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Lent as God's Plan for Transfiguring the Peoples through Christ

**Second Sunday of Lent
2 March 1980**

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 9:28-36

Dear sisters and brothers present here in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart and dear sisters and brothers who are in communion with us on this Second Sunday of Lent through our friendly sister station in Costa Rica, Radio Noticias del Continente.

First of all, receive a fraternal greeting from this very word of God which sheds light on the reality of our people. (Applause) Since we now, thank God, can rely on such valuable collaboration, we ask our friends from outside our country to try to understand us and to show us their solidarity, above all in their prayer to the Jesus of whom the eternal Father said this morning, «This is the chosen one, the Son in whom I delight. Listen to him!» (Luke 9:35). My words have no other aim than to be a humble echo of this word of God that becomes incarnate in Christ as a guiding light for all peoples. He is the one whom we most urgently need to listen to, as God has commanded us.

Since Lent prepares us to celebrate the feast of our redemption, our observance of Lent cannot disregard the concrete circumstances in which Christians and others celebrate this very meaningful season. We are celebrating redemption, which means the same as liberation and salvation, and liberation is precisely what our people need. (Applause) Our preparation for Holy Week and Easter—when we celebrate the mystery of human redemption—is so profoundly inserted into the history of our Salvadoran people that we can truly say that Lent and Holy Week are made for us. They are the celebration of our own redemption!

Today's gospel presents to us a transfigured Christ who displays in his person the redemption of humanity, the hope of the nations. This scene of the transfiguration is related by Luke as a preamble to Jesus' going up to Jerusalem. «He was speaking of his passion», the gospel tells us (Luke 9:31), and that should say something to all of us. The road to redemption follows the way of the cross; the road of resurrection is also the road of Calvary. All the blood shed by our people must be united to the blood of Christ that is being poured out along this sorrowful trail.

This Lent, which we celebrate amid blood and sorrow, must foreshadow the transformation of our people, the resurrection of our nation. That is why the church urges us to give a modern meaning to the ancient Christian practices of penance, prayer, and fasting by adapting them to the situation of the people. Fasting during Lent is not the same in countries

where people eat well as it is among our malnourished peoples of the Third World who are forever fasting in an unending Lent.

For those who eat well, Lent is a call to austerity, a call to be generous in sharing with those in need. (Applause) But in poor countries and in homes where people are hungry, Lent should be celebrated as a way of infusing people's sacrifices with the redemptive meaning of the cross. That does not mean false conformity, which God does not want, but it does mean feeling in our living flesh the consequences of sin and injustice so that we are moved to work for social justice and to show true love for the poor. (Applause)

So Lent should awaken in us a sense of social justice. Let us therefore celebrate our Lent in this way, by giving to our sufferings, our bloodshed, and our sorrows the same value that Christ gave to his condition of poverty, oppression, abandonment, and injustice, and thus transforming it all into the saving cross that redeems the world and all people. Let us also, with hatred for no one, be converted so that we can give spiritual and material aid, despite our own poverty, to those who are perhaps even more needy than we.

In this regard, this Sunday begins the Week of Voluntary Sacrifice. I have asked Refugio Álvarez, one of the main promoters of this work, to speak at the end of the homily about the Christian ideal of transforming our faith in Jesus Christ into the practice of charity and love.

In this regard also, we enjoy reading letters from the Christian communities, such as this one that came from La Laguna in the department of Chalatenango: «Through this means we, the Christian communities of Laguna want to express our solidarity with the communities of Las Vueltas, Chalatenango. We offer them our moral and economic support, as well as lodging in our humble homes in accord with our possibilities. At the same time we condemn the ruthless persecution they are suffering at the hands of the security forces and right-wing organizations. We likewise condemn and repudiate those horrible crimes as a violation of human rights, which in this country are not at all respected. We also express our solidarity with them in denouncing the murders that are being committed in those localities in an unscrupulous and barbaric manner». This is a splendid message, for which I thank you and congratulate you. This is how our Christian life should be!

Another gesture of Lenten solidarity that echoes the truth of Christ is evident in this wonderful letter from the people of Potonico, who lament the bombing of our radio station YSAX. They say that it makes them feel that «the saboteurs have cut off the pastor's tongue and destroyed the ears of us who used to listen to him with such great delight». And despite their meager means they offer their support so that soon our dead—or murdered—YSAX may rise again with more vigor than before. (Applause)

Joined as we are to the figure of the transfigured Christ, dear sisters and brothers, let us present our reflection for this Sunday. Our theme will be «Lent as God's Plan for Transfiguring the Peoples through Christ». I synthesize my thoughts on this Sunday of the Lord's transfiguration in this way: Lent reveals to us God's powerful and loving plan to transfigure the peoples and save them from all their miseries, injustices, and sins so that they will be transformed by the beauty and justice and holiness of Christ himself. (Applause) As usual, I will develop this idea with the following three reflections: first, the transfigured Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the history of Israel; second, in the transfigured Christ, God offers the

peoples a plan of integral liberation; and third, the transfigured Christ is the anticipated presence of the definitive liberation beyond history.

The transfigured Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the history of Israel

My first reflection, then, is that the transfigured Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the history of Israel. The history of Israel is an essential element in our Lenten catechesis because Israel was the nation, among all the nations of the world, which God chose to make his own. By liberating Israel, God wanted to give a foretaste of the liberation that he would then offer in Christ to all the world's peoples.

Israel was meant to be a model for salvation history so that after Christ salvation history would become part of the histories of all peoples. That is why during Lent all Christians must go back to the history of Israel. From what God foreshadowed in the Old Testament we must learn everything that God wants to do today with all the world's peoples.

