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## **Conversion Is Necessary for True Liberation according to God's Plan**

**Third Sunday of Lent  
9 March 1980**

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15  
1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12  
Luke 13:1-9

Honorable ambassador of Sweden, esteemed secretary general of Swedish Ecumenical Action, and dear sisters and brothers, we find ourselves here between corpses and our assembled pilgrim people, between pain and applause. I gratefully accept this award, which is not just for me but for all this beloved people who were so beautifully described by the secretary general of Swedish Ecumenical Action when I was given this distinguished award, their 1980 Peace Prize<sup>1</sup>. (Applause)

The presence of the ambassador of Sweden signifies that country's valuable endorsement of our Christian ecumenical initiative. (Applause) But the unexpected and sorrowful presence of these two dear bodies brought by their worthy families has a very powerful impact on a preacher of peace<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, we hear these voices from distant lands which offer impartial, disinterested judgments because they comprehend what people here among us often do not want to comprehend. On the other, we also hear the voice of eternity in the deathly presence of these two coffins before us. From an eternal, eschatological perspective, this voice moves us to see that the Christian way is the true way toward peace.

How delighted I was to read that among the reasons for awarding this distinguished Peace Prize were our efforts on behalf of «reconciliation, justice, and humanity among peoples». How wonderful it is that these words accompanying the distinguished award coincide with the ministry that Saint Paul calls «the ministry of reconciliation» (2 Cor 5:18). That is the heart of the word of God that it is my duty, as pastor of this diocese, to comment on this morning.

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<sup>1</sup> Before the homily the Swedish ambassador, Henrik Ramel, bestowed on Archbishop Romero the 1980 Peace Prize awarded by Swedish Ecumenical Action and the Free Churches of Sweden. Anders Kompass, secretary of Swedish Ecumenical Action for Latin America, read the document, which among other things said that the prize was being given to Archbishop Romero for his evangelical work «of promoting reconciliation, justice, and humanity among peoples. ... When the people are oppressed, tortured, persecuted, and deprived of freedom and humane conditions, it is a Christian duty to defend and support them. Swedish Ecumenical Action considers that Archbishop Romero and his church have provided significant help in their defense of the oppressed». Bishop Per-Arne Aglert, secretary general of Swedish Ecumenical Action, then gave a brief message in which he thanked God for providing, in Archbishop Romero, «a clear, bright light.... that will never lose its clarity». *Orientación* (16 March 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Castellanos Braña and Annette Matthiessen Schultz, «Report of the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador» in *Orientación* (16 March 1980).

Today's readings take us back to the true sources of reconciliation and peace which are part of the unmistakable message of Lent: reconciliation with God and conversion. This theme is most opportune at this moment when we are in the presence of death and of visitors from distant lands. Here in El Salvador, as we were just told by Bishop Anglert, we see only a gloomy night of repression and violence, but the word of God allows us to sense the dawn that is approaching if only we are converted and reconciled. There are so many polarizations, so many ideologies, so many selfish interests, so many mistaken paths to which I want to address the call of Jesus Christ: «Be converted! If you are not converted, you will perish!» (Luke 13:3). Let us hope that my call to reconciliation, so providentially reinforced this morning by this award and by these silent presences, will be heard by all, and especially by those who don't want to hear it.

As usual, I am going to give a title to my homily, and I hope it expresses the gratitude of my archdiocese to this noble group, Ecumenical Action of Sweden. May these words find an echo in the hearts of all through this Christian ecumenical voice and through the pain of these families who are present here with their bodies. The topic of the homily will be the same one we have been studying all during Lent: God's plan and what it means for all our earthly political and social projects. The title will be: «Conversion Is Necessary for True Liberation according to God's Plan». (Applause) This is the central idea for this morning. According to God's plan, conversion is necessary for true liberation. As we usually do, we'll develop this topic with three reflections: first, the teaching of the Gospel: «If you are not converted, you will all perish»; second, the chastisement of Israel: «Not all were pleasing to God; therefore, their bodies were strewn about in the desert» (1 Cor 10:5); and third, what it means for El Salvador to be converted today.

### **The teaching of the gospel: «If you are not converted, you will all perish as well»**

This teaching of the gospel is found on the very lips of Christ, «If you are not converted, you will perish as well» (Luke 13:3), and it makes us ask what conversion is, what it means to be converted. The whole Gospel message is synthesized there. That is how John the Baptist began, that is how Jesus Christ continued, and that is what he wants us to preach to the end of the centuries: «The kingdom of God has arrived! Be converted and believe in the Good News!» (Mark 1:15). This is the foundation of God's kingdom.

Conversion is the same as doing penance. It is the same as the famous Greek word *metanoia*, which means being converted, changing one's mentality. Those who had bowed down before the idols of earth now had to change their mentality and kneel down instead before the only Lord. Being converted means returning to God, and since the way back to God is by Jesus Christ—who said «I am the way: no one comes to the Father except through me» (John 14:6)—conversion means clinging to Christ and seeking the Father.

The Gospel of Saint Luke, which is the gospel for this year, has something unique about it. The ten chapters from chapter nine to chapter nineteen provide us with a real Christology, an extensive explanation of the meaning of Christ as the Savior of humankind. Luke presents this Christology as he recounts the Son of God's journey toward Jerusalem. This is the gospel that especially concentrates on that journey toward Jerusalem, not in its geographic details, which are not of much interest to Saint Luke, but in its theological significance. For Christ and for all his Christian followers, journeying toward Jerusalem means searching for the will of

God. It is a journey of suffering, humiliation, and crucifixion on Calvary—he does not deny it, he announces it. But the goal at the end is one of triumph, victory, and resurrection.

