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THE PASCHAL MEAL

The Lord's Supper

Holy Thursday

23 March 1978

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-15

With this celebration of the institution of the Eucharist we begin what is called the Easter Triduum. These three days celebrate the greatest religious event in history and, naturally, of the liturgical year as well. Saint Augustine called this Triduum the feast of the passion, the death, and the resurrection of the Lord. This night is like a synthesis or a summary of the entire paschal mystery we are celebrating. To help us understand it, today's readings place us within the context of the ancient history of Israel which culminates with Christ our Lord, who in turn empowers his church to continue this history until the end of time.

On this most sacred night of Holy Thursday I present three thoughts: the history of Israel, Christ who embodies that history, and the Eucharistic prolongation of that history until the end of time.

The history of Israel

The book of Exodus that was just read tells us about the ancient history of Israel. As commanded by God, the Jews celebrated the feast of Passover at the time of the full moon of the month of Nisan (the first month of the Hebrew calendar, overlapping our months of March and April). The Passover was the celebration of two great Old Testament mysteries, the liberation from Egypt and the covenant with the Lord. Passover was that moment when the Israelites, enslaved in Egypt by the Pharaoh, could finally leave the land after the terrifying tenth plague in which the firstborn of the Egyptians were slaughtered. To spare the Hebrew families, God ordered the people through Moses to kill a lamb and wipe the blood of the lamb on their doorposts because that night the angel of death would pass by. That's what Passover means: the passage of the angel, the passage of God, which for the Egyptians would be punishment and for Israel liberation (Exod 12:12-13).

On that night, while the Egyptians mourned the death of their firstborn, the Israelites, signed with the blood of the lamb, escaped from slavery with all their families and began to cross the desert toward the Promised Land. Every year they celebrated the feast of their emancipation, the feast of God's passing through to save Israel, just as we celebrate September 15. At the same time they were remembering this event of the past, they also recalled that there was a covenant between God and the people. By this covenant Israel promised to respect the law of God, and God promised to protect the people in a special way. The Passover and the covenant were similar to other celebrations of nomadic peoples, but these special signs and revelations gave Israel's celebrations a prophetic meaning. The Passover and the covenant

would find their fulfillment when the greatest among the Jews, one born of Abraham and David, a holy descendant of Israel, celebrated his Passover.

On this night Christ our Lord, like a good Israelite, formed a family with the group of Israelites who were the apostles. They had a lamb slaughtered and shared a meal on Holy Thursday night just as all the families of Israel did, remembering the ancient history of liberation and covenant. How many thoughts about this sacred history must have filled Christ's mind! The whole history of Israel must have become present in the Lord's life on this night of deep emotions! If we want to be authentic Salvadorans, let us contemplate Christ, who was an authentic patriot. He lived the history of his people; he felt the slavery in Egypt as something present; he thanked God for freedom and the covenant between God and the people. All this was in Christ's heart on this night of many memories, which was also for him a night that contained a special mystery.

Christ incarnates the whole history of salvation

My second thought on this night is this: Christ incarnates the whole history of salvation. He had told the Samaritan woman, «The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, for God seeks worshipers in spirit and in truth» (John 4:23). On this night one of the most serious accusations against Christ was repeated before the Sanhedrin. He had said he would destroy the temple and in three days rebuild it (Matt 26:61). The gospel makes it clear that the temple to be destroyed was his body because his body was the temple where the covenant, God's victory, and the liberation of the people of Israel would take place (John 2:21). He was temple, victim, priest, and altar. He is the totality of redemption.

In Christ our Lord becomes incarnate all the gratitude of the people of Israel to the God who freed them. In Christ our Lord becomes incarnate all the patriotic hope of Israel and all the hopes of humankind. This night Christ our Lord senses that he is «the lamb who takes away the sins of the world» (John 1:29) and that his is the blood that will seal with freedom the hearts of all who truly want to be free. From this night on he is the priest who lifts adoration to the Father and brings from the Father forgiveness and blessings for his people.

Tomorrow, Good Friday, the torment of Christ culminates with his crucifixion, but from this evening on, the memorial of that passion remains here with us. Christ dying on the cross is the Lamb whose blood marks the hearts of those who believe in him; they will be free and will not suffer the torments of sin. He is the one who comes to take away the sin of the world, the one who comes to fill our hearts with hope. Sisters and brothers, blessed are Christians this night as we celebrate the Lord's Supper in this cathedral, and also in the parish churches, in the chapels, and in the communities throughout the archdiocese. Today we form part of the Israelite family that slaughters the Lamb who is Christ himself and that eats his flesh which is our Communion: «Take and eat for this is my body that is given for you. Take and drink for this is the cup of my blood which will be shed for you for the forgiveness of sins» (Luke 22:19-20).

A eucharistic prolongation until the end of time

My third thought concerns the Eucharist. The Body and the Blood of the Lord, present on the altar each time that a priest celebrates Mass, become the same sacrifice of Christ on the cross; the whole history of Israel culminates there on the altar. Moreover, as Saint Paul just told us, in the Eucharist «we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes» (1 Cor 11:26).

The Christian people are a people who live with a memory, the memory of Calvary. But it is not just a memory; it is something present and even becomes hope for the future. This Christ who becomes present in our host at the Mass is the Christ who will return; he is the Christ who will come to judge history; he is the Christ in whom all peoples find the solution to their problems. The definitive solution can be found only in him because he is the hope of the people who travel through history as tormented martyrs, always hoping for the definitive liberation that is to come.