Accordingly, today's first reading tells us that salvation history began with Abraham, the patriarch and father of the whole of that nation. Until the time of Abraham, the history of the natural world was like a canvas which a painter was preparing so that he could draw on it a marvelous picture called «salvation history». Against the backdrop of the universal history of the world, God began with that lowly Hebrew man, Abraham, to weave the marvel of salvation history that would eventually intertwine all the histories of the entire world.

God made Abraham two promises, according to the custom of those ancient peoples. First, he made him look at the stars: «Behold the stars, and count them if you can, for the people who descend from you will be as numerous as the stars» (Gen 15:5). Someone might say that God was joking with Abraham, who was already old and sterile and had no children. Yet he was promising him a people, descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. God also made him this promise: «I am going to give you this land. Here will dwell that nation that is going to be born of your loins» (Gen 15:7). Abraham was a pilgrim of history, wandering among peoples who were not his own. He was a man without homeland, without native soil, and yet God told him, «I am going to make you a numerous people, and this will be their country, their homeland».

Naturally Abraham asked God, «How will I know that this will come true?» (Gen 15:8). In response God ordered him to perform that ancient rite used for oaths and promises: «Bring some animals, and split them in two» (Gen 15:9-10). The custom was that, when an agreement was being made, the swearing parties would pass between the two parts of the dismembered animal, as if to say that they should be treated like that slain beast if they did not observe the oath they had made. The Bible then tells us that at sunset Abraham entered into a «deep sleep», similar to what happened to Adam when the first woman was created (Gen 2:21). Even in his sleep, Abraham could see God passing among the parts of the animals in the form of a smoking brazier and a flaming torch (Gen 15:12,17). Thus he understood that it was God himself who was taking the customary oath, declaring that his words were not false and that the twofold promise—of a great and numerous nation and of a promised land—would be fulfilled in due course.

In this way was the people of Israel born: in an alliance with God, who asked a man for faith. The chief characteristic of the alliance would be faith, and that is why Abraham is not

only the father of the Jews who would populate that land but also the father of the new Israel, the Christianity born precisely by faith. If we Christians believe, then we are children of Abraham. We are counted among his numerous progeny, like stars in the heavens. And like the heavenly stars, this tribe born of faith will never end. No one can do away with Christians in the world! (Applause)

But we also said that this long history of Israel had a goal, an end, a fulfillment. God's reason for choosing Abraham and promising him a land and a people blessed by the Lord was so that «all peoples would be blessed» in his descendants (Gen 22:18). These words explain the existence of Christ. As a man, Christ was a son of Abraham and of all his descendants. Mary, the virgin chosen by God to give the Son of God flesh, was an Israelite, a daughter of Abraham. She was the flower which would yield the final goal, the glory of all the history of Israel: Jesus Christ our Lord.

In today's gospel we see two outstanding figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, the great legislator of the people and the great prophet of the people. We also see this great truth that we are trying to understand: that the transfigured Christ, standing between Moses and Elijah, is the fulfillment of the whole of Israel's history. Moses and Elijah, the patriarchs and the prophets—that whole braid of gold that God was weaving in the history of Israel—had one objective: to bring us the Redeemer, to have the Son of God made man born of that race.

But the Son of God made man is seen here between the two great figures representing the two great Lents of Israel. The Lent of Moses consisted of the forty years crossing the desert to reach the Promised Land; it also consisted of the forty days and forty nights when Moses spoke with God on Mount Sinai before bringing the Decalogue down to his people. And the Lent of Elijah came when he grew weary of life because he was persecuted by the people. He went on pilgrimage and wanted to end his life: «I am no better than my ancestors. Send me death!» He lay down next to a bush in the desert and waited for death, but a mysterious angel roused him and told him, «Eat!» He was given mysterious bread, with which God nourished him, and he was told, «Walk, because you still have much life ahead of you». So he walked forty days through the desert until he found himself again at Mount Sinai (1 Kgs 19:4-8).

At Sinai Elijah experienced another theophany. He felt a hurricane wind, but God was not in the wind. He felt the earth shake, but God was not in the earthquake. Finally, a gentle breeze was felt, and this told him: «God is passing» (1 Kgs 19:11-13). That is how God speaks in the intimacy of prayer; that is how the Lord dialogues with us, person to person. God may appear as a strong hurricane or an earthquake when he is punishing the sins and injustices of the people, but he is gentle and tender with the prophets who must announce dreadful news to those who don't want to be converted.

Situated thus between the two Lents of Moses and Elijah, the great protagonist of the Christian Lent, Christ our Lord, revealed that all those earlier theophanies were happening right there. No longer was the voice of the Father being heard in the clouds or in the splendor of Sinai or in the mysterious voices of the natural elements. It was being heard now in Christ himself. Christ, the plain and humble son of the Virgin, was the glory of God present on earth, but he had, hidden within himself, the fullness of divinity. At that moment of transfiguration, Christ our Lord appeared as a cloud that encompassed God. Refulgent with God's glory, he disclosed the great secret of what he held hidden inside himself. Then was heard from heaven a voice that declared who this man was who had come into history: «He is my Son, the chosen

one. Listen to him!» (Luke 9:35). This is the great revelation. Blessed are we Christians who don't have to wait for Christ as the Israelites did, for we have seen him present in our history.