For the Israelites, and for Christ especially, the city of Jerusalem was the embodiment of all God's promises. When Jesus announced that he would be driven out of Jerusalem, that meant that the city had been prostituted by those who would expel him: the scribes, the Pharisees, the priests themselves. When Christ was driven from Jerusalem, he took with him all that was pure in the city, leaving behind in the old Jerusalem the schemes, the sins, the injustices, the intrigues of humans. But climbing with him to the cross, on this road to his supreme humiliation, were the innocence, the holiness, the justice of God and forgiveness for human beings. And from that cross all the promises of the pure Jerusalem were extended to all those who believe in this Lord who is Jesus Christ.

Being converted, then, is to walk with Jesus on that mysterious journey toward the will of God, toward the promises of God, without letting ourselves be seduced by the intrigues of religion itself or by the triumphal claims of politics and the things of the earth. Let us ally ourselves instead with Christ in purity and grace in order to merit those promises of the Lord. In the language of today's gospel, then, being converted is a sorrowful journey amid weeping and mourning, amid suffering and pain; it involves lashes and tortures and thorny crowns, but it ends in the final victory of the Lord's resurrection, which is the resurrection of all of us.

This helps us understand the two episodes that the Gospel of Saint Luke narrates about how Christ used to teach those who followed him on his journey. One episode refers to those who died while they were offering a sacrifice. Some pious Galileans were killed while they were celebrating a sacrifice; no doubt their death was due to repression and religious persecution (Luke 13:1). This fits well with the description of Pontius Pilate that we have from the history books: he was an extremely repressive ruler, a man who ordered large numbers of people to be killed in the temple. He was a man who would feel at home today with the repression in El Salvador. (Applause)

The other episode also recalls our political situation in El Salvador. It speaks of those who were crushed to death in the construction work of Siloam (Luke 13:4). No doubt they were Zealots, members of a political movement who died in battle. Whatever the situation, we humans have a mentality that accustoms us to associate tragedy with sin. Once, for example, when the disciples saw a poor blind man, they asked Christ, «Who sinned to make this man blind, he or his parents?» In replying, Christ traced the mystery of suffering back to its source: «Neither he nor his parents. These things happen for God's glory» (John 9:2-3). So when the disciples asked Christ about these two catastrophes, the men killed in the temple and the ones crushed by the column, his answer was, «Do you think that those who died that way were more sinful than all the others who did not die? By no means! And let me tell you: if you do not repent, you shall all perish as they did!» (Luke 13:2-3).

How considerate the Lord is! He has no desire to reveal the inner mystery of the soul of each person killed. How did they die? Were they tortured? Were they killed unjustly, like these two innocent ones before us? How did they die? It doesn't matter, says Christ. What matters is something greater and grander: dying reconciled with God, converted to God. Therefore, the message that death delivers to all of us who are alive is this: Do penance! Be converted!

Sisters and brothers, if there has ever been a moment here in our country when this statement of the Lord hits home, it is at this moment when lives are in danger everywhere. Be converted! Let death not surprise us while we're walking on the paths of sin and injustice, not to speak of crime and mayhem. May death find us in God's love. This is the great teaching of the episodes in today's gospel: we are called to journey with Christ, and if death finds us while we are walking with him, there is nothing to fear. Death is victory for those who believe in the Lord who said, «Those who follow me will never die but will have eternal life» (John 6:47).

It is in this same sense that we should interpret the powerful parable of the barren fig tree that Saint Luke tells us today. The owner of the farm tells the administrator, «Cut it down! Why should it take up land if it produces no fruit?» The gardener responds, «Leave it, sir. I will care for it well this year. Maybe next year it will bear fruit!» (Luke 13:7-9). In a similar passage Saint Matthew tells about a time when the Lord approached a fig tree that was dried up, symbolizing the futility of life and the curse of God. Saint Luke's gospel, however, is called the «gospel of mercy», and so his account does not end so tragically but rather gives us a breath of hope.

Saint Luke interprets Christ as saying that what is important is having a life that is useful, a life that produces fruit. Luke's gospel teaches us to ask ourselves: what use is our life, as pompous as it may appear, if it produces no fruit? We are barren fig trees! The gospel also tells us that God is waiting for us with gentleness and patience. Lent is urgently calling us to review our lives in order to see whether we really are bearing fruits or are simply useless fig trees taking up space in the world. There is a great need today for active, critical Christians who do not accept social conditions without analyzing them internally and profoundly. Today we don't want masses of people who let themselves be easily controlled, as has been the case for so long. We want men and women who, like fruit-producing fig trees, can say yes to justice and no to injustice. (Applause) We want men and women who know how to make good use of the precious gift of life. Whatever your situation may be, dear sisters and brothers—no matter how lowly you feel, no matter how tiny and insignificant you think you are—God looks upon your lives with love! And God looks with love upon these two dead friends of ours. Their lives have ended, but God has already harvested their fruits. God cares for each human being with the fondness of that gardener who for a whole year cultivated the fig tree threatened with death, so that it would produce good fruit.

Therefore, the call to us during Lent is clear: «Do penance!» This is what the Lord has been commanding us to announce to all peoples since Ash Wednesday. And thanks be to God, this is the same message that is being carried by the radio station that has befriended us, Radio Noticias del Continente of Costa Rica, to regions we didn't even dream of before they destroyed YSAX. (Applause)

This week we heard some fascinating stories about the mysterious places reached by Radio Noticias del Continente. They told us that, at the request of various listeners, our homily was repeated on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. (Applause) We never would have imagined that we'd be heard by radio audiences in Costa Rica, Venezuela, Colombia, and other places. They say that the station can be heard well even in the Southern Cone. Right here in this country there are religious congregations and Christian communities in the villages that have shortwave radios, and they have heard us just as they heard the radio broadcasts before. We want to express our sincerest thanks because what is going forth is not just a human voice. The

voice is merely an echo of what is really important, which is the message of God, the message of Christ: «Be converted!» May this message reach every heart.

