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TODAY THE MEDIATOR OF THE NEW COVENANT ARRIVES¹

**Palm Sunday
8 April 1979**

Isaiah 50:4-7

Philippians 2:6-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

[.....]² This procession of palms that is now arriving at the cathedral is like a Lenten pilgrimage that is nearing its goal. The season of Lent has offered us the opportunity to review the history of the covenants God has made with humanity, and now we find ourselves celebrating during Holy Week the new and eternal covenant.

We would like to give our homily this Sunday this title: «Today the Mediator of the New Covenant Arrives». My first thought about this theme is the rejoicing of the people at the arrival of the Mediator. A second thought concerns the Mediator as he identifies with the people as one who serves. And the third thought will be the new covenant in which God shares with humanity the glorification of his Son.

Filled with joy, the people go forth to meet the Mediator who arrives

First of all, I look at all of you and then at myself. I feel part of that mass of humanity that went forth twenty centuries ago to encounter God, who was coming to save them in history. Twenty centuries ago it was the people of Jerusalem, the young people and the children, who cut branches from the trees and went out to meet the Lord. They were a poor people who had lost their independence and their unity and whose religious traditions had been betrayed.

Nevertheless, there was always a faithful remnant in the history of Israel, and that's what the Bible called them: «the remnant of Israel» (Jer 31:7). The salvation brought by God rested with this remnant because from them would come the Son of David who is the one being acclaimed today: «Blessed is he who comes! Hosanna to the Son of David!» (Mark 11:9).

Our procession from the church of El Calvario reminds us of the long history of humankind, but now it is we who are the protagonists who must go forth to meet Jesus. In his recent encyclical the pope tells us that the mystery of Jesus' redemption touches everyone: «We are not dealing with the "abstract" humanity but with real, concrete, historical human beings. We are dealing with each individual because every person has been included in the mystery of redemption—all human beings in their unique and unrepeatable human reality» (RH 13). Those who went out to meet Jesus in Jerusalem twenty centuries ago were people of

¹ Archbishop Romero's homilies were transmitted directly by the archdiocesan radio station, *Vox Panamericana*, YSAX. The broadcast of this homily was illegally jammed without the government doing anything to prevent it. See «New Ways to Persecute the Church» in *Orientación* (22 April 1979).

² The greeting and the opening words were not recorded on the tape.

their time; they brought with them the history of their people, all the frustrations and all the hopes of Israel. Those of us here today are Salvadorans, and we have our own history, and not just as a collective people but as individuals. Christ is the Redeemer of all people, but each of us can still say, «Christ is my Redeemer». I think that what becomes clear in this procession is what Puebla called «the faces of Latin American humanity».

We see many faces here. «The faces of indigenous peoples and also African Americans, who have lived in marginalized and subhuman situations. They are the poorest of the poor». Puebla also talks about «the faces of *campesinos*, who as a social group live abandoned in almost the entirety of our continent, deprived of land, trapped in a situation of internal and external dependence, and subjected to systems of commercialization that exploit them. The faces of workers, often poorly paid and impeded in their efforts to organize themselves and defend their rights. The faces of the marginalized and overcrowded urban dwellers, whose lack of material goods stands in contrast to the ostentatious wealth of other social sectors. The faces of the underemployed and unemployed, those who are laid off not only because of the harsh exigencies of economic crises but often because of development models that subject workers and their families to cold economic calculations» (P 33-38).

In this procession we can see what Puebla saw as they continued looking at Latin America: «The faces of young people, disoriented because they cannot find their place in society and frustrated by the lack of opportunity to get training and employment, particularly in marginal rural and urban areas. The faces of children, beaten down by poverty before they are born, their chances for full development blocked by irreparable mental and physical deficiencies that will be with them all their lives. The faces of the street children in our cities, so often exploited, the products of poverty and the moral breakdown of the family. The faces of old people, more numerous by the day and frequently marginalized from a society that prizes progress and disregards people who do not produce» (P 32-33,39). This is our Palm Sunday procession, and we could go on reciting here the realities of our times³.