Christ was talking with Moses and Elijah about a sorrowful event: the passion. Saint Luke tells us that they spoke of his exodus, of his leaving this world. That leaving would be on the cross, humiliating and painful, but it would lead to resurrection in glory and an Easter that would never end. This is the sign for all the peoples God loves: birth pangs are suffered because they will produce new generations, new peoples. Let us do our best, sisters and brothers, to keep Christ in the middle of our people's movement. Let us do our best to keep Christ from taking leave of our history. That is what is most important at this moment in our country: that Christ be the power and the glory of God and that the scandal of pain and the cross not make us flee from Christ. Let us not shun suffering but embrace it! (Applause)

In the transfigured Christ, God offers the peoples a plan of integral liberation

In Christ God offers the peoples a plan of integral liberation. This is my second reflection for today. This is the time of political projects in El Salvador, but political projects are worthless unless they reflect the project of God. It is not the mission of the pastor or of the church to enter into competition with those projects by proposing still another one. Our mission as children of God, undertaken with the autonomy and freedom of the Gospel, is to point out and encourage whatever is good in each project and to condemn and discourage whatever is bad. (Applause)

We see God's project represented by Christ on the holy mountain, transfigured as the model for humanity. We hear the voice from heaven exalting him, «This is my Son, the chosen one. Listen to him!» (Luke 9:35). The project of God must prevail over all human projects if they are to be truly human and not anti-human. (Applause) The church must always keep the human person in sight. This is the star that guides her along the way. She is often misunderstood and often maligned because many people want to make their earthly projects prevail. All the church is concerned about is the human being, the child of God, and that is why she grieves over all human corpses being found, over the torture of human beings, over the suffering of human beings. For the church the goal of all projects must be this great project of God: the human being. Every person is a child of God, and in every person killed the church venerates a sacrificed Christ.

In today's readings God reveals to us the two great goals of his project: to free us from something and to move us toward something. The goals of God's project are to promote something, to remove injustice, to eliminate sin, to save humankind from evil. In sin is to be found the cause of all the injustices that take place in history. (Applause) That is why there cannot be true liberation as long as human beings are not liberated from sin. (Applause) This must be kept in mind by all the liberation groups that arise in our country: the first liberation that must be sought by any political grouping that truly wants to liberate the people must be freeing ourselves from our own sins. As long as we are slaves of sin, of selfishness, of violence, of cruelty, of hatred, we are not fit for liberating the people. (Applause)

The Father made his mercy and his love present to us in Christ, giving him human flesh, because he wanted that human flesh of Christ to be one day nailed to the cross as payment for sin and as a sign of what sin means to God. That is what sin is: it is death. Wherever there is death there is sin. Death is the clear sign that sin reigns. It is frightening to think how many

deaths there are in this country, how many sacred roads of our land have been soaked with human blood. Sin reigns in El Salvador, and that is where the liberators of El Salvador have to begin, by rooting sin out of our soil. This is the project of God. That is where God's project begins. All political projects must take into account sin, injustice, the maintenance of social injustice, the enthronement of sin, and the rejection of God. Without God there can be no liberation, and where there is sin God cannot be. The projects that seek only to preserve scandalous privileges cannot be from God. (Applause)

This is the negative goal of redemption: Christ came to save us from sin. And we cost him dearly! During Lent let us not forget his great pain and suffering. The crucified Christ is preaching to me personally, and before I can lecture or criticize others, I have to look at myself, for I also have driven nails into Christ with my sins. I am in need of liberation myself, and only Christ can redeem me and free me from my own conscience in order to make me a child of God.

But the second, positive, and truly marvelous goal of redemption is that we human beings, once freed from sin, are raised up to the dignity of God's children: «This is my child» (Luke 9:35). There is nothing more beautiful than this. Our conscience itself feels relieved when we are in God's grace, having escaped from sins that perhaps caused us to be disgusted and appalled by ourselves. Forgive my bluntness, sisters and brothers, but who among us has not felt disgusted with sin? Let us hope that from now on all of us here will be able to say that we have experienced the joy of redemption. True progress is feeling that we are children of God, forgiven by God, heirs of God, sisters and brothers of Christ, an eternal race.

Standing on the heights of Tabor, Christ is a magnificent image of liberation. That's how God wants us to be: freed from sin and death and hell, and living his eternal, immortal, glorious life. This is our destiny. Talking about heaven is not something alienating; it motivates us to undertake our great responsibilities on earth more seriously and more passionately. Nobody does the earthly work of seeking the people's political liberation with more enthusiasm than those who hope that all the liberation struggles of history will be incorporated into the great victory of Christ's liberation. For as the Council says, we know that everything that we promote in the world—justice, peace, loving words, appeals to sanity—we will later find transfigured in the beauty of our eternal reward.

Christ, therefore, is the model of God's plan of liberation. I don't want to abuse your patience, but I have here a beautiful passage from the Puebla document that follows the schema of John Paul II when he inaugurated the bishops' meeting in Puebla. The document brings together the three great theologies of our Latin America: the theology of Christ, the theology of the church, and the theology of the human person. I recommend that you study the section on the human person, especially those of you who have social and political concerns. Be sure to read these pages, and even more study them, because no one can be a good politician or a good social strategist if the human person is not taken into account. The church has much to say about the human condition in the Latin American continent, especially when she views that sad parade of faces described by Puebla: the faces of landless *campesinos*, maltreated and murdered by powerful forces; the faces of workers arbitrarily dismissed, left without income to support their homes; the faces of the elderly, the faces of the marginalized, the faces of the slum dwellers, the faces of poor children who from their infancy begin to feel the cruel sting of social injustice (P 31-39). (Applause) It seems that for all of these there is no future; for them there are no schools or colleges or universities. By what right have we catalogued people into first-

class and second-class human beings when the theology of the human person teaches us that there is only one class, that of the children of God? (Applause)

In today's second reading Saint Paul tells us about this Christ in whom God offers us the project of true liberation. Opposed to the followers of Christ, he says, are «the enemies of the cross of Christ» (Phil 3:18). They seek only earthly benefits and aspire only to earthly things: «Their god is their belly, and their glory is their shame» (Phil 3:19). These harsh words are used by Saint Paul to disparage the projects of history that pursue only temporal goods. Paul presents instead the great project of God, which he wants to infuse into earthly projects so they become part of the great divine project. God is telling us that from the time of Christ's resurrection we Christians are inhabitants of eternity. We continue our pilgrimage and our work on this earth because we must give an account of it to God, but our definitive homeland is there, where Christ is living always and where we will be happy with him, the great liberated One. The truly liberated persons and peoples will be those who have made their own what Saint Paul calls «the power by which Christ subjects all things to himself» (Phil 3:21).

