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THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

**First Sunday of Lent
12 February 1978**

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

... of this week¹, we find ourselves in that very intense season of the liturgical year called Lent. To understand this better, let us go back a little to those Lenten celebrations of the golden era of the liturgy. In ancient Rome the people used to organize a great Lenten procession composed of three large groups of Christians. The main group was that of the catechumens, that is, those who were preparing to receive baptism on the solemn night of Holy Saturday. Lent was a time of intense preparation for baptism, by which the catechumens would rise with Christ to Christian life. The second group was the penitents, people who became aware of their grave public sins and sought God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the church. During Lent they did penance in order to receive absolution during Holy Week and thus became incorporated once again into the holy people of God. The third group consisted of the faithful, those who had their ordinary human defects but who, thanks be to God, had not betrayed God's law in any serious way and therefore asked the Lord for the grace of perseverance.

The pope and the clergy used to lead this procession of catechumens, penitents, and faithful for they too were part of this sinful humanity. Marked with ashes and clothed in penitential vestments, the people walked in procession through the diverse parts of the city in order to inspire the people of God to renewal. That is why the Second Vatican Council exhorts us to take advantage of this Lenten season; we should cultivate the rich elements of the liturgy during these forty days, especially the baptismal and penitential elements (SC 109). So let us feel that we also are joining in the procession of those preparing for baptism even though, thanks be to God, we are already baptized. On Holy Saturday we are going to renew our baptismal commitment in a new liturgy. We should take advantage of the Lenten season to study our faith and become more immersed in this Christianity which we entered by our baptism. If we have sins that we lament, if we have disobeyed God's law, if we have betrayed Christian morals, then let us use this time of Lent to purify ourselves so that we become living members of this people of God who desire to reflect the infinite holiness of God. We are going to speak about this more in depth as we reflect on the readings that the word of God offers us today.

Events of the week

¹ The *Vox Panamericana*, radio station of the archdiocese, was interfered with during the transmission of this homily so that it is difficult to hear some parts. There are also some abrupt interruptions during the recording, which are marked by brackets.

But before that I want to frame this special time of the liturgical year called Lent within the concrete events of the week, as I usually do. In this regard, sisters and brothers, I want to refer to two events that occurred here in the capital.

At noon on Tuesday a group of workers and *campesinos*, most of them relatives of the workers on strike at the Izalco factory, entered the cathedral, closed it up, and occupied it. The following day, Wednesday afternoon, another group with the same motivation entered the church of El Calvario and also closed it in order to occupy it. Both groups wanted to dialogue with the archbishop, and I provided them this opportunity. I learned that their objectives were to show their support for this strike and to ask for the release of their imprisoned relatives who they said had been abused by the authorities.

During the dialogue I expressed to them what I now want to tell you publicly. On the one hand, I criticized the improvised character of these actions and stated that this act of occupying a church was serious and not to be undertaken lightly. When done too spontaneously, such acts lose much of their effectiveness and can cause frustration. I said that it would be better for them to leave the churches, and I promised to commit myself personally, as I'm doing now, to affirming my solidarity with the just demands that our people at times express with words and in forms that are ineffective. And so it was that both groups left the churches peacefully. I witnessed their departure from the churches, and I observed the respect they gave those places.

But I also want to share with you a further reflection concerning an event I want to announce. Yesterday I drove the Guadalupana Sisters to Arcatao where they will be ministering to the people since no priest lives there. At the conclusion of our religious ceremony there was a demonstration that was led by the Popular Revolutionary Bloc². Because of these events I simply want to repeat what I've said many times: the church is independent of all political groups even when they have very legitimate aims. The church can offer support when their claims are just but she does so without identifying with the objectives and ideals of these groups. I believe they are [...] ³

I want to tell you that the groups which undertake such initiatives are not properly church organizations, and the church exhorts Christians who become part of these groups to remain faithful to the church's teaching. The church teaches that people's legitimate desire for freedom very often brings with it the temptation to violence and desperation, but the church cannot approve, much less justify, violent acts. At the same time, the church cannot condemn them without first doing a serious analysis of the causes that provoke these actions. Pope Paul VI, when he traveled to Bogotá, spoke these words which inspire the church's action: «Many historical crises could have been avoided if with valiant self-sacrifice the necessary reforms had been put in place, reforms that could have avoided desperate revolutionary explosions»⁴.