The poor were the subject of an analysis of the reality of our country carried out by CEPCIES⁴ of the Organization of American States. This commission included three of our ministers, the president of the Central Reserve Bank, and the Salvadoran ambassador to the United States. Their report states that since 1974 the incidence of malnutrition has increased: some sixteen percent of the population are eating less protein than what is recommended for a healthy diet. They also stated that the neediest sector of the population was even worse off, with forty-four percent eating less than what is recommended. This means that the Salvadoran people, now in pilgrimage toward Christ, suffer serious levels of malnutrition and a high rate of infant mortality. There are also adults who die of malnutrition, such as the man who died in Santa Ana last week, Juan Portillo Álvarez—it is said his death was due to malnutrition.

These very same people who today walk side by side with the Redeemer live in rural dwellings, forty-eight percent of which do not have running water. Some sixty-six percent of the houses in this country are without electricity, and in rural areas it's ninety-three percent. Some thirty-five percent of the people are illiterate. These reports mention other deficiencies

³ On this occasion Archbishop Romero integrates into the first part of his homily his usual section on «Events of the week».

⁴ Spanish acronym of the Permanent Executive Commission of the Inter-American Economic and Social Council.

that reveal the deplorable state of this people of ours who are hoping for the great liberation that comes from Christ.

We are given some hope by the words of the minister of justice, who declared at the same time that «social justice is the only weapon that is capable of defeating the enemies of democracy and of the humanity's highest values»⁵. What other message has the church of Jesus Christ been shouting in the face of these frightful realities of our people? Now it is the people who are asking the Lord, «Lord, create for us more human and fraternal structures which correspond to the people's desire for the liberation».

This people now seeking the Divine Messiah who brings redemption is a people living in a whirlwind of violence. Just this week there have been twenty-six victims of violence. Whole districts have been assaulted. In Cinquera, for example, the Gámez family has had five men murdered, and one of them, despite being mentally disturbed, was tortured barbarously⁶.

News of assaults in other places are also arriving. There are prisoners who will spend this Holy Week awaiting to appear in court even though they were arrested on March 30. This is a violation of their dignity and freedom. The prisoners are the following: Cecilio Antonio Murillo, forty years old with four young children; Antonio de Jesús García, forty-one years old with three young children; Fermín Landaverde, forty years old with six young children; Tranquilino Pocasangre, thirty years old with two small children; Ricardo Hernández and Francisco Rosa, both married and now leaving their families orphaned. These men will spend Holy Week deprived of the justice that we are asking the Lord to give to our people.

Of those kidnapped, the Japanese man has been set free, thank God⁷. Now back in his homeland, he was inspired to send a telegram thanking the church in El Salvador. But we regret to say that the FARN has already declared closed the case of our two brothers from England⁸. Even so, this is a Sunday of hope, and we trust in the work of the Human Rights Commission⁹. With Jesus Christ, the church brings freedom to people, freedom from all that causes suffering. Therefore the church cries out and sends messages to those who are responsible for the separation of these two brothers from their homes. The father of one of the English kidnap victims is gravely ill and near death; he awaits his son there in their homeland. An English journalist has come from the *Daily Record* to see what they can do to save their compatriots. The church extends a hand, the hand of Christ the Liberator, and she raises her voice and declares, «There is still time! Let us save these men's lives!» I want to echo what the pope said on this Palm Sunday: «These acts of violence have caused great bitterness in me and in all persons who have a Christian respect for life, which is a sacred gift of God»¹⁰. The pope urges us all to pray during this Holy Week so that our minds come to understand the divine order of mutual love, which is the only foundation for a just and peaceful society.

This is the people that today goes forth to meet the divine Messiah. We go forth, dear sisters and brothers, crying out, «Blessed is he who comes!» because we know that the

⁵ *La Prensa Gráfica* (5 April 1979).

⁶ Angel Gámez Artiaga. See «Solidarity» in *Orientación* (8 April 1979).

⁷ Takakazu Suzuki was freed on 31 March 1979 after being kidnapped for four months by members of the FARN. *La Prensa Gráfica* (2 April 1979).

⁸ Ian Cameron Massie and Michael Stanislaus Chatterton, kidnapped on 30 November 1978.

⁹ «Press Bulletin of the Human Rights Commission», 2 April 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (3 April 1979).

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II «Sunday Allocution», 1 April 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (8 April 1979).

redemption of the peoples must come from God. This is also the invitation of Holy Week. Let us pray that God will not deny us the liberating power that he brings us in Christ Jesus. Christ is the God who comes. Christ is the Redeemer who brings us the freedom and dignity we have lost. Christ is coming, and our liturgical celebration this morning—going out to meet him, waiting for his inspiration, dutifully listening to his words—gives us great hope.