We are not weak, sisters and brothers, when as Christians we speak about our faith in Christ. No one is as strong as those Christians who have faith in the Christ who lives with the power of God. What leader of humanity can tell all his followers that he lives eternally? What conqueror of the world can show all humanity the great victory of his death and his resurrection? These are not vain considerations; they are the fundamental reality of our Christian faith. Christ has risen, and death no longer has dominion over him. The destiny of that risen Christ is to subject all of history to his rule so that one day he can hand over to God the cosmic kingdom of the universe, the kingdom of human histories in which even his enemies will be bound beneath the power of the Christ who will be ever victorious.

This is our faith that overcomes the world, said Christ (1 John 5:5), and that is why God's project has the greatest power. This is not an unpopular project for it receives the applause and the love of all those who follow the Gospel. Many of these have already become, says the Council, a «cloud of witnesses», those good and holy ones living in eternity but still connected to our history. For we shouldn't think, sisters and brothers, that our beloved dead have left us. They are perfected in love by their eternal reward in heaven, and they continue to love the same causes for which they died. That means that in El Salvador this liberating force does not depend only on those of us who are alive; it is supported also by all those whom they sought to kill but who are more present than ever in the movement of the people. (Applause)

That is why we are truly interested in those who are liberating the history of our people and of all the peoples of America and the world. I haven't forgotten that people are also listening to me in Costa Rica and in other countries of the continent, through the shortwave band of Radio Noticias del Continente. The silencing of YSAX has worked this miracle of making my voice heard beyond the borders of my own country. (Applause) Dear sisters and brothers of the continent, accept this applause from an overflowing church that sends greetings to all of you and that joins me in saying that our Christian faith, this faith in Christ, is what gives true value to all the liberation movements of our Latin American countries. (Applause) I am happy that the close-minded intransigence of those who want to silence the voice of YSAX has opened up wider horizons to the voice of this tiny church of the tiniest country of the continent, so that from here we can speak to all of you these words of liberation. (Applause)

The transfigured Christ is the anticipated presence of the definitive liberation

So for all of you and for us who are reflecting together here, the third point of my homily today is the transfigured Christ as the anticipated presence of the definitive liberation. I have already explained this in part, but I want to concentrate on what Christ is telling us in today's gospel. By being transfigured a few days before suffering on Calvary, he is showing us the goal of the suffering to which he is calling his apostles and his followers.

The theology of the transfiguration reveals that the path of redemption passes through the cross and through Calvary but that the goal of Christians lies beyond history. This doesn't mean being alienated from history but rather giving more meaning to history, a definitive meaning. From the day Christ rose, a torch of eternity began to shine in the history of time. From the day Christ rose in human history, people found in their own history a motive force that never existed before: the knowledge that Christ is alive and that those who work with him will live eternally. By rising and being transfigured for all the human beings of history, Christ is telling all his followers, «Whoever believes in me will never die» (John 6:47). This same Christ was inspiring Saint Paul when he wrote the letter we read today, in which Paul told his Christians, «We are citizens of heaven, and from heaven we await a Savior who will give us the power to submit everything beneath the feet of Christ» (Phil 3:20-21).

I believe, dear brothers and sisters—and I'm happy to say this during Lent—I believe that we Christians are being called to offer new men and women to the history of the Latin American continent. They are the new men and women that the bishops called for in Medellín when they said, «It is no use just to change economic, social, and political structures; new structures are useless unless there are new men and new women» (M 1,3). Who are the new, renewed men and women? They are those persons who, through their faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, make theirs this glorious theology of transfiguration. They have no fear of suffering; they do not embrace the cross out of conformity; they do so as Mary did. For she, in her poverty and her suffering, dared to say, «He has sent the rich away empty and filled the lowly with good things. He has removed the powerful from their thrones whenever they became idolaters of their own power» (Luke 1:52-53). (Applause)

That is the reason for the prayer that we offered at the beginning of Mass. I asked our Lord to purify our sight so that one day we might be filled with joy in the contemplation of his glory. Sisters and brothers, let us not lose sight of the transcendence of the Christian message. No matter how great our concerns or our responsibilities in the struggles for the people, let us not rely only on natural energies, without transcendence. I would like many people, many young folk, many political persons to get organized, but always with a profoundly Christian spirit so that they can bring this testimony of transcendence to the movement of our people, who today more than ever need the testimony of Christians.

In this way the liberation movement of our Salvadoran nation can be assured that the church will not abandon it but will continue to accompany it with the authentic voice of the Gospel, the voice of transcendence and Christ. And the church will continue to appeal to all the liberators of history, telling them that if they want to be strong and effective, they must place their confidence in the great Liberator, Jesus Christ, and not draw apart from him. And they must be very careful about robbing the people of the Christian sentiments that make them so noble and so vigorous! (Applause)

Life of the church

We will now try to incarnate into our archdiocesan church these themes of Lent and the transfigured Christ on which we have been reflecting. So for those who are not used to hearing our homilies, I explain that we present here a kind of chronicle of our week. We recount the work that is being done in the church, and we do so not out of vanity but out of a desire to share, among all of us who believe in Christ and make up the church, the ideals which we want to embrace more every day in order to form the true church of Jesus Christ. (Applause)

The first thing I want to do today is to ask all of you to be generous and to live this week with the spirit of voluntary sacrifice. After my homily the young woman Refugio will explain to you what the week involves.