² The Popular Revolutionary Bloc (BPR) was a social organization which brought together the Christian Federation of Salvadoran *Campesinos* (FECCAS) and the Union of Rural Workers (UTC) as well as other organizations of teachers, students, slum dwellers, and workers which were involved in the struggles during the decade of the seventies.

³ There was an interruption in the recording.

⁴ PAULVI, «Allocution at the Mass on Development Day in Bogotá», 23 August 1968. The citation is not exact, but it captures faithfully the pope's thought: «Do not forget that certain great crises in history could have had their direction changed if the necessary reforms requiring valiant sacrifices had in timely manner prevented revolutions of desperation from exploding».

This is what we have always said, dear sisters and brothers. When the church decries revolutionary violence, she cannot forget that institutionalized violence also exists and that the desperate violence of oppressed persons cannot be repressed with one-sided laws, with arms, or with superior force. As the pope says, revolutionary violence can be prevented only by courageous sacrifice and renunciation of many comforts. As long as there is not greater justice among us, there will always be outbreaks of revolution. The church does not approve or justify bloody revolution and cries of hatred, but neither can she condemn⁵ them as long as there is no attempt to remove the causes that produce the great distress in our society. This is the church's position for which she must suffer terrible conflicts, but she feels that in preaching this she is being faithful to God's justice and the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

My sisters and brothers, I want to make a necessary clarification here: the Salvadoran ambassador to the Holy See has authorized me to tell you that in the foreign ministry a false rumor concerning the archbishop is being propagated. It is being said that I have placed a condition on dialogue with the president, namely, that this dialogue must take place outside the country. I want to tell you, sisters and brothers, that this is completely false. Knowing that I can speak directly with the president here, I would be foolish to say that the two of us must leave the country in order to dialogue. What would be the point? And what is behind this false rumor? Again we see attempts to distort the church's attitudes and malign her intentions. The church seeks an environment of trust that is guaranteed by actions that serve and respect our beloved people.

Church events

I want to refer now, sisters and brothers, to church events during this Lent. I want to join with you in thanking the Lord for the clergy meeting we had on Tuesday, where the work of the base ecclesial communities was analyzed. These are Christian groups that come together to reflect on the Bible; they create among us a church that is more human, more aware, and more engaged in dialogue with the people. At the end of this year, God willing, we priests would like to celebrate a congress of the base communities. At this time I want to commend all those who are working in this way. And I make [...] of the Gospel to create among us a culture that inspires us [...] this afternoon at 6:00 o'clock will take possession [...] ⁶

I had the pleasure of greeting the superior general of the Josephites who administer the Holy Family Parish in Colonia Centroamérica. I take this opportunity to thank and commend the Josephite Fathers who are doing so much good in our archdiocese.

I also have news about religious life. This week the Sisters of the Assumption celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of their school ministry in the Lourdes neighborhood. As we celebrated the Eucharist we gave thanks to God for the enormous change that this presence of the church has made in that important sector of our people. We are grateful for the ministry of the Sisters of the Assumption and their collaborators, teachers, and benefactors.

As I mentioned, we traveled yesterday with the Guadalupana Sisters to Arcatao. Through this broadcast I want to express my warm greeting and gratitude to the people of

⁵ The verb is obscured in the tape, but «condemn» seems the most likely one since a little earlier he expressed the same idea using that verb.

⁶ There were interruptions in the recording.

Arcatao for the reception they gave us. Sisters and brothers, I wish all of you could have experienced what was really a kind of Palm Sunday. So many people and *campesinos* traveled up to three hours in order to be with us at this beautiful moment in the history of Arcatao. The valiant discourse of their representative Don Ernesto (I don't remember his last name) gave expression to the people's support of the bishop and their gratitude for the presence of the church there. I also want to greet and congratulate the sisters who are present there in the name of the church.

There is a change of superiors in the Good Shepherd community. Yesterday the Carmelite Missionaries celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of their founding, which is actually March 8. A procession in honor of our Lady of Lourdes was organized with the participation of their alumnae from the school of the grotto and other collaborators. After the procession there was a beautiful ceremony in which many sick people were anointed and heard the Christian message about the value of patiently bearing with illness. When the ceremony was concluded, some people in good health expressed their gratitude for the hope that the church offers to those who are suffering, for she tells those who feel useless in society that their pain and suffering, offered in solidarity with Christ on the cross, is precisely what saves the world.