Our pastoral appeal—especially for this archdiocese with its cherished priests, its dedicated pastoral collaborators, its religious, and its Christian communities—is that we make good use of this message of Lent to bring all men and women to conversion and to the following of Christ, for Christ is journeying toward the spiritual Jerusalem, toward the truest heaven, toward the true resurrection which the esteemed secretary of Ecumenical Action told us about a moment ago.

**The chastisement of Israel: «Not all were pleasing to God; therefore, their bodies were strewn about in the desert»**

My second reflection thus reinforces the first one about the lesson of this gospel. The second point of today's readings is the chastisement of Israel. The history of salvation, as seen in the history of Israel, is a very important aspect of Lent. It helps us to see that the church is not exaggerating today when she calls people to repentance. Rather, she is responding to God's plan, which has been the constant subject of our Lenten preaching. We come to know God's plan by studying the history of Israel. God chose that people from among all the nations in order to create a history of salvation which, when viewed from Christ on his cross, would be a part of the history of all peoples. The history of Israel continues now through the history of the church and the history of our Salvadoran people. The history of El Salvador is another vehicle for God's project to the extent that we Salvadorans make our own the project of salvation history. Therefore, wherever the Gospel is preached, no matter what the political or social setting in which it's preached, God's project will continue forward. There in Sweden its character will be very different from what it is here in El Salvador; the social realities are very different. But the project will remain always the same: the need for us to be converted.

Today's first and second readings tell us about the chastisement of the people of Israel. These readings recall for us three elements of God's project for Israel. The first was the encounter between God and the leaders of his people, especially Moses; the second was the revelation God made of his name and of his mission among the people; and the third was the great history of the Exodus, which represents the path of liberation for all peoples.

Today we see Moses when he is still unaware of what plans God has for his life. But there on the mountain Moses experienced a theophany that was typical of others we see in the Old Testament: there was fire, the voice of God, the infinite sanctity of the Lord. Moses wanted to draw near, but the mysterious voice told him, «Do not come closer, for the place where you stand is holy» (Exod 3:5). That mysterious God told Moses that he had been chosen as God's instrument to bring freedom to his people.

What interests us here, sisters and brothers, is this grand experience of Moses. Those who lead the people by the ways of God must themselves have personal experience of God. The Bible makes that clear in the example of the great prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It is true of the New Testament leaders as well, such as Paul and the apostles. They needed to be educated first of all through intimate contact with the Lord. This is what we see today in the account of the theophany on Mount Horeb: Moses entered into communication with God, and from that moment on he would not be able to forget the presence of God. Even though he felt incapable and inadequate for the great mission given him, he knew that he was

not alone, for God was walking with him, and God would guarantee the triumph of the mission he had entrusted to Moses.

The spirit of Moses should encourage all Christians to be the people of salvation history. God was communicating to Moses something that he wants all Christians to experience: an intimacy with God that reinforces our efforts and makes all our fears disappear: «Do not fear because I go with you» (Exod 3:12). That is what Paul learned as well: «If God is with us, who can be against us?» (Rom 8:31).

The second revelation we find in the Bible this morning is the revelation of God's name. Moses cautiously asked this mysterious Being, «If they ask me what God has sent me or what he is called, how should I respond to them?» (Exod 3:13-14). God then defined himself with a word which was sacred in Israel: Yahweh. The word Yahweh is an archaic form of the Hebrew verb «to be». It signifies not just a being that exists, but an active, dynamic being. When God told Moses, «I am who am», he meant to tell him, «I am dynamically present. I am the one who must be discovered in the dynamism of history. I am present in the interventions of all the powers of the world. I am the force of the stars and the seas. I am the one who makes all things be».

God also told Moses, «I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob» (Exod 3:15), as if to say, «Don't think of me as an abstract idea, as a God who is up in the heavens and leaves the earth to human beings. That is not right». The God of the heavens is the God of earth. He is the God who is creating history, the God who walks with the patriarchs, the God who accompanies parents, the God of our grandparents, the God of all of our country's affairs. This revelation is vitally important today, dear sisters and brothers, precisely at this time when we are trying to preach a religion that many people criticize, saying that it has nothing to do with spirituality. So many crazy things are heard these days, and so many insipid columns appear in the papers, claiming that people are no longer going to church because «they're preaching only politics, not religion». But here we have the proof: never before has the basilica been so full! (Applause)

When I spoke with Doña Rosa,<sup>3</sup> the grieving mother who is here with us, I told her that the setting of the basilica was perhaps not appropriate for mourning our beloved dead, but she insisted on bringing them, so that here we have these two deceased loved ones surrounded by the people's applause. (Applause) Doña Rosa is one of those intelligent, thoughtful, truly pious souls who understand that a pastor must talk about politics not because he's a politician but because the dynamism of God makes politics fall under the dominion of God. (Applause) By revealing his name as he did, God has taught us that he is a God who wants to be with humanity. He is a God who feels the pain of those who are tortured and die in agony. He is a God who, with the church, denounces torture, repression, and all such crimes. The God we adore is not a dead God; he is a living God who feels, acts, labors, and leads this history forward. In him we hope, in him we trust. God walks with us, as he walked with Israel. (Applause)

The third revelation we hear today from the Old Testament is one that becomes the golden thread of the New Testament: the determination of God to free all peoples from slavery.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosa María Braña de Castellanos was the mother of Roberto Castellanos Braña, who was murdered together with his Danish wife, Annette Mathiessen, on 26 February 1980. *Orientación* (16 March 1980).