I also want to communicate to you, with a pastor's joy, that this week I made my spiritual exercises along with a group of priests from the vicariate of Chalatenango. That time of spiritual and pastoral reflection among fellow priests and friends did me a great deal of good. Yesterday, when a reporter asked me where I found the inspiration for my work and my preaching, I told him, «Your question is very timely because I am just now finishing my spiritual exercises. If it were not for this prayer and reflection with which I try to stay united with God, I would be no more than the "clanging cymbal" that Saint Paul talks about» (1 Cor 13:1) (Applause) That is why I appeal to all of you—priests, religious, Christians, communities—not to let Lent pass by without reflecting profoundly on your spiritual life.

I also want to express my profound gratitude for the abundant expressions of solidarity that keep arriving as a result of the attack on our radio station YSAX. I have already expressed my gratitude for the services of this station that is broadcasting our message today, Radio Noticias del Continente of Costa Rica. (Applause) I am especially grateful for the spontaneous way in which its representative here in El Salvador came to our assistance even though many of our Salvadoran stations were overcome with fear. (Applause) I don't blame them because I understand the risk involved in serving the truth in a world where lies are more profitable. (Applause) Also very valuable have been the gestures of solidarity in Venezuela and Colombia, where some homilies have been rebroadcast, according to news that has reached me. Diffusion has also taken place by means of the cassettes that are recorded here in the church. Last Sunday someone counted around fifty tape-recorders placed near the loudspeakers of the basilica. I thank you because this is a very kind gesture of solidarity. (Applause)

I also want to tell you that in *Orientación*, our Catholic weekly, you can find the complete text of the homilies that can't be transmitted these days by YSAX. I want to express my special thanks for the help provided by the UCA technicians. Also, this morning the technicians of ANTEL offered their services to help restore our Catholic radio station and to provide it with great power. (Applause) Economic assistance, both great and small, has arrived in diverse ways. When one large donation of five thousand colones was brought to me by a political group, I told them, «We accept this without commitments because the church does not sell herself to anybody». (Applause) The person who brought me the donation also told me quite frankly, «We're not trying to buy you, but with this donation we want to express our admiration for the church because we consider her an indispensable voice in the process our country is presently going through». (Applause)

Many notes and letters, written in the simple language of the countryside, fill me with great emotion because they make me realize the great good that our radio station does, and so I realize the great evil that has been committed by the church's enemies in taking away this voice of the church. Let us hope that they don't repeat their crime. May Lent convert them so that they know how to argue reasonably as human beings. Let reason be fought with reason if they are not in agreement. (Applause) But never should brute force be used to try to silence the voice of truth, which may appear weak in the physical sense. Remember the giant Goliath who laughed at little David because he was coming out to meet him armed with just a slingshot. David told the giant, «You laugh because you trust in your great weapons, but I come against you in the name of the Lord» (1 Sam 17:45,47). So in the name of the Lord he took his slingshot, and he sent a stone into the forehead of the giant, who in this way was defeated by little David. That is how God works! (Applause) Physically, truth may be very weak, like little David, but no matter how mighty and well armed falsehood may be, it is no more than a ridiculous Goliath who will be brought down to earth by the stones of truth. (Applause)

I want to tell those of you who couldn't attend about the precious experience we had yesterday here in the basilica: the ordination to the priesthood of our beloved Jaime Paredes, who is concelebrating with me this morning. Some elements in the celebration moved me deeply, and I think they moved everyone who was present. There was, for example, the affectionate embrace of his two parents, and also the presence of Miss Nacha. Miss Nacha is a nurse at Divina Providentia Hospital, and she was Father Jaime's nanny. What joy she must have felt in kissing his priestly hands. (Applause) I was moved also by the tears I saw on the face of a young man from one of our seminaries. (We now, thank God, have five seminaries, and the young men in the one for late vocations are perhaps those who most anxiously aspire to the priesthood.) When he saw Jaime prostrate here before the bishop, the young man trembled to the point of tears, perhaps dreaming of the day, soon to come, when he also will prostrate himself to receive the priesthood he has longed for. (Applause)

But what moved me most of all was the unity of the priests, and I say this as a testimony to the joy we experienced in being church. Many priests were there, and the flowering of vocations was especially evident in those who came from our five seminaries. It was a sea of young people, all aspiring to the priesthood. They are at different stages of their formation, but they give our people good reason for hope. Christ said, «The harvest is great, but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers» (Matt 9:37-38). I believe that your prayers are working this miracle of multiplying the young men who aspire to the priesthood—to the point that there are so many, that they don't fit in our seminaries! But I want to tell those of you who could not enter to continue to cultivate your aspirations in your homes and in your schools. Even without being in the seminary, you can participate in your Christian parish communities and prepare yourselves so that one day, after some simple prerequisites, you will be able to present yourselves and receive priestly ordination. Sisters and brothers, God is truly blessing us. Someone from Europe who was viewing this whole panorama told us, «You're going to have to send some of your vocations to Europe! Here you have plenty, and there we have few!» (Applause)

Yesterday a commission of priests, religious, and laity left for Brazil to attend a meeting of ecclesial base communities. Brazil is a place where these communities flourish marvelously, and the visit will no doubt provide a great lesson and a wonderful experience for these people, who will then come back to help cultivate those communities among our people.

Tonight at seven o'clock there will be confirmations in the parish of the barrio of Lourdes. Last Sunday I forgot to mention the request of a good Christian woman who wanted prayers to be offered for Sister Marie Pierre Dykmans on the first anniversary of her death. The sister did much work here in the Colegio Sagrado Corazón. I also forgot to tell you that here in the capital the Sisters of Bethany are running a residence for female employees, students, and professionals in order to provide them spiritual and moral support. This house is called Ave Maria and is located just to the east of the UCA. So if any young woman needs the church's moral support, she can find it there with the Sisters of Bethany.