I have the feeling, dear sisters and brothers, that different sectors are looking for solutions to the situation of our country. There are sane voices and there are noble hearts who are right now exploring what can be done. The church is willing to extend her hand in support of every effort that contributes to the true dignity and freedom of this people for whom the church lives.

The Mediator identifies with the people as one who serves

My second reflection, therefore, considers what today's readings tell us about how this Mediator, though he was coming as almighty God, still wanted to identify himself as a servant who immersed himself in human misery and was humbled to the point of death. By doing so he gave divine meaning to the just claims of the peoples who are bowed down, and at the same time he inspired them with a hope that goes beyond the powers of earth. «Unless the Lord build the house», says the Bible, «they labor in vain who try to build it» (Ps 127:1).

Today's first reading presents a mysterious figure called the Servant of Yahweh, who despite his good will is spat upon and beaten (Isa 50:4-7). Yet this Servant is obedient to the will of God, who is sending him to save the people. Having heard this morning the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, we now know the identity of this mysterious person who was foretold centuries before Christ. What a moving account it is! This Servant of Yahweh is the Son of God who divests himself of his divine dignity in order to become human like all of us and to carry on his back the miseries of all of us.

In the gospel reading this morning, Christ, represented by one of the seminarians, exclaimed, «My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?» (Mark 15:34). That is the moment when the humiliation—the kenosis—of the Son of God who became man reached its lowest point and Christ felt abandoned even by God. That is how closely Christ identifies himself with the suffering of our people! In his voice we seem to hear the cries from many hovels, from many slums, from many suffering in prison, from many who are hungering for justice and bread. «My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?» God has not abandoned us. This is the moment when the Son of God obediently accepts the burden of sin that God asks him to carry so that those sins of humanity might be forgiven, those sins that are the source of all forms of injustice and selfishness.

The political redemption desired by many of those who went out to meet Jesus on Palm Sunday would have been useless. Liberation from the yoke of Rome would not have been true freedom because the people would have fallen under other yokes. Nations never seem to learn the lesson about dominating and exploiting one another. There is only one true Liberator: God, who brings us freedom from sin, the source of all human wretchedness. That is why it is important for us to understand how Christ identified with suffering humanity. Let us feel great sympathy for him now, and when we accompany him on the way of the cross—sweating blood

and weeping tears of pain with almost no hope in human succor—let us think about our own situation with the divine hope that Jesus inspires in us.

The new covenant in which God shares his Son's glorification with the people

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, the new covenant flowed from this heroic obedience unto death by which Christ was identified with the sin of the world and so was punished on the cross. His was the blood that was shed for the new and eternal covenant, established for all those who want forgiveness. After this heroic giving of his life for our sake, it was glorification that awaited him.

As we just heard in the two readings, after Christ passed through the humbling kenosis of being the Servant and dying on the cross, «God gave him a name above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven, on earth, and under the earth» (Phil 2:9-10). And in the Gospel of Saint Mark, proclaimed so solemnly today, we heard the testimony of a pagan soldier who told Pontius Pilate and the people and the whole world, «Truly, this was the Son of God!» (Mark 15:39).

Christ has overcome. His humiliation was not in vain. The cross is the path to true glorification. And this is the hope that I would have all of us reflect on during this Holy Week. This is what the church is working on: she is trying to build a monument of hope in the human heart, and that is why she cannot side with forces that place their confidence in violence alone. The church does not want to be confused with purely political and temporal liberation movements. The church is certainly concerned about these forms of earthly liberation, and she grieves at the sight of people who are malnourished, illiterate, homeless, and without shelter or electric light. But she knows that those are not the only misfortunes people suffer; the deeper misfortune of sinfulness resides within the heart. That is why the church not only supports all the just claims of the people but wants to raise them to a higher level, one that will free us from the sad sequence of sin, death, and hell. The church tells us to strive to be truly free, but to do so from the depths of our hearts. Such is the freedom of the children of God, the freedom that makes us children of God, the freedom that removes from us the chains of sin so that during Holy Week we can celebrate together the joy of Easter.