God told Moses that he wanted him to be his instrument for liberating Israel, but what we hear today, dear sisters and brothers, are God's words spoken also about the people of El Salvador: «I have heard the complaints and the laments of my people. Stories of the people's sorrow and the oppression have reached my ears. I don't want to leave them abandoned, so I have decided to liberate them, and you are going to be the leader of this liberation!» (Exod 3:7-8a). That decision of God gave birth to the history of the Exodus. From that moment on Moses worked hard to wrest the people from the claws of slavery and then to lead them through all the difficult trials of the desert to the Holy Land, the land which God said was «flowing with milk and honey» (Exod 3:8b).

But God was revealing something beyond Israel. He was also saying, «This is the path of history». No people already possesses a land «flowing with milk and honey», but it is toward such a land that all peoples tend. The will of God generates the desire for liberation, the desire to create a more just society, the desire to rescue the poor and the oppressed from misery and injustice. God does not want people enslaved; he wants them to set out toward a promised land, which will not be found in this world but nevertheless has to do with this world. This earth must be an anticipation of heaven until we truly have a «new heaven and a new earth», a place where milk and honey flow in abundance (Rev 21:1).

Therefore, sisters and brothers, the presence of these bodies here among us speaks to us about the true dimension of our trust in God. Without a doubt many politicians are listening to me, and many people who have no faith in God but are trying to make our country more just. Let me tell them, «My dear atheist friends who do not believe in Christ or in the church, your struggle is noble, but it is not complete. Allow yourselves to be led by the plans of God and the projects of true liberation. Join your passion for justice to these projects that do not end on earth but are able to give earthly projects true force, true dynamism, true projection, true hope, and true transcendence».

Saint Paul reminds us that the final, culminating action of the Old Testament history of Israel occurred when the Son of God became man. And God himself ordered that he be given a name similar to the one revealed on Sinai, the name «Jesus». In Hebrew the name *Yeshua* is a contraction, meaning «Yahweh saves». Jesus is our Christ, the one who will be present this morning in our Eucharist, but he is also the eternal Yahweh, now humanly present in Christ. The action of God is present in the history of all peoples, Christian and non-Christian, for God is always resolutely determined to free from injustice all the peoples of the world.

In today's second reading Saint Paul reflects on this account of the history of Israel, which started with God's revelation and continued for forty years in the desert and then through all the kings and prophets in the history of Israel. In today's reading Saint Paul tells us about the chastisement of Israel, saying that everything that happened in the desert «happened as an example and as a warning to us who are living in the end of ages» (1 Cor 10:11). The Christian era is the final one in God's project, and it should be a time when we learn the lesson of the history of Israel, the lesson of salvation history. The main lesson we learn today concerns the chastisement of those who did not remain faithful to God. The lesson that Saint Paul draws from this failure is this: just belonging to the people of God is not enough.

Saint Paul tells us today, «Those who left Egypt for the Promised Land were all part of the people of God. They were all children of Abraham, but not all arrived. Many were strewn about in the desert because they were not pleasing to God; they were not faithful to what they

had been promised and what they hoped for». The indispensable condition, then, is not just being called a Christian or a child of Abraham; the indispensable condition is what we are preaching this morning: personal conversion. If you don't do penance, your baptism is no use at all. If you don't do penance, then belonging to the people of God is no use at all. If you are not converted to God in your hearts by repenting your past faults, then don't think that you will enter into the kingdom of heaven. This is the great lesson and the great warning.

### **What does it mean for El Salvador to be converted to the Lord today?**

Now, dear sisters and brothers, I address my third and final reflection to our beloved people, asking them what it means today for El Salvador to be converted to the Lord by the ways of Christ. Who are the true Salvadorans who can today be called the «people of God»? They are the ones who are joined closely to Christ, seeking the heavenly Jerusalem and working on earth, not for their own particular projects but pursuing the transcendent project of God that brings us closer to the kingdom of the Lord.

### **Life of the church**

Instead of doing an abstract examination of conscience, I want to present here the realities of our people so that each one of us and all of us as community can reflect on whether we are proceeding as the people of God or whether we are instead going astray, like those who did not obey the Lord. First of all, I want to look at the life of our church in order to tell all our people—beloved priests, religious, seminarians, and faithful—what kind of church we should be building if we are following the plan of God rather than human theories. There are many wonderful things that give me great hope for this church of El Salvador to which we belong.

First I want to acknowledge with gratitude this little card I received from my dear predecessor, Archbishop Luis Chávez y González, who writes, «As I send my affectionate greeting through these lines, I want to express my profound consternation at the wave of extreme violence that has swept over our cherished church and our beloved country El Salvador, both of which I have tried to serve with total commitment and sincere allegiance. I offer my humble prayers so that the Divine Savior, as the exalted patron of the republic, and the most holy Virgin of peace, as patroness of El Salvador, may guide all their children by the way of the gift of peace». Many thanks, Archbishop Chávez. (Applause) This is a wonderful example that helps us see that life is always useful. The archbishop, though elderly and ailing, is pouring out all the affection of his life on his church and his country. Even his infirmities and his sufferings render a great service to the country. May this message reach all of you who are sick and who are suffering: no life is useless as long as it follows the paths of conversion. (Applause)

Lent also brings out all the exuberance of the life of our church, whether in the intensity of prayer that is felt everywhere, in the reception of the sacraments, or in our popular custom of that Way of the Cross as it passes through the streets of towns and villages on Fridays during Lent. I hope you take care, dear Catholics, to make your annual confession and to receive communion during Holy Week. The Council reminds us that baptism and penance are the two great elements that help us keep the spirit of Lent. Let us keep that spirit well since Lent should be preparing us for the great Easter vigil of the young people, when all of them and all of us will renew our baptismal promises. Lent is also a preparation for Pentecost, when the young folk who have not yet been confirmed will take part in that act of true conversion. Everything we do

in Lent will come to fulfillment on the evening of Holy Saturday, which is April 5, and on Pentecost Sunday, which is May 25. Let us try to experience Lent intensely!