In this Sunday review of our church I also want to consider the teaching of the pope. A pastor's greatest glory, sisters and brothers, is living in communion with the pope. In my view, the secret of the truth and effectiveness of my preaching lies in communion with the pope, so I am always filled with joy when I find in his teaching thoughts and gestures that are the kind that our church needs. For example, at the end of February he celebrated Mass in Saint Peter's Basilica for Professor Vittorio Bachelet, who was murdered in Rome, and in his homily he said that the sacrifice of Bachelet was united to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and to that of the first Christian martyrs¹. In saying this I believe the pope is authorizing us to say that the priests and the catechists who have died among us for the Christian faith are, in a popular sense, true martyrs of the faith. (Applause)

At the same time the pope asked a question that I also want to ask here: «When a system chooses to kill innocent persons, is it perhaps not revealing that it possesses no truth with which to overcome its adversaries, no truth with which to conquer hearts and minds and promote true human progress»²? Could it be, in other words, that violence is simply a clear statement that those who kill have no good reasons to put forth or that their reasons are very weak? Violence does not do honor to any movement.

The pope also said that the root of the world's ills lies within human beings and that the remedy must begin with the human heart. That is what we are preaching during our Lenten season. Addressing the people of Rome, the pope also said, «Humanity is facing the menace of evil in a way that has never before been experienced»³. Let us not be frightened. We have directly experienced this confrontation between good and evil. Instead of being frightened, we must respond by allying ourselves with the good rather than siding with evil.

In another message that is very opportune for us, the pope recommended that there be good pastoral care for married couples and Christian families, and he made mention, in a very understanding way, of couples who are separated. The pope said that «spiritual help should be offered to the homes affected by separation and to people who have divorced and remarried civilly and so have an incomplete sacramental life»⁴. Naturally, this is not a sanctification of adultery, but it is a real call for understanding. Our pastoral experience teaches us a lot about the suffering of these homes where people have not been faithful to their first commitment, but they should know that they can always rely on God's mercy and that the church continues to accompany them with affection so that they'll be converted and live.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily at the Mass for Vittorio Bachelet», 23 February 1980, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (16 March 1980).

² Ibid.

³ JOHN PAUL II, «Sunday Allocution», 24 February 1980, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (2 March 1980).

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Closing of the Preparatory Session for the Fifth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Christian Family», 23 February 1980, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (9 March 1980).

Also interesting is the news that next October there will be a dialogue in Rome between Christian and Marxist philosophers. Some people are easily startled by Marxism, not out of Christian motives but out of selfish interests. (Applause) Never do we see such zealous anti-communism as when people see their selfish interests endangered! Still, there can be dialogue with Marxism which does not yield in any way regarding the principles of our faith but tries to understand the meaning of communism and Marxism today. Often those who are most outraged at the great evils of communism don't want to examine the great evils of capitalism, which is what is sacrificing our people! (Applause)

Events of the week

As we try to stay true to the church with these grand reflections, we also feel responsible for throwing light on our national life and all that surrounds us. I ask those of you who live far from our country and don't know the situation in El Salvador not to be scandalized before knowing the reality. I say this because I have received letters from Spain that criticize me for being a dedicated communist. I have asked them to come to know our reality. Then they will see that I am only a Christian who is trying to defend the Gospel against the very ideologies that can deprive our people of grace. (Applause)

The first part of my commentary on this week is concerned with violence. Every day more alarming reports are reaching the archbishop's office about the growing repression being unleashed by the security forces against organized *campesinos*. This repression is affecting not only the people who are organized but the rural population in general. The people's organizations are being destroyed, and we know the reasons why. When the people are not organized, they are a mass that can be manipulated, but when people are organized to defend justice and moral values, they must be respected. The security forces are using very cruel military operations to destroy these organizations, and they are killing countless *campesinos* with no scruples at all. Even here in the capital, though to a lesser degree, we are feeling the effects of this intensified repression, as well as the attacks of ultra-right-wing paramilitary organizations, which seem to operate under the protection of the same security forces. (Applause) I have a very confidential letter that treats of this matter, but I will not reveal its contents here since it makes some real indictments.

On the other hand, I have a report of Legal Aid which states, «This week violence has surged, especially in the rural areas. The situation is becoming more and more serious». Some really horrible things have occurred in the countryside. On February 26 there was a military operation in Rosario, Ojo de Agua, El Terrero, and Dulce Nombre de María. As a result, nine homes were burned, there were acts of banditry and pillage, and five *campesinos* were killed. What is saddest of all is that two little children were among those killed. These military operations are instilling terror in the people. During this week operations were carried out in several parts of the country, including Aguilares, Suchitoto, Sonsonate, Chalatenango, Sensuntepeque, and some villages in La Unión. It was there in La Unión, as I entered the church, that I was given a letter lamenting the death of Rubén Benítez, a much loved catechist of the parish of La Unión. Besides being inhumane, these operations are unconstitutional since they have no legal foundation. Acting only on reports and rumors, the security forces will occupy several towns for three days or more, creating occupied zones and suppressing the most basic rights of Salvadoran *campesinos*, just as in a state of siege. By what right, then, do they later complain that other forces are occupying the estates?