I want to congratulate the lay people who attended the meeting in Costa Rica whose aim was to prepare for lay participation in the third general conference of the Latin American bishops, which will take place in October in Puebla, Mexico. I also want to announce that the commission on the laity, with the authorization of the archbishop, is working in the department of Cuscatlán to develop lay ministry in all the parishes of that vicariate. While speaking about the laity, I want to tell you that I was filled with joy as I traveled through Chalatenango yesterday and saw the way in which these communities have flourished, mainly through the ministry of our dear lay people. In fact, another course of catechesis will be offered from February 14 to March 15 to help prepare people to bring the Christian message to all the communities [...].

As I conclude these announcements, I want to refer to something very important, namely, the campaign of voluntary sacrifice. Here beside the main altar are some posters that will be used during this week to invite our people to join this campaign against world hunger by voluntarily depriving themselves of something. Let us contribute some amount, even if it is out of our poverty, to alleviate the hunger of our sisters and brothers. My sisters and brothers, hunger is a tremendous reality even in our own society. Our love for Christ ought to make us feel the needs of our suffering sisters and brothers as our own, and so next Sunday we will take up a special collection to help those who suffer hunger in our world.

Finally, I want to extend a warm invitation to all of you, whom I consider my sisters, brothers, and friends, to accompany me next Tuesday evening at 7:00 o'clock here in the cathedral, where I will receive an honorary doctorate from Georgetown University. As I told you before, I do not want to receive this honor for myself. Rather, I want to feel that this honor and commendation is being conferred not on an individual but on this church that is composed of all my beloved priests, religious, and lay people, for they all are all striving to make the church's teaching real in our midst. As I said yesterday in Arcatao, the Gospel becomes incarnate when we experience and respond to people's needs. This is how I view the honor that is to be conferred upon me—the honor is for all of you and is meant to encourage everyone who works for a more just order in the world.

These, then, are our thoughts for today's homily, sisters and brothers. Lent has changed the face of the liturgical year. It interrupts Ordinary Time, and like a great university it invites all God's people to enroll in a course in salvation history, not just in theory but as something in which we participate by our lives. This history of salvation finds its culmination in Christ, but it had its origin in Adam and is prolonged in us through Christ. These are the three points of today's homily: the two protagonists of salvation history, Adam and Christ, with one objective: the people, all of us, the whole of humanity.

Salvation history had its origin in Adam

Today's first reading takes us back to the origins of history, the first man and the first woman from whom the whole human race descends. It is interesting to see how creation and nature form the first chapter of salvation history. The redemption that Christ brings later is the second chapter, and we are part of that whole history. We read today in Genesis about the love with which God created the world in order to hand it over to humankind. Human beings are the reason for creation to exist. The human person, made in the image of God, is the owner of creation. All created things are for humankind. This is the original idea of God's plan: the human person called to collaborate with God. The Bible graphically presents God as breathing the spirit of life into a man who is formed out of clay. He is a being created by the breath of God. He is the image of God because he has been made intelligent and capable of love. Extending his creating hand over all things, God says, «Everything is yours» (Gen 2:7). We should not forget this gesture of creation. All creation exists for humankind, and human beings are created by God's love to be owners and rulers of all things that exist.

The second part of the reading from Genesis recounts for us the regrettable response of humankind. Looking for the road to happiness, Eve disobeyed God, and then she seduced Adam to follow her on the road of disobedience. At that point human history takes on a different aspect: the human race falls into sinfulness. Yet Adam, despite his disobedience, became the father of a family, the protagonist of all humankind. We must keep these origins in mind in order to understand the points we are going to make. But first let us focus on the other protagonist of salvation, for that is the second point of this homily.

Salvation history culminates in Christ

Christ, the second Adam, the Son of God who became incarnate in the womb of Mary, comes into the world wanting to assume total responsibility for the human race, including our disobedience to God and beginning with the disobedience in Paradise. Christ's redemption is achieved only through a heroic, divine act of obedience. Through obedience he becomes incarnate, through obedience he accepts the cross, and through obedience we see him today in the desert. At the beginning of Lent, the eyes of Christians should be fixed on that Christ who is fasting for forty days and nights. The gospel tells us that he was «led by the Spirit» (Matt 4:1), the Spirit of obedience.