Life of the church

Therefore, brothers and sisters, this church to which I refer is also a concrete church. It is our church of well-instructed communities, such as the ones I visited last Sunday when I was at the festive Ricaldone Oratorio or yesterday when I was in the village of El Pepeto or in San Antonio Abad. It is our church as I saw it at the gathering of the 200 lay teachers from our Catholic schools, who met to reflect on the meaning of Holy Week and the role of the teacher here in El Salvador—they discussed the consciousness that comes from a liberating education. It is the church I saw in the community of vendors in the central market, who celebrated their fourth anniversary by offering a Mass of thanksgiving to the Lord.

United in pain, we are the church that weeps over the death of so many sisters and brothers. Today we ask your prayers in a special way for Doña Mercedes Díaz, the mother of Father Próspero Diaz, the pastor of Candelaria. She died this week. Let us also remember friends who have asked our prayers for their departed loved ones.

This is the church whose different communities will be receiving visits from nuns, priests, and catechists who will animate a Holy Week to bring us closer to God. I want to congratulate and encourage all these missionary groups who strive to bring the message of the cross and resurrection to our rural districts. I especially want to advise the village of Mizata in Teotepeque that three sisters will arrive tomorrow to celebrate the Holy Week liturgy with you. I ask the sacristan and the faithful to give them a warm welcome.

We will celebrate the mysteries of Holy Week here in the cathedral, and we hope that the radio will serve us better than it has today. On Holy Thursday, at nine-thirty in the morning, we will bless the oils in a ceremony in the cathedral; these are the sacred oils that will be used to administer the sacraments throughout the diocese, and for that reason priests will attend from all the diocese. That same day we will also deliver the message that the pope has prepared for all the priests of the world¹¹. Since Holy Thursday is the day when our sacrament of priesthood was born, we renew on that day our priestly commitment.

The celebration of the institution of the Eucharist will be at six o'clock in the evening of Holy Thursday. There will also be our traditional Procession of Silence, something that many people misunderstand and misuse. This year we want to use it as a vehicle for evangelization. Therefore, from ten o'clock in the evening until midnight we will be broadcasting reflections for those who want to bring their radios along. Or you can also organize groups of reflection in your neighborhoods or your homes. This is a night rich in mystery, the night when Christ was utterly humiliated and offered the silence of his passion for us.

At eleven o'clock on Good Friday we will transmit the Way of the Cross from the cathedral. The liturgy of Good Friday will be at four-thirty in the afternoon, and from six-thirty until nine in the evening we will accompany the Holy Burial on the radio. The procession will leave from the church of El Calvario, and we invite everyone to spend the evening in reflection on this Christ who has died so that like Saint Paul we may cry out, «He loved me and gave himself for me» (Gal 2:20).

Above all, sisters and brothers, I want to ask your enthusiastic collaboration for the celebration of Easter. This Christ now enters Jerusalem to become a servant and to be humbled to the point of death, but we are not going to leave him overcome in the tragedy of Calvary. We are going to stay with him until the triumph of the resurrection. We will be singing the Easter Alleluias here in this same place. The solemn Easter Vigil will be next Saturday, which is Holy Saturday, at seven o'clock in the evening, and we are especially calling on young people to attend.

When we conclude Holy Week on Holy Saturday night, we want to offer our country the best gift our church can offer: we want to contribute to renewing the life of our land. We cannot continue the way we are now, but there cannot be a new country unless there are Salvadorans who are themselves renewed from within with the strength of Christ's redemption. This is the church's contribution.

I want to call upon all those organizations that struggle for the liberation of our country in ways that are different from those of the church. I ask you to dedicate some time to

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, «Letter to All Priests», 8 April 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (15 April 1979).

reflection in these days. Please do not use the language of the church about freedom from sin, which I've spoken clearly about today. Do not confuse such language and manipulate it for the specific ends of earthly liberation. Do not use the Holy Week processions to proclaim other kinds of liberation different from the liberation the church preaches. We invite everybody, and we try to include all our people. We ask you to try to understand us! Try to understand the language of the church, which in Holy Week is very clear: it tells us of a Christ humiliated to the point of death on the cross. There's violence, yes, but it is done to Christ himself, who gave his life for others and did not take away the life of others. This Christ who hands himself over makes us realize that the only true way out of our country's dead-end distress is the love of Christ, who is the salvation of the world.

Let us imitate him, dear sisters and brothers. As we wave our palms before the triumphant Christ who is entering San Salvador, may this Palm Sunday be a poem of hope which declares that El Salvador has placed all its trust in Christ and tells him, «In you, Lord, we have trusted; let us not be disgraced» (Ps 31:2). Let it be so.