I want especially to congratulate the catechumenal communities, who do a good job of reminding us of the liturgical events of the church's golden age, namely, preparation for Easter and renewal of our baptismal promises.

Another expression of Lent is seen in the organization of the charitable works in our diocese. Caritas is a charitable work that is part of the Catholic life of the diocese of San Salvador. With the help of Caritas and an archdiocesan committee, and in union with the Ecumenical Humanitarian Aid Commission, we try to meet the needs of our people. Motivated by true Christian charity, we make no distinction between Catholics and Protestants but consider only the needs of our sisters and brothers when handing out humanitarian aid. I beg you, then: let us support these works of Christian charity.

In the communities these have been days of much liturgical and catechetical creativity, as can be seen in the barrio of Lourdes, where there is a confirmation group and where tonight at seven o'clock there will be a change of pastors. I also saw great creativity in my visit to La Aldeíta, where four young men are receiving some pastoral experience under Father Gabriel, who is a fine pastoral worker. This is preparation for their priestly ordination, which will be soon.

Much enthusiasm could also be seen in the new chapel in the village of El Salitre, Tejutla, where the people are realizing that the church is not only a material edifice or a building committee but is first of all the community, without which the building means nothing at all.

The youth communities everywhere also inspire in us great hope. Today they will have, or are already having, a gathering in San José de la Montaña, which will conclude with a Mass that I will have the delight of celebrating for them.

In Aguilares preparations are underway for the celebration of the anniversary of the death of Father Grande, our first martyr in these current waves of persecution. A Mass will be celebrated there next Sunday morning at eleven o'clock, but if you can't attend because of the severe repression in that parish, I invite you to come here to the basilica. The eight o'clock Mass here next Sunday will also pay homage to Father Grande. From here we will go to Aguilares to celebrate the anniversary Mass at eleven o'clock.

Quite wonderful also is the quiet ministry of the Missionaries of Charity in Cuscatancingo. In order to save time I won't read you the wonderful letter they wrote, telling us about how they are giving testimony as true missionaries of poverty. Without being priests, they go about visiting the most needy people, not only bringing them the little material help they can, but above all helping them understand the great gift of Christ. They want people to know that poverty becomes divine when it relies on the great gift of our redemption.

Just last Sunday the Belgian Fathers in the community of Zacamil received death threats. We stand in solidarity with them, and we hope that no attempt is made on their lives. May they be inspired to continue working for our community and for our church.

At five o'clock this afternoon I will celebrate Mass in this basilica in memory of Doctor Mario Zamora. Tomorrow morning at ten o'clock I will celebrate in the cathedral the funeral Mass for the nine persons who were killed in the repression against FENASTRAS.

Finally, some news that makes us happy: YSAX is making intense efforts to get back on the air. We were hoping that it might have been possible today, but we have to be patient. I thank you very much for the donations that have arrived from many places. (Applause)

I am grateful for the other testimonies that have been published by some media, and I'm also grateful for the news about the Peace Prize that some of the media have just now brought us from Sweden<sup>4</sup>. I tell you, I'm grateful. I want to cite here a testimony of solidarity from the university newspaper. It states, «The dream of the darkest reactionary forces of our country is to drown out every voice of the people demanding and proclaiming authentic justice. By opposing the diffusion of thought with weapons and violence, they paradoxically arouse more voices and more cries expressing the deepest longing of this people that is no longer asleep but is actively building an authentic new society. The latest attack on YSAX once again made evident the great historical error of the people's enemies. (Applause) They damaged the archdiocesan radio station, and they deprived the church of an important means of communication, but the ones they harmed most were the oppressed, who are unprotected by the law. They took away from them one of the few sources of reliable information in this country, where the press is obsequious, misinformed, and oligarchic by nature». (Applause) The statement provides proper orientation by citing the thought of Medellín about those who possess much and refuse to share: «If they zealously hold on to their privileges, and especially if they defend them by violent means, then they make themselves responsible before history for provoking explosive revolutions of desperation» (M 2,17).

Regarding the thought of the church, I want to recall as well the wise observation John Paul II made to the Nicaraguan officials who visited him. He told them, «The literacy campaign is in itself deserving of all praise, provided it is planned and carried out with full respect for the rights and religious convictions of the people and, more concretely, of the parents of the pupils. This respect for the right of the Catholic family to an education that is in conformity with the faith they profess excludes imposition of concepts contrary to faith»<sup>5</sup>. This is what I have always said, and I see in the pope's statement something that I have discussed with him personally: we need to support the struggle for social justice out of love for the poor, but we have to be very careful, dear sisters and brothers, that, in pursuing the just goods of this earth, we do not forget the true Christian values of our people. Let us work hard to maintain our Christian sense of liberation. (Applause)

## **Events of the week**

Finally, we analyze what is happening around us from the perspective of the church, which is a community that seeks to make salvation history real. As we said before, the church wants to use that salvation history to shed light on the profane history of our people. That is why we cannot keep silent about social, economic, and political realities. We must illuminate them with the light of the Gospel. (Applause)

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<sup>4</sup> *El Mundo* (8 March 1980).

<sup>5</sup> JOHN PAUL II, «Meeting with Members of the Governing Junta of Nicaragua», 3 March 1980, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (9 March 1980).

Two realities have marked the life of our society this week: the repressive violence and the promulgation of the two laws decreeing structural reform, namely, agrarian reform and nationalization of the banking system.