The Son of Man, as representative of all humankind, knows that men and women are in a state of fallen nature and need to be raised up. Christ comes as a great restorer. That is what «redeemer» means: «savior». And to save the world, to restore and redeem this fallen race, it is necessary that the Lord's will be accomplished. That is why today's gospel shows us Christ being tempted by the devil, for it was by temptation that the first human beings fell and

deprived all humanity of grace. Temptation is necessary so that the Son of Man can give us an example, teaching us that happiness will be found by being obedient to the will of the Lord and not by following the deceitful words of the devil.

How easy it would have been for Christ to use his power and change the stones into bread! He was hungry, and it would have been easy for him to fill his stomach by changing the stones into bread. But Jesus knows that his messianic role means not abusing his power to perform miracles in order to satisfy his own needs. Note well that the three temptations in the desert are temptations to use power contrary to the will of God. Christ subordinates his power when he says, «It is written that not by bread alone does one live» (Matt 4:4). It is preferable to die of hunger rather than spurn the nourishment that comes from God: the word of the Lord.

This is the true nourishment for Christian people: the word of God. In this desert experience that marks the beginning of Christ's ministry, we find homage being given to the word of God. Christ himself applauds us as we reflect at this time on the word of God. This is what human beings live by—it is not that we ignore bread, but it is not to be preferred to the word of God. Don't be idolaters of your stomach. Don't betray the convictions of your faith for the sake of a position in society or in politics. Don't betray them! This is what the Lord teaches us!

The devil attempts to seduce Jesus a second time. Notice that this new Adam is restoring humanity. He is not looking for some easy, spectacular way to do this but wants to walk the path of humility and reparation. The devil sets Jesus on the parapet of the temple, from which can be seen the crowds in the magnificent atrium of the temple. The devil tempts Jesus to vanity by saying, «Look, throw yourself down from here because it is written that "he will bid his angels to take care of you so that you may never stumble on a stone", and the people will acclaim you as the Son of God! Look at the multitude that will applaud you when you make this gesture!» (Matt 4:6). Then Christ, with the serenity of one obedient to God rather than to the devil, says, «It is also written»—in Deuteronomy—«that you shall not put the Lord your God to the test» (Matt 4:7; Deut 6:13).

My sisters and brothers, there are many people deceived by easy messianic promises; there are devotees of revolution who seek to establish a new order by doing violence; and there are those who betray God in their desire for applause and celebrity. Let them behold this magnificent response of Jesus Christ: «Do not tempt God». More valuable is the road of humility and simplicity, the road of duty and love, the road of prayer, the road of justice, the road of the Gospel. Do not follow the road of spectacle. Here Christ denounces and overcomes another temptation of power, the power that seeks to use great spectacles to win votes and the applause of others, even if by deception. The people are not redeemed that way. People are not redeemed by tempting or provoking God, for God is present in the people—he is always present.

Finally, the third temptation of this second Adam takes place not in Paradise but in that austere environment of the desert, where he must pay for the licentious and dissolute way we have offended God. The gospel tells us that in the third temptation Jesus sees in a moment—as in some cinematographic vision—all the kingdoms of the world pass before him. The devil tells him, «Look, all this is mine. I will bestow it on you if you prostrate yourself in homage before me» (Matt 4:9). What an incredible temptation is experienced by those who say that they have made a deal with the devil! It is the temptation of power, the temptation to see great parades

with cannons and weapons, the temptation to stand before great masses of people who assemble not out of conviction but for personal advantage, often just to fill their stomachs with bread. Christ despises such cheap applause and tells the devil, «Away with you, for it is written, "You shall serve the Lord your God, and him alone shall you adore"» (Matt 4:10). This is the great response of Christians who want to be protected against the ready temptations of the world: adore the Lord. We have one Lord, our Lord and God, and him alone must we serve and adore. His law is the norm for my life; his will is the design of my existence. I cannot travel on other roads that are contrary to the will and the service of the Lord.

Jesus is the second protagonist and the primary one of salvation history. The commentaries say that Saint Matthew wrote these pages thinking of the symbolic significance of Christ for the church in future centuries. It is not precisely the divine person of Christ who is tempted in such an insolent way by the devil; rather, it is the Christ who is prolonged in history through the church. It is the church that will suffer these temptations. Bishops, priests, religious, and Catholic institutions will have to suffer these tremendous temptations of power. Instead of carrying out our messianic saving mission in humility, austerity, and sacrifice, we will want to find support in power and money and well-being. How many times has our poor church fallen into this temptation!

