freedom. (Applause) That is the reason they are exploding all the bombs, like the one at the UCA, and that is also why they have killed so many *campesinos*, students, teachers, workers, and other persons who have organized.

Our Legal Aid Office has been giving us some very sorrowful information these days. This week many bodies with evident signs of torture were found in different parts of the country. There has been an average of six unidentified bodies a day, some of them marked with the initials of the criminal gangs of the extreme right. On February 20 in Mejicanos, for example, two bodies were thrown from a moving vehicle, one about thirty-six years old and the other about twenty-eight; they had been tortured and their throats were cut. On February 19 some individuals opened fire on the church in Tonacatepeque and killed six persons who were in the town park. So far in the month of February at least fifty *campesinos* in Aguilares have been tortured, shot, and killed. At noon on February 21 two employees of the Office for Poor Assistance, Doctor José Antonio Baires Zelaya and Ricardo Alfredo Torres, were brutally killed, and two law students were also wounded.

The terrible murder of Doctor Mario Zamora has been reported<sup>7</sup>, and the Christian Democratic Party has offered this reflection on it: «The Party, speaking to the national conscience, holds responsible for this appalling crime Major Roberto D'Aubuisson and the band of assassins commanded by the extreme right. (Applause) The connection is clear between the denunciation made on television by this sinister individual and the criminal act that obliterated the valiant life of this man dedicated to serving the most noble and generous efforts to help the Salvadoran people. The Party thus repeats its repudiation of the violence which is causing bloodshed in our anguished country».

I want to express my own personal sorrow to the family of our dear Doctor Mario Zamora Rivas. At this time his body is being interred in Cojutepeque. Let us join together in prayer for his eternal rest.

On February 21 in Suchitoto known members of ORDEN ambushed the *campesinos* Jeremías Melgar and Osmaro Acosta and killed both of them. Osmar was a close relative of Lucio Elías Acosta, who was killed in similar circumstances on February 13. Also on February 21, in the village of Amayo in Aguilares, members of ORDEN, with the protection of security forces, killed the *campesinos* Teodoro Vega, Miguel Ángel Rivas Ruiz, Manuel Marroquín, and Carlos Alvarado.

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<sup>7</sup> Mario Zamora Rivas, an outstanding leader of the Christian Democratic Party and head of the Office for Poor Assistance, was killed on 23 February 1980. On a television program three days earlier, Roberto D'Aubuisson had accused him of belonging to a guerrilla group, the People's Liberation Forces (FPL). *La Prensa Gráfica* (24 February 1980) and *El Independiente* (26 February 1980).

Still another teacher was killed, José Abilio Torres Benavides. So far this year nine teachers have been killed. In a spirit of friendship I also want to join in the sorrow of the family of Edgar Béneke, another victim of this wave of violence in our country.

The illegal arrests continue, and it is assumed that the victims will become disappeared political prisoners. I want to make this matter more publicly known because if the victims are still alive, those responsible for their arrest must hear the voice of the people crying for the release of these brothers. No more persons should be made to disappear from among our own people. Yet the *campesinos* Gabriel Antonio Menjívar Cornejo and Francisco Molina were arrested in Aguilares on February 14 by twenty agents of the Treasury Police. The *campesinos* Candelario de Jesús Alas, Silvestre Landaverde Cardoza, Pastor Escalante Escobar, and Roberto Antonio Villanueva were arrested by the National Guard in Aguilares on February 16. These men leave behind fourteen children without sustenance and protection. The *campesino* Carlos Amilcar Linares and Rafael Antonio Linares were arrested on February 14 in San Salvador. The *campesina* María del Carmen Pérez was arrested on February 15 near the municipal market in San Salvador. Jaime López and Oscar René Aparicio were arrested on February 19 in San Vicente. And as I was entering here, I met the weeping mother of Francisco Arnulfo Ventura, who was arrested on January 22 and has still not appeared; she asks for mercy for her son and for herself. He was one of the students arrested near the United States embassy.

Shots have been fired at the Colegio Sagrado Corazón, the house of the mayor of Sonsonate, and other places as well. On Tuesday the nineteenth a bomb was set off at the offices of the Revolutionary Trade Union Federation. On February 22 an attempt was also made to dynamite the offices of the union of beverage workers.

Another important thing that must be denounced is the dismissal of five directors of the Workers' Association of ANTEL. This provoked a military cordon and also the intervention of the archbishop's office. This is a very interesting case since it appears that it constitutes a violation of the right of association that the new governing junta has said that it would respect. In practice, however, that right is being infringed in the case of ANTEL. I call attention to article 191 of the constitution and to article 204 of the labor code, which reaffirm that the right of free association will be honored, especially in the case of workers. At the last minute I learned that seven other workers of the Workers' Association of ANTEL have also been dismissed. It is only right that an investigation be carried out quickly and that this labor conflict be resolved since it touches on human rights.