I especially want to denounce the threats that the National Guard and ORDEN have made against the *campesinos* of the villages of Zapote and Suchitoto. The people have been told that if they don't leave that zone they will be cruelly repressed. There has already been an exodus, but this whole thing is inconceivable. There is no reason why the *campesinos* should have to leave their humble homes. I formally ask the government to insure that the sacred rights of these *campesinos* to their lives and their homes are respected. (Applause)

Between January and February some six hundred persons have lost their lives due to the political situation. The assault on the *campesinos* is disproportionate, and other sectors of the people are suffering as well. During these two months we know of fourteen persons who were arrested and then disappeared for political reasons. These events were all duly documented, so nobody is making them up, as someone said on television.

This week we have forty-five persons from the poorer sectors who were killed for political reasons; among them were three more teachers. Thirteen teachers have now been killed in the last two months, including one in Atiquizaya, another in Morazán, and others in Chalatenango. At least thirteen *campesinos* have been killed in the area of Aguilares and Suchitoto, eight in the area of Chalatenango, and fifteen in Sonsonate.

Arrested this week were the *campesinos* Encarnación López López and José Cecilio Hernández Alfaro and the student Oscar Ernesto Chacón Melgar, but none of them has been brought before the courts. Legal Aid intervened in the case of Juan Chacón⁵ at his mother's request. I have been informed that yesterday he and two members of the People's Leagues were set free. (Applause)

Yesterday at noon we were informed of the arrest of the university student Óscar Edmundo Bonilla. I hope that they have already released him, and if not, I ask that he, along with other detained persons, either be brought before the courts or be set free if there is no good reason to keep them in detention.

I am concerned about all the violence in our country, but what concerns me most, sisters and brothers, is that there has been a notable diminishment in the people's capacity for reaction, condemnation, and protest. This has allowed the repression to proceed with even greater insolence and abandon. The various organizations affected are publishing their denunciations, perhaps now more than before, but public opinion is paying less and less attention to the large number of victims. The death toll is provoking little reaction that will guarantee the defense of human rights.

As I attempt to analyze the causes of this phenomenon, it seems to me that in large part it is because people are now more fearful of speaking and acting. And what is worse, there is increasing skepticism about the effectiveness of denunciation, protest, and dialogue. The different sectors have less and less faith in the efficacy of the laws and of official justice. The security forces themselves are now making it clear that the only thing they believe in is the power of their arms. The silence of the junta and the judicial power in the face of such great violence gives the impression that they have no control over the security forces. Indeed, their silence might even be a symbol of their unspoken complicity with those systematic violations.

⁵ Secretary General of the People's Revolutionary Bloc.

Such silence is very dangerous because it makes the people more and more convinced that they have a right to take vengeance themselves. That is a very bad development, but it is understandable when those responsible for bringing about justice in the country do not act more resolutely. (Applause)

In the second part of my commentary this week I want to refer to the agrarian reform. It is rumored that this coming week there will be a decree of agrarian reform and perhaps of other social and economic reforms. If all those reforms are not accompanied by a firm decision to stop the repression, they will be seen simply as measures designed to distract international and national public opinion. They will be viewed as attempts to conceal the river of human blood that is being shed. (Applause)

If I insist on the constant increase in repression and the ever weaker reaction against it, please understand me well, sisters and brothers. I do not want to incite violence. Those who have interpreted me that way are maligning me. My desire is quite the contrary. It is to ask that those responsible for the upsurge in repression stop using violence as a way of keeping the people oppressed. I also want to urge the people not to lose their moral sensibility and their critical awareness. I am saying this because I insist that an authentic government—one that calls itself «revolutionary»—can never promote processes of social change and reform while at the same time it maintains a climate of repression among the people.

The agrarian reform is at the base of all our structural changes. As a pastor of the church, I don't pretend to be a technical expert who can propose the best formula, but as pastor I do want to stipulate four necessary conditions.

First, the need for change is urgent. If it doesn't happen soon, then the right-wing opposition will have time to fortify its position, and the result will be ever greater loss of credibility among the people. (Applause)

Second, the reform must have the support of the people. It should in no way be a project imposed from above or from outside. It is not millions of dollars that will bring about the transformation desired by the people. (Applause) More than aid of that type, what is needed is the consensus of the majority of the people. Without that, there is nothing. (Applause)

The third condition is that the reform be just and capable of bringing about justice. There is the danger of bribes. There is the danger that the Armed Forces will support the oligarchy and not the people. (Applause) If we can't count on the Armed Forces' support for the people in this agrarian reform, then it will all be fruitless. What is needed is sincere appreciation of the social function of property.

The fourth condition is one that is very important for the church and for the general transformation of the country: there should be respect for the Christian sentiments of the people, and attention should be paid to the social doctrine of the church to which most of our people belong. (Applause)

The third part of my commentary concerns the «Programmatic Platform of the Democratic Revolutionary Government»⁶. That's the name given to a series of proposals made known this

⁶ *La Prensa Gráfica* (28 February 1980).

week. The coordinating body of the people's organizations has taken another step in the unification process this week by proposing a platform of government to the democratic sectors and the people in general. I hope that the different political and labor groups will react responsibly to this invitation by making their opinions known and by collaborating in the creation of an alliance that will bring together a majority of the people and give legitimate expression to the will of the people. (Applause)

I want to remind you that this call for solidarity with the true common good of the people, disregarding group interests, is the same one I made when the proclamation of October 15 was announced⁷. At the time some voices rushed to reject it instead of criticizing it constructively. I said the same thing as well when the project of agrarian transformation was announced by the Minister of Agriculture⁸, who has now resigned. I stated that the project was not a gift of the government to the people's movement but was rather the result of a movement that found support in the government. I stated further that if the government wanted to win the people's support, it had to unite itself to the people's movement and not obstruct it. (Applause)

