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REDEMPTION, GOD'S INITIATIVE BROUGHT BY CHRIST TO HUMANKIND

**Third Sunday of Lent
26 February 1978**

Exodus 17:3-7

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

John 4:5-42

During Lent, dear sisters and brothers, true Christians do not forget that we are on a spiritual pilgrimage toward a well defined goal: the celebration of Easter. Celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ will be fruitful for us to the degree that we make this Lenten spiritual journey a true longing for redemption and eternal life. But every pilgrimage is undertaken in the real world and we always run the risk of being distracted on the journey and losing our way. Therefore, each Sunday we must seek the light of the word to guide us and at the same time reflect on the realities that surround us, seeing them in the light of the word. As a Lenten pilgrim, how do I think about the realities of my surroundings?

Today, for example, as we greet with fraternal affection a Canadian priest, Father William Smith, from the diocese of Prull, Quebec, and as we receive from him fraternal greetings of the bishop of that diocese of Prull, I feel a great sense of solidarity, along with all the archdiocese. Let us thank the Lord for the countless fraternal gestures we have received in these days from bishops, from communities, and from Christians in other parts of the world. As we concelebrate Mass, we feel that this church is not alone; we are on pilgrimage with all those who sincerely desire to think with the church.

Events of the week

Within this international context, I want to highlight two news items of the week. From Nicaragua came news of a fine imposed on a radio station for transmitting part of the bishops' pastoral letter in which they declared that they could not remain silent before the injustices and violations of the people's human rights. Also from the press we received news that the cardinal archbishop of Paris refused to celebrate a Mass that had been requested by the government of Argentina to commemorate the centenary of the birth of General San Martín. The reason was that two French religious nuns have disappeared in Argentina, and the cardinal wants this crime to be clarified. As you can see, sisters and brothers, these prophetic gestures support the attitudes of our own archdiocese in its desire to remain faithful to the Gospel. What is wonderful is that the Christians of Nicaragua are helping to pay that fine out of solidarity with the voice of the bishops.

During this week we have also seen a reaction—hopefully an effective and salutary reaction—to the recent rash of fires¹. On the church's part I only want to remind you that those who damage the property of others are obliged to pay restitution. We do not know the reasons for these fires, which are mysterious, but certainly, if they have been set deliberately in order to harm another person, then the arsonist is a criminal who is obliged in conscience to make restitution for the fraud and damage he sought to cause by these fires. Our moral position is firm in this regard. To receive sacramental absolution for a sin of this sort, the person is asked to make restitution; otherwise he is unworthy of absolution.

It has been announced that during the coming months a seminar on educational reform will be held. Through the media we know that the following persons have been invited to participate: the president of the Chamber of Commerce, the president of ANEP², and the rector of the university. We hope that the church's experience in the field of education will also be recognized; the exclusion of the church's educational sector could be fatal because it would bias the educational reform which has much importance for our mostly Catholic population.

We hear of many anomalies at our Legal Aid Office. There has been no resolution of the labor conflict at the Izalco sugar refinery, nor has the Union of Construction Workers resolved its conflict. *Campesinos* looking for land to farm have also voiced complaints against those who could provide them access to this land they need to survive. They are anxious because the rains are coming and they have nowhere to plant for their families. I want to recall the words of the encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, quoting the letter of St. John: «He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?» (1 John 3:17). Pope Paul VI comments, «Private property is not an unconditional, absolute right for anyone. No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life. In short, as the fathers of the church and other eminent theologians tell us, the right of private property may never be exercised to the detriment of the common good. When private gain and basic community needs conflict with one another, it is for the public authorities to seek a solution to these questions with the active involvement of individual citizens and social groups» (PP 23).

Many denunciations of arrests and disappearances also arrive at our offices. Amid the avalanche of correspondence received concerning the Amnesty International report on disappeared persons, I want to highlight the case of Miss Lil Milagro Ramírez. I was deeply moved by a letter sent to me by a Christian woman in France. She wrote, «Bishop, I write to you as a Christian who is for the abolition of torture. We live far away, and we can do little more than write to you as a minister of Jesus Christ. Do you understand my call?» How could I not understand? Thanks be to God, she has been a voice for us! This international support gives us strength to pose again the same question we have asked many times before, «Where are the persons who have disappeared?» In meetings with the mothers of prisoners and disappeared persons, we feel anguish as we see the cloud of dust that is cast over their pain since the authorities continue to deny the cruel assault on so many homes. At least give them information! Where are they?