As regards the repression, I say with sadness that it continues to prevail and that it is increasing in the country. It is horribly repressive violence that has already caused in the first two months of this year some four hundred deaths, among the six hundred victims of violence in general. I want to stress this number, six hundred, because some people have attempted to distort what I said last Sunday. As a result, *Orientación* had to print a clarification, which you can read in today's issue<sup>6</sup>. The director of *El Diario Latino* called attention to the matter with the headline: «Archbishop's Romero's Statement Contradicted»<sup>7</sup>. Spokespersons for the army, according to reporter Eduardo Vázquez Becquer, said that it was untrue that six hundred persons had been killed in encounters with the government's security forces and the extremists. I did not say that. What I said was, «Between January and February some six hundred persons have lost their lives due to the political situation»<sup>8</sup>. I maintain that position; you can count them yourselves. (Applause)

What we are talking about here is the repressive violence that can be attributed to the security forces and the Armed Forces, as well as to the right-wing paramilitary groups. I have never refrained from denouncing the violence of the left, and I will not refrain from doing so today.

The details of the repressive violence this week are terrifying. Even the national press reported the finding of fourteen bodies on Monday<sup>9</sup>. Some few have been identified, such as the student Rogelio Álvarez, who died as the result of horrible torture after being captured illegally by civilians. Also among the dead were two young students and some *campesinos* from El Paísnai.

On that same Monday night, José Trinidad Canales, a teacher at the Externado San José, was gunned down. Five civilians came with a list in their hands; they asked for the teacher and then committed the deed. There are now fourteen teachers who have been killed so far in 1980.

Also, the bodies of four *campesinos* were found after the military invaded a rural zone in Cinquera. In another incident, nineteen were killed during an attack by the National Guard. The persons killed had nothing to do with the attack; most of them were passersby.

On Tuesday, four *campesinos* were reported killed in the village of El Tule in El Paísnai, among them a twelve-year-old boy. At the same time three bodies were found at kilometer 28, near the village of San Jerónimo.

In the village of ICR of Suchitoto, about thirteen *campesinos* were killed when the village was invaded by fifty heavily armed civilians wearing bulletproof vests. They set fire to the

<sup>6</sup> *Orientación* (9 March 1980).

<sup>7</sup> *El Diario Latino* (4 March 1980).

<sup>8</sup> «Events of the week», Homily of 2 March 1980.

<sup>9</sup> *El Diario de Hoy* (3 March 1980).

houses and captured Andrés Escobar, Francisco Escobar, and Alberto Rodas. That same group of civilians also invaded the villages of Tres Ceibas, Líbano, Trapiche, and Chagüitón. They had good trucks and good military equipment.

The offices of the Revolutionary Trade Union Federation were sacked by armed civilians wearing bulletproof vests. Also, the mayor of Divisadero, Daniel Escobar, was murdered.

On Wednesday, the emaciated bodies of three workers were found in San Pablo Tacachico; they had been kidnapped in the early hours of that same day.

Four workers were captured in San Salvador: Álvaro Nerio, Rafael Contreras, Ofelia Meléndez, and Estela Romero.

On Thursday, men opened fire on the offices of FENASTRAS in Santa Ana, killing three workers. They loaded the other workers onto a truck and then threw them off as they went along the highway toward Sonsonate. The poor workers were hoping to save themselves but they were shot as they tried to escape. Their names are Roberto Rodríguez Quiñónez, José Roberto Núñez Rico, Raúl Hernández, Juan López, Víctor Juárez, Ricardo Guardado, Boanerges Solís, and Ana Mirna Figueroa. Today their bodies are in the cathedral, and tomorrow at ten o'clock we will offer a funeral Mass for them.

Ricardo Padilla, Pedro Donal Montes, and Eduardo Ortiz were other victims who were killed while (as I said) supposedly trying to escape. They were buried in Santa Ana.

Seven *campesinos* were murdered in San Antonio Mecate, Cojutepeque. All of them belonged to organizations. Other organized *campesinos* were killed in the village of Analco in Zácatecoluca, San Vicente. The bodies of three *campesinos* were found on the road to Chalatenango. The *campesinos* Juan Juárez, Julia López, Tomás Juárez, and Roberto López Hernández were captured.

And crowning this series of bloody events is the tragic case of the bodies we have here in our midst, those of Roberto Castellanos Braña, a member of the UDN, and his wife, Annette Mathiessen, a Danish citizen. I am moved by this coincidence, that while Sweden awards us a Peace Prize, a citizen of a country near Sweden is lying dead here, as if sorrowfully affirming the need to support this work for peace. (Applause)

With regard to this case I received from Costa Rica a very revealing telegram: «On Sunday, 29 February, 5:00 p.m., Roberto Castellanos, companion at our Universidad Nacional, and wife Annette Mathiessen, Danish citizen, student, were arrested by national police in El Salvador. We fraternally ask you to denounce detention and to demand government give immediate freedom. Christian Group, Universidad Nacional, Heredia, Costa Rica». We regret that our denunciation did not reach the authorities in time and that they were so quick to kill persons as valuable as the ones they have killed on this occasion. (Applause)

From La Unión comes a letter from a beloved seminarian who tells me, «Early in the morning of February 10 officers and soldiers of the army took my other brother from the house». (His brother José Eduardo Vásquez had already been disappeared, and now he's talking about his other brother, Santos Domingo Vásquez.) «Even though my mother begged them not to kill him, they opened fire on him. Again, on the morning of February 28 they

assaulted the villages of Conchagüita, Amapolita, and El Farito. They took the youth Narciso Antonio Cuevas, 22, from his home. He was having breakfast when they took him, and moments later they killed him, destroying his head with bullets. They also captured Santíos González, and along the road they met up with his brother, Martín González, who was returning from work in the port of Cutuco, La Unión, along with Victor Turcios. They seized the three of them and then killed them far from the village, on the road to El Pilón». The letter pleads for us to do something so that this horrendous repression is stopped.