By means of money and violence the right has until now managed to paralyze the government and prevent it from keeping its promise—a promise also made by the Armed Forces—to nationalize the banks and foreign trade and to carry out an integral agrarian reform.

Since we are now in the season of Lent, which is a time for conversion and reflection on what it means to be Christian, I want to make a fraternal, pastoral appeal to the oligarchy. I ask you to be converted to life and to use your economic power for the people's benefit instead of for the misery and ruin of our population. (Applause) If you don't want to listen to me, then at least listen to the voice of Pope John Paul II. This very week, at the beginning of Lent, he

exhorted the Catholics of the world to give up superfluous wealth in order to help the needy and to do this as a sign of Lenten penance<sup>8</sup>.

In this regard I want to recall what Pope Paul VI said about there being two ways of celebrating Lent: one way for the economically developed countries, and another way for the poor countries where Lent is perpetual because they are always fasting (Pae 28). In the former, Lent should consist of giving up something and promoting the value of austerity, while in the latter Lent is different. Among our own people, who constantly suffer hunger and privation, understanding their situation in a penitential sense doesn't mean accepting it passively. Lent should mean working so that social justice will prevail in the country. The best way for us to celebrate Lent will be to work for social justice out of love for the poor, as Pope John Paul II told me to do during my visit to Rome.

The same pontiff has stated that the goods that for some people are superfluous are an essential requirement for the survival of hundreds of millions of human beings.<sup>9</sup> The pope also stressed an essential point of the Christian message when he said that the church is not interested simply in there being a more equitable distribution of wealth. She wants that distribution to result from a true desire among all human beings to share not only material goods but life itself with those who are disadvantaged in our society<sup>10</sup>. This is something wonderful. Social justice is not just a law demanding distribution; seen from a Christian viewpoint, it is an interior attitude, like that of Christ who, being rich, became poor in order to be able to share his love with the poor (2 Cor 8:9).

I hope that this appeal to them from the church doesn't harden even more the hearts of the oligarchs but instead moves them to conversion. You must share who you are and what you have. Don't keep silencing with violence those of us who extend to you this invitation. More importantly, don't keep killing those of us who are trying to achieve a more just distribution of the power and the wealth of our country. I speak in the first person because this week I was advised that I am on the list of those they are planning to eliminate next week. But let it be shown that the voice of justice cannot be killed by anybody. (Applause)

For this reason I think that this call to conversion extends also to the Armed Forces. At the beginning of this year the supreme authorities of this institution promised to support a process of reform that was anti-oligarchic and for the benefit of the people. It is now time, especially during Lent when we hear the urgent appeals of the Gospel, for them to honor this commitment if they wish to be true to their military pledge. Don't let the oligarchy continue to use you to defend their interests! Guarantee freedom of expression, of movement, of organization, and the rest. Support the efforts to bring about the authentic changes the country requires.

It appears that the United States State Department is conditioning its economic and military aid on the government's willingness to carry the reforms into practice. As I said last Sunday, it is evident that until now that condition has not been fulfilled. A recent press notice, however, stated the following: «The United States today warned the conservative military

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<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, «Message of the Holy Father to the People of God at the Beginning of Lent», 19 February 1980, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (24 February 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

leaders of El Salvador that Washington's relations with that country would be damaged if the Armed Forces were to block the reform program of the moderate government that now holds power. ... "We do not want United States aid to El Salvador to contribute to repression in that country or to be used to frustrate reforms"»<sup>11</sup>. The reporter referred to the letter I read to you last Sunday, which one member of the United States government described as «devastating»<sup>12</sup>. I did not mean to devastate anything but simply to ask in the name of the people that the military aid not be unconditional. Now, thank God, it seems that the eyes of the United States have been opened so that the aid will be strictly monitored and not result in evil and in the repression of our people. (Applause) And this is necessary because the stance of the Armed Forces has become ever more pro-oligarchy and more brutally repressive. (Applause)

Speaking with words of the Gospel and calling all to conversion, I earnestly desire that the United States provide no more aid until our Armed Forces are converted. (Applause) Moreover, I continue to ask, no matter what happens, that no part of that aid be used for training or equipping the Armed Forces, for they offer no guarantee of remaining faithful to the people for long. (Applause) Finally, I want to reaffirm my desire that no American economic aid given to the Salvadoran people should place limits on their legitimate right to self-determination. (Applause) As long as there is no guarantee that this right will be respected and that none of the aid will be used to continue repressing the people, there is no justice or benefit for the country in any aid, no matter what country it comes from. (Applause)