We want to save the authentic church from this failing of seeking prestige in people's applause or relying on easy triumphs. We want Christianity to find its support in the same way Christ did: in the word of God. May the church never betray the truth of the divine word, no matter what advantages she is offered. May the church know how to deal with her own hunger, her own weakness, her own duplicity. She should not see these as signs of failure, as though she were waiting for better days. The better days are now, these days when we find our support in Christ and make the word of God the center of our faith. Our power does not consist in performing miracles or seeking support in the spectacular or triumphal. Our power is in simple fulfillment of our duty, in simple faith in the word of God. This is the redemption that Christ offers us.

The history of salvation is prolonged in us

Therefore, sisters and brothers, my last thought, the third idea of this homily, is that all of us are identified with these two protagonists, Adam and Christ. Saint Paul tells us in the second reading that each and every person experiences a double solidarity. All of us here are able to understand this reflection. We are intelligent, free, and capable of love. We have many human skills for organizing a business, for being professionals, for being politicians or merchants. We are all human beings who have received from Adam these capacities of intelligence and organization and worldly prestige. As descendants of Adam, our human abilities are an inheritance that comes to us from that breath of God that is the life of humanity.

For this reason, sisters and brothers, we humans in our pride are often satisfied with nothing more than solidarity with Adam, with the natural breath of God. But there is a second solidarity that few understand: we are also in solidarity with Christ. Paul tells us today that our solidarity with Adam makes us all sinners, a failed and fallen race, even though we have not lost the spark of intelligence or other natural gifts. Our nature would be fallen if it were not for Christ who is constituted the protagonist of redemption. Only those descendants of Adam who also enter into solidarity with Christ can become the human race that God desires: Christianity.

Christ is the second Adam, and no one can belong to this family of God except by being incorporated into this second Adam.

Now we understand the meaning of Lent in the church. Lent is more than the reform of customs and the practice of penance. It is above all a theology. It is the theology of those who want to discover the meaning of their baptism. Lent helps me realize that my baptism puts my life in solidarity with Christ who gave me a share in his death and resurrection by baptism. That is why we want baptism to be administered with greater awareness. Baptism is not just another social event: «I want Father or Bishop So-and-so to baptize my child». «I want Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so to be the godparents». All of this is a social concern, and it is fine, but the main thing is to meet with your humble pastor before the ceremony so that he can explain the significance of baptism. Children do not receive their dignity through their godparents or because they are descendants of Adam. Children receive their dignity because baptism incorporates them into Christ who died. Baptism is a participation in this death. But Christ rose, so that baptism is also participation in this eternal life of the resurrection.

Lent should remind us of this great dignity of Christians, a dignity we carry with us through our lives thanks to our parents who had us baptized as children. We did not understand what it meant then, but now the church celebrates Lent each year so that we become more conscious of our baptism. We are no longer children; we are adults, we are professionals, we are university professors, we are men and women involved in business and politics. What is the meaning of our baptism? Ah! It means we cannot live with just those qualities that make us like Adam; we must live as persons belonging to Christ. Otherwise we are not saved, no matter how brilliantly we shine in the eyes of the world.

That is what Lent is, a theological reminder of the reality that incorporates us into Christ and makes us live in solidarity with Christ the Redeemer, with the Son of God who brings the life of God so that all who believe in him will be saved. It is not enough, then, to be a descendant of Adam and to feel the powerful breath of natural life. This breath must, through baptism, enter into solidarity and become one reality with Christ. If unhappily we have lost this solidarity with Christ, then there is the second aspect of Lent, penance. Since we are already baptized, we are not among the group of Lenten pilgrims who are catechumens, but we have not been faithful to our belonging to Christ. We therefore want to wash away this betrayal with penance, repentance, and fasting. We want to show that happiness is not to be found where Adam and Eve sought it, on the paths that are not God's ways. Rather, happiness is found on the paths of Christ who overcomes the temptations of the world.

Let us celebrate, then, dear sisters and brothers, this Eucharist of the First Sunday of Lent with a great desire to revive in ourselves the life Christ has given us. Let us revive our Christian enthusiasm as we approach Holy Week and Easter and celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ. Let us stand now and proclaim our faith.