The Council of Churches has also issued a denunciation that has attracted much attention here. Their telegram reads, «Concerned about prolonged detention since February 29 of student Guillermo Castro, member of First Baptist Church and member of Christian Student Movement. The National Council of Churches has been informed of his detention, and we ask to be informed of the reason for same. If there are no charges against him, we would appreciate the immediate release of our Christian brother. Eugene Stockwell, Secretary General of the Division of Ministries of National Council of Churches of the United States». I have received many pleas from the friends and companions of Guillermo, whom I know and esteem highly as one who gives much hope to El Salvador and to Christian life. Let us hope that they respect his life if they have not killed him already. May God keep that from happening.

There also arrived from the community of Playas Negras in La Unión this sad note: «Today Saturday our catechist Rubén Benítez, of the parish of La Unión, was found murdered. Last Sunday members of the National Guard were at his house asking him various questions about where he kept his weapons. We members of the Christian community of Playas Negras bear witness to the pastoral labor of our catechist. His concrete work was strictly based on the Gospel, and he followed in the footsteps of the Divine Master, handing over his life to serve the Gospel. A Judas sold him».

This is one more proof of the wave of repression in this country that has been unleashed against members of the people's organizations, such as teachers, unionists, and politicians. Don't forget that our dear deceased brother here present was a member of an officially recognized, legalized party.

The average number of persons killed daily keeps increasing, and it demonstrates that there is a firm purpose to implement a general policy aimed at violently eliminating all left-wing elements that are not in agreement with the reform project proposed by the government and backed by the United States. This is a fact that is important for understanding the meaning of the structural reforms begun this week. (Applause)

We are not silent either regarding the sins of the left, but they are proportionately less serious as regards repressive violence. The government repression cannot be justified by the actions of the political-military groups, whose victims this week were three police officers in Illobasco and three or four estate or local guards. There were no more than ten killed in all, which shows that the average was the same, one and a half per day, as in the two previous months.

There were also other left-wing actions, such as the attack on the National Guard base and other forms of harassment, but the seventy victims killed by the security forces and the so-called paramilitary groups had almost nothing to do with those attacks launched by subversives. They respond rather to a general program of annihilating members of the left,

who themselves would neither use violence nor encourage it if there did not exist the social injustice they want to do away with. (Applause)

Certainly there has been much agitation, such as burning of buses, occupations, strikes, and above all the seven-day strike decreed by ANDES because of the teachers who have been murdered. All these protests also disturb the peace, but the people who have been killed have not generally been killed for such actions.

It is in this context of death and annihilation that we must judge the two important reform measures, agrarian reform and nationalization of the banking system<sup>10</sup>. Both measures are important, and they represent at least a temporary triumph of the junta and the Armed Forces over the most oligarchic sectors of the country. Now there are not just promises and threats but the beginning of realities.

Expropriation of estates that exceed 500 hectares has already begun in the whole country. This measure, as Coronel Majano stated, «affects about 200 landholding families who, though only a quarter of one percent of the national population, own more than 300,000 *manzanas* of land»<sup>11</sup>. The properties between 100 or 150 and 500 hectares, depending on the case, are not yet affected. Those smaller than 100 or 150 hectares, which represent eight-five percent of property owners, will not be affected in any way. The affected properties will be handed over to those who work the land, and as Colonel Majano explained, there will be three forms of property: state-owned, cooperative, and private<sup>12</sup>.

We do not have time now, sisters and brothers, to evaluate this measure adequately. We cannot make a firm judgment. What we can say is that it is good insofar as it confronts the oligarchy. (Applause) This law takes possession of the land away from that minority, and they will be compensated for their land in bonds, as is just. The measure is not very drastic; it makes it clear that everything is being done according to a moderate capitalist schema. (Applause) Another good thing about the law is that, at least in principle, the benefits of the expropriated lands will go basically into the hands of those who work the lands, the wage-earning *campesinos*. The law provides that none of the workers be excluded, whether they are organized or not.

Nevertheless, serious doubts have been raised about this process, and they must be discussed frankly. Leaving aside the technical problems, which it is not my job to judge, the main doubt concerns the relation of this process to the more general plan. In other words, what do these reforms mean for the general project of the government, one of whose essential elements, as is plain today, is brutal, murderous repression, especially of those who want a different national project? There also exists the project of the Revolutionary Democratic Government<sup>13</sup>, which is beginning to be made known. (Applause) This group has the right to

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<sup>10</sup> Decreed by the Revolutionary Governing Junta on March 6 and 7 respectively. *La Prensa Gráfica* (7 and 8 March 1980).

<sup>11</sup> «Message of Colonel Adolfo Arnoldo Majano Announcing Decree No. 153 of the Governing Revolutionary Junta: Basic Law of Agrarian Reform» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (7 March 1980). The *manzana* is equal to about 1.75 acres or about 0.7 hectares.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> «Programmatic Platform for a Revolutionary Democratic Government of the Revolutionary Coordinator of the Masses», 23 February 1980, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (28 February 1980).

make its project known and to seek popular support for it. This is an alternative political project that the people's organizations should defend and should fight for politically.

But what is happening in fact is that, with the pretext of reform, they are trying to annihilate what the colonel<sup>14</sup> called «the extreme left». While the recalcitrant rightists are being reined in, they are not being repressed in the same way the leftists are. (Applause) There is injustice in the different ways that the extreme left and the extreme right are being treated. In fact, those on the extreme left are not really so extreme, as you'll see if you read the project presented by the Revolutionary Democratic Government. It is therefore necessary to take that project into account and not consider as enemies those who disagree with the official project.

On the other hand, the government should understand that even though these reforms are necessary and desirable for the majority of people, this majority has not been directly consulted. At this time the agrarian reform is being presented as a politico-military action of the Armed Forces. (Applause) Our most serious concern is that it can lead to a systematic militarization of the whole republic by militarizing the estates. (Applause) That would make it possible to control and systematize the repressive vigilance aimed mainly against the people's forces.