My Lenten appeal for the conversion of the diverse sectors of Salvadoran society would not be complete if I did not, as pastor, address an affectionate message to the grassroots forces. There is an urgent need for the people's organizations to continue maturing so that they can carry out their mission of being interpreters of the will of the people. Given the great dignity of our people, their suffering and oppression should not be manipulated; rather, it should be guided by a true spirituality of poverty, as we recalled last Sunday. Their poverty is a denunciation of the injustice of our country, but it is also a spirituality. The poor have in their hands a great instrument for being holy and pleasing to God. Poverty means being as dedicated as Christ was, for he, though being rich, chose to live with the poor to save them, and to do so precisely by his poverty. I praise here the efforts of all those Christians who make this generous commitment to the sacrifice of poverty.

In calling the poor and the organizations to conversion, I want to cite these wise words of a beloved Salvadoran writer:

If those of us who, being poor, have no economic interests to defend and have suffered no personal harm, nevertheless feel intense desires for severe judgment against those who have altered the peace and destroyed the national economy, then how much greater must be the wrath and the violent reaction of those who have seen their possessions destroyed and great damage done to countless poor families? To the oligarchs can be applied the words of the book of Wisdom which say, «Terribly and swiftly shall come upon you the wrath of God. The mighty shall be mightily tested» (Wis 6:5-6). (Applause) But is it with proletarian terrorist violence that the repressive violence of millionaires should be and can be combated? Our people are left with no other alternative than violence—so think even some Catholics who say they're

<sup>11</sup> «Conditions Placed on United States Aid to El Salvador» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (23 February 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

progressive. Second, is it with bombs, arson, occupations, kidnappings, and even murders that the kingdom of God and its justice will in the end be established? Third, do you believe that it is the Holy Spirit rather than the devil that is inspiring these acts of vandalism which harm Christian moral life more than they harm the estates of the oligarchs? To defend or cover up subversive violence, instead of condemning it outright, will in my opinion only provoke more repressive insolence, for we are seeing on all sides the reaction of the bloodthirsty forces of repression against any attack of the groups of subversion<sup>13</sup>.

It seems to me, then, that during this Lent we have to try to achieve a sane balance. I repeat that the church has defended and will continue to defend the right to organize and all just demands. The church believes in the role that the people's organizations can play as political forces. At the same time, the church calls them to continue to grow so that they become a true expression of a people that is not violent by nature but rather loves peace and seeks reasonable solutions.

There are other letters of a personal nature, and I ask those who hear this message to keep them in mind. A family from San Antonio Los Ranchos writes that a certain radio station in San Salvador identified some persons as belonging ORDEN, specifically José Humberto Menjívar and Andrés Menjívar, but the family is quite certain that these men do not belong to that organization. We must be very careful not to slander people or to wage vendettas against people who are not guilty.

Another clarification comes from Chalatenango, stating that a report came out in *La Prensa Gráfica* about an old man, age seventy-two, who was shot and killed by subversives. The wife claims that the person named is her husband and that the reports in the newspaper are totally false. «My family and I know exactly what happened», she writes. It is dangerous to make statements when a report is unverified.

We also received a sad call from a mother who was in the Hospital San Rafael in Santa Tecla. She left her child, just a few months old, in the hands of another woman while she went to buy some juice. When she returned, she found neither the woman nor the child, and they have still not appeared. She is asking if some person can give her information. She lives on the Talcualuya estate in the village of La Esperanza, San Juan de Opico.

Sisters and brothers, the history of our people is very dense, but I am consoled by knowing that it is being illuminated by the history of salvation. Today Christ in the desert has taught us that people can be influenced either by the law of God's project or by temptations to evil. That Christ, who is the Son of Man because he represents all human beings, has a great message for us this Sunday. We are working out our history under two influences: our Christian faith and the evil forces of crime, violence, and other vices that are right now dictating our history.

Like Jesus in the desert, I ask you to reflect especially on what God's project is. As Christians, each and every one of us should be a reflection of that project of God. Before anything else we should seek the will of the Lord and not follow the caprices of human beings, especially when these are inspired by crimes of selfishness. Let us seek for what God wants,

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<sup>13</sup> The author of this quotation is unknown.

even in the hunger of the desert, even on the cross of his own Son. God wants to save the world not just by appearances but by the true force that emanates solely from the cross and from sacrifice. So Lent summons all of us to love our homeland but also to enlighten it regarding the path by which the Lord wants to lead it so that we are not left disillusioned. In our Mass today, then, we are going forth like the Israelites to proclaim our faith in the God of our history.

(Applause)