That is why our Mass tonight, sisters and brothers, must be a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord. We thank him because he has redeemed us and because all his suffering on the cross is now captured in this consecrated host on the altar. We thank him because his blood which sealed the covenant between God and humankind flows fresh again as the blood that this very night reaffirms the eternal covenant between us and God. Our Christian people are more blessed than the people of Israel who sealed their covenant with God with the blood of lambs! As Christians we seal our covenant with the blood of God, with the blood of Christ, with the immolated body of Christ on the cross and present in our host—with these we seal the love God has for us and the hope we place in him.

That is why we celebrate the Christian Passover tonight, sisters and brothers, relying strictly on the merits of the one who will be crucified tomorrow, Good Friday, and on the resurrection of Christ celebrated Holy Saturday evening. This Passover is the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the Lord wants us to celebrate it in a setting of love and humility.

Above all, of love. That is why today's gospel narrative begins with that stupendous statement: «Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass»—that is «pass over»—«from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end» (John 13:1). In all of history no one has ever encountered a love that was so—how to say it?—so crazy, so exaggerated: giving to the point of being crucified on a cross. There is no friend who has given his life for another friend with such an outpouring of suffering and love as Christ our Lord. This is the setting of our Passover. That is why Christ tells us that the sign of the Christian is living the new commandment he gives us. It is a commandment that tonight becomes fresh in our memory and our lives: «As I have loved you, so you also should love one another» (John 13:34).

This is the greatest disease of our world today: not knowing how to love. Everything is selfishness. Everything is exploitation of human beings. Everything is cruelty and torture. Everything is violence and repression. The houses of our people are burned. Our sisters and brothers are thrown into prison and tortured. So many cruel acts are committed against them. Jesus, how you must suffer tonight as you behold the situation of our nation with all its many crimes and cruelties! I see Christ saddened as he sits at his Passover supper and looks upon El Salvador; he tells us, «I told you to love one another». Let us reflect this evening, sisters and brothers, on how love must be the context for our celebration of Holy Week. We cannot celebrate Holy Week if we harbor in our hearts feelings of selfishness and cruelty toward our sisters and brothers. We can celebrate Passover with Christ only if we love, only if we forgive, only if we know how to exercise the greatest power that God has placed within our hearts: the power of love.

Dear young people given to violence and vice, you who have already lost your faith in love and think that love can solve nothing, here is the proof that love alone solves everything. If Christ had wanted to impose his redemption through armed force or through fire and violence, he would have achieved nothing. That would have been useless; there would be only more hatred and wickedness. But going straight to the heart of redemption, Christ tells us on this night, «This is my commandment: as I have loved you, so you also should love one another» (John 13:34). And he says more: «So that you may see that these are not simply words, stay with me tonight when I will sweat blood as I observe the evil of humankind and the pain of my own sufferings! And tomorrow you will see me carrying the cross like a silent lamb and dying on Calvary. Be assured that I bear no resentment toward anybody. From the depth of my soul I will cry out, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do"» (Luke 23:34). Let us reflect, sisters and brothers, on this personified gesture of love. And when we are tempted to act with vengeance, resentment, cruelty, or selfishness, let us not consider the sad example of people who hate one another. Rather let us raise our eyes toward the love that becomes lamb, that becomes food, that becomes Passover, that becomes covenant.

Christ teaches us also that humility is the road to reach these heights. That is why the priests are obliged to preach not only with words but with the humble gesture that we are about to perform here in the cathedral and that is also performed in all the churches where Holy Week is being celebrated. Christ tells us, «You call me teacher and master, and so I am. Since I am your teacher and master, do what I do». He then took off his outer garment and knelt before the apostles like a servant to wash their feet. It was the job of servants to wash the feet of dinner guests. It was like the humble service of the shoeshine boy who is like a servant before the one whose shoes he's cleaning. So also Christ. «Though he was in the form of God», Saint Paul tells us, «he did not grasp at equality with God but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness» (Phil 2:6-7). This evening he humbled himself before the feet of the apostles, even before Judas, and tomorrow he will suffer the death of slaves because crucifixion was not inflicted on Roman citizens but only the slaves of the Roman people. He who is God becomes slave, the humble Lord of lords.

What a wonderful example for this era of vain pride and arrogance. Because of a lack of humility the world is the way it is. No one wants to be inferior to anybody; we all want the world to revolve around ourselves. We have set ourselves up as gods and become idols unto ourselves. We must destroy all these idols, sisters and brothers, the idol of «me» most of all, so as to be humble. Only by humility can we be redeemers and collaborators in the true collaboration that the world needs. Liberation that cries out against others is not true liberation. No liberation brings true freedom if it causes hateful, violent revolutions that destroy the lives and offend the dignity of people. True freedom is that which does violence to itself just as Christ, almost disregarding his sovereign power, becomes a slave in order to serve others. These are the true liberators that this tremendous hour demands of our country, liberators with humble hearts in which Christian love shines bright.

My sisters and brothers, as we celebrate our Passover on this Holy Thursday, let us embrace all these precious lessons of our Divine Redeemer. Needing to be freed from so many forms of slavery, we have found today in Christ the way to break our chains and open our prisons: in love and in humility. We place our hope in him. Let us live our Christianity with authenticity, and may our church continue to proclaim to the world that our only hope is in Christ. The true way is in imitating his love and his humility.

St Oscar Romero, Mass of the Lord's Supper, 23 March 1978

Let us proceed, then, to this gesture of our Divine Teacher and Lord which I unworthily will try to imitate, sisters and brothers, in order to preach to you with something more than my words. I ask that we always do this as a silent example of love and humility.