The reforms will not resolve the problem unless they are kept free of all forms of repression against *campesinos* and unless they receive the support of the people—both the organized and the unorganized. And if the reforms fail, they will become a new weapon that will allow the oligarchy to make a triumphant return, declaring that they alone are able to save the country. (Applause)

This criticism serves only as a warning so that what is good in these reforms is not destroyed by aspects that are dubious and dangerous. If the government's efforts are sincerely meant to benefit the people, then it is time for them to meet with the people and dialogue with them about the projects the people themselves are proposing. (Applause)

Much the same should be said about the nationalization of the banks<sup>15</sup>, although here the negative elements are not so great. As it is now proposed, the nationalization of the banks is a measure that converges with the general project of the Revolutionary Democratic Government. It delivers a clear, precise blow to the oligarchy, even stronger than that delivered by the agrarian reform. It shows that the junta's project is not in itself pro-oligarchy even if it continues to be pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist.

There are two possible problems with this reform. First, it is part of a more general project backed by the United States, one that includes massive repression. That is not good. Second, the measure runs the risk of being implemented in a way that does not help the majority of the people. Both possibilities make us very cautious. Whether these dangers are real or only possible will be seen in the way the reforms are actually implemented. If the repressive aspect is avoided and if both the agrarian reform and the nationalization of the financial system are carried out well, perhaps it will then be possible to think about ways to bring together the project of the left and the project of the government. That would be the

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<sup>14</sup> Colonel Adolfo Arnoldo Majano, member of the Revolutionary Governing Junta.

<sup>15</sup> «Decree No. 158 of the Revolutionary Governing Junta: Law of Nationalization of Credit Institutions and Savings and Loans Associations» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (8 March 1980).

ideal. We know that the project of the left is supported not only by well-known organized groups but by people who are well equipped intellectually. It needs to be taken into account.

The condition for these two projects to come together is the cessation of the repression. As long as there is repression, none of the people's forces will have enough confidence to collaborate with the government. (Applause) How dangerous is all this? You can judge for yourselves on the basis of a letter that has not been publicized but is nevertheless very revealing. It is Héctor Dada's letter of resignation addressed to the governing junta<sup>16</sup>. It reads:

On January 6 the National Convention of the Christian Democratic Party named me as a candidate to form part of the honorable Revolutionary Governing Junta. I was told to work for the strict fulfillment, in spirit and in letter, of the programmatic platform that had been presented by the Armed Forces as a condition for the participation of the Christian Democrats in the government. Once the Armed Forces had made a clear commitment to this platform and the honorable Junta had included me as a member, I took up the position with the explicit intention of carrying out the party's mandate in a thorough manner.

It is true that the problems encountered along the way have been enormous, but it is no less true that the Junta has been unable to take action against those who I believe are the primary opponents of the process and who are clearly becoming ever more entrenched in the same government structures. The effort to develop a democratic revolution is taking a path that is completely mistaken.

I will not go into further detail regarding interpretation of the events, but they offer complete and utter proof of the conclusion to which I have arrived. We have been unable to stop the repression, and those who commit acts that are not only repressive but dismissive of the Junta's authority go unpunished. (Applause) The promised dialogue with the people's organizations has not happened, and the possibility of bringing about reforms with the people's support becomes ever more distant. If I could cite just one more example, it would be the arrogant declarations of the Minister of Defense<sup>17</sup> when he contradicted a military officer of the Junta and ridiculed the demands of the PDC. Even before the high command of the Armed Forces had made any decision, he stated that there would be no changes at the command levels of the military institution, and he denied that there was any coup attempt, about which you are all informed. His arrogant attitude, like that of those who attempted the coup, will once again meet with complete impunity.

I do not believe that I have to explain further the causes that lead me to make this decision. I already expressed at length, in a note sent to the Christian Democratic Party, the reasons why I cannot continue representing that political institution at the highest level of government. Since my understanding of the facts basically contradicts the line that present leadership determines in practice, my political ethics prevents me from continuing for I know that their line will not stop the derailment of the process I have pointed out. It is for that reason that I feel obliged to present my irrevocable resignation from the position that the honorable Junta entrusted to me, with the

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<sup>16</sup> On 3 March 1980, Héctor Dada Hirezi resigned as member of the Revolutionary Governing Junta. He was replaced by José Napoleón Duarte. *El Independiente* (6 March 1980). The full text of his letter of resignation appeared in *Orientación* (16 March 1980).

<sup>17</sup> Colonel José Guillermo García.

conviction that in this way I am serving better the authentic interests of the people of El Salvador. (Applause)

Let me conclude, then, dear sisters and brothers. Pardon me for going on so long, but the life of our country is very dense! I want to tell you that Saint Paul in today's second reading recalls a Jewish tradition according to which the people thought that the rock that gave them water to drink in the desert was moving along with them. In today's epistle Paul says, «That rock was Christ» (1 Cor 10:4c). The pilgrims in the desert were already experiencing what we experience this morning: the rock is the altar, which is Christ. From that rock shine forth the hope of Israel and the hope of all peoples for redemption.

Let us therefore stay close to this rock which is Christ as we embrace these bodies before us and the pain of this family who has desired to share the Eucharist with us. Let us be thankful for the honor of having present these envoys from Sweden. And let us join with all the sorrows, the anxieties, and the hopes of the people here assembled. Let us be united to Christ, and let us follow the way that Christ has pointed out as the only path to salvation: «Be converted to the Lord. Otherwise you will all perish» (Luke 13:3). But the path of those who walk with him will lead to the encounter with the true God and to the true salvation of the people. Let it be so! (Applause)