The same principle guides me today as I announce this new platform of the people's organizations. Now as then, I am not telling you to become part of this movement in an uncritical way, but do give it your critical, constructive support so that our country will find a viable democratic solution. Let us declare that we are capable of reaching mutual understanding: the people can find their own way and should not be waiting for some solution to be imposed by force from outside. It is not for the church to identify herself with any project. She does not have the technical competence in the social sciences even to advise about the concrete forms for making this project viable. Her mission is rather to encourage the processes that tend toward unity and that seek greater justice and greater respect for the most fundamental human rights. The church also claims for herself, at this stage of the people's movement, the power to intervene by virtue of her competency in defending Christian and human values. On this level the church offers her conceptions concerning human dignity and human rights and how they should be promoted. I remember when Pope Paul VI, addressing the General Assembly of the United Nations, defined the church as the great «expert in humanity» even though she was unarmed and devoid of political or diplomatic power⁹. That is what the church is: an «expert in humanity». (Applause) The people therefore can be sure that they have the support of this expert in humanity when their own destiny is at stake, for she will firmly reject any vision that distorts the truth about the human person. Concerning this truth, as I've already told you, the Puebla document has some marvelous teaching; it would be good to study it since it is quite opportune for the present moment.

Another point I want to make in my commentary is that the church calls upon the people to be more aware that they are the architects of their own destiny. Since the church's mission means that she is equally free to denounce all groups that violate these human rights, our denunciation this morning of military and paramilitary repression would be incomplete if I did not also say that the people's organizations and their rash behavior are also to blame for repressive acts which harm not only organized groups but the people in general, as we've said before. There are complaints among the *campesinos* that some members of the organizations

⁷ «Proclamation of the Armed Forces of El Salvador», at the time of the coup d'état of 15 October 1979.

⁸ Enrique Álvarez Córdova.

⁹ PAUL VI, «Message for All Humanity: Discourse to the General Assembly of the United Nations», 4 October 1965.

are provoking the military operations so that they then have to defend themselves, but the ones who are suffering most harshly as a result are the poor, unorganized folk. Since we have talked about the maturation of the organizations, I ask you to take this into account so as not to expose the people to violence, for they are the ones you should be helping. Part of the terror experienced by the *campesinos* is caused by the imprudent acts of the organizations themselves.

The church issues a denunciation, for example, whenever a church is occupied or whenever slander is directed against a pastor, who is precisely the one looking out for the people, and she does the same whenever innocent people are accused falsely. I have a letter from a mailman of San Vicente who says that he has heard on the radio that people are accusing him of belonging to the forces that are repressing the people. He says he is innocent: «I live with my wife, my mother, and my children in the village of Calderas in Apaxtepeque, and I work in the San Vicente post office. I have no connection with the forces they want to identify me with». It is a very serious matter when they single out people who can suffer fatal consequences.

Another matter that I consider a serious affront to the sentiments of the Christian people is the renewed occupation of the cathedral by the BPR, right in the middle of Lent. I disagree with this action. I thought the problems had been settled. So I ask the leaders to exercise strict discipline in their organization because these things discredit it terribly.

Another piece of confidential information I received this week is truly scandalous. Someone took the trouble to see how much the BPR is spending on paid advertisements and TV propaganda in just one week. They have one and sometimes two half-hour programs a week, and I think each minute costs one hundred *colones*. Besides that, they are paying high fees for radio programs and for entire pages of newspapers. In that one week the total amount spent was calculated to be ninety thousand *colones*. One might ask: couldn't they use that money to do something more beneficial for the people? (Applause) They could help the people in the slums, the women in the markets, and other things like that. There is so much need! And what is most ironic is that they are paying those immense sums to the mass media of the oligarchy! (Applause) In this regard I believe that our church has been giving them a good example by simply making her poor voice heard, but doing so without collaborating with instruments that too often lend themselves to injustice and falsehood. It would be good for the people's organizations to reflect on these criticisms and use them to mature.

Here I also want to make an appeal to those who are holding Mr. Dunn and the other kidnap victims¹⁰. Enough time has passed for you to grant them their freedom!

At the beginning of the homily I spoke about the ANTEL workers who, in a gesture of solidarity, have offered to help reorganize our radio station. They told me that they have still not been able to get the head of ANTEL to dialogue with them even though the Ministry of Labor has called for such dialogue. The petitions of the ANTEL employees are these: reintegration of four fellow directors who were unjustly fired, recognition of the legitimate right to organize freely, compliance with their list of demands, immediate withdrawal of the military cordons at the workplaces, and a commitment to guaranteeing the moral and physical

¹⁰ The others were Jaime Hill Argüello, kidnapped on 31 October 1979, and Adolfo McEntee, kidnapped on 3 December 1979.

integrity of the movement participants without taking reprisals of any kind against them. I believe that these petitions are just and that it would be good for the responsible parties at ANTEL to enter into dialogue. That is how matters will be resolved, by mutual dialogue.
(Applause)

I want to express my gratitude also for an initiative of the Christian communities and other organizations, including the ecumenical committee, the humanitarian aid organization, and various people's committees. They have organized a press conference to defend the teaching of our diocese and also to defend the pastor since his life has been threatened. I thank you for this gesture of solidarity and support. (Applause)

Finally, I want to request, in the name of his mother, prayers for David Augustín Cristales Elías. He disappeared on 7 March 1977, and nothing is known of him since then. Is he alive or dead? That is the question so many mothers are asking. Like this mother, they have decided it is best simply to invite people to Masses for the eternal rest of their loved ones.

Let us pray, sisters and brothers, because the situation in our country is very difficult. Nevertheless, the vision of the transfigured Christ during this time of Lent is showing us the path we must follow. The path of our people's transformation is not far off. It is the path that God's word indicates to us today: the path of cross and sacrifice, of blood and pain. But filled with hope, let us keep our sight fixed on the glory of Christ, who is the Son chosen by the Father to save the world. Let us listen to him! (Applause)