¹ The High Command of the Armed Forces in El Salvador called an emergency meeting to deal with this problem. See *La Prensa Gráfica* (21 February 1978).

² National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP).

Life of the church

Within our own domestic domain as church, dear sisters and brothers, I want to mention the historical setting of this week. First of all, I thank my beloved archdiocese with its priests, religious, and faithful for the kind homage paid me on February 22, the first anniversary of my episcopacy in this archdiocese. On that day of the Chair of Saint Peter those gathered in the cathedral expressed their solidarity with their bishop and through the bishop with the See of Peter. I give thanks for this unity of our church. I especially thank Father Jesús Delgado for his discourse, which some people naturally considered offensive and inappropriate. We understand this, and we cite those words of Jesus: «If your eye is healthy, your whole being will be full of light, but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole being will be full of darkness» (Matt 6:22-23).

In any case, sisters and brothers, as I said at the time, I do not want to be an idol. I will never allow myself to become an idol of the masses and deceive them, because the Sacred Scripture tells us, «Cursed are those who find their support in the flesh» (Jer 17:5). As I said here on the occasion of my honorary doctorate, I want to be a sign like John the Baptist. My own person should decrease, and the eternal word of Christ's message must increase (John 3:30). If I were honored personally, how swiftly I would flee from such honors! But when I direct them toward Christ, the Good Shepherd, and when your faith discovers in my poor person the eternal message of the Savior, then I must accept such honors and present them as a bouquet of fresh roses to the Divine Priest, Christ our Lord. Therefore, my gratitude is rooted in our faith, and I invite you to continue to strengthen the bonds of unity with your bishop so that together we may offer ourselves to the One who is the center of our religion, our Divine Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the same spirit of faith, I announce to you that we are going to celebrate the anniversary of the assassination of Father Rutilio Grande and his two *campesino* friends, Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Rutilio Lemus. The actual date is March 12, but we are going to anticipate it out of prudence and to avoid being seen as ill-intentioned. Next Sunday we will celebrate a Mass in El Paisnal, and on the following Saturday, March 11, we will celebrate a Mass here in the cathedral at 11:00 o'clock in the morning. Father Grande's fellow priests will concelebrate the Eucharist. We have an obligation, sisters and brothers, to preserve the memory of our beloved collaborators. If they have died as martyrs, we should also recall the example of their courage and commitment so that the voice their enemies tried to silence through violence may never die. May it continue to cry out like Jesus Christ, «Do not fear those who can kill only the body but leave fully alive the word and the message of the eternal Gospel» (Matt 10:28).

In the same spirit, we have also been asked to celebrate Mass in the parish of El Rosario on February 28 in memory of those who died in the Plaza Libertad. I want to make it clear, dear sisters and brothers, that in doing so the church has no other intention than to pray for the dead. When those we pray for have died as a result of violence, then we must also deliver the same message about violence that we have repeated here on many occasions. There can never be peace as long as we seek to establish peace through repression. There will be peace only when human rights are respected, and among these is the natural right to participate in politics and government in order to work with our God-given gifts for the common good of the nation. When some people believe they are irreplaceable and refuse to allow others to collaborate,

then such attitudes result, as the pope says, in painful situations that are later lamented when they produce violence³.

God willing, may these prayers for Father Grande and his companions in death, as well as the suffrages for others who have died, be understood as true messages of the church. Let it be very clear that the church has religious goals; her reflections on social, political, and economic matters come from her religious nature, from union with God and from prayer. Every liberation movement, every political party, and every group that seeks purely earthly objectives should not attempt to manipulate the church and her lofty religious goals. No one has the right to confuse the religious ends of the church when these coincide with the temporal ends of other groups. The church has a transcendent mission about which the word of God speaks clearly to us today.

But first I want to extend a warm greeting to the communities that gave me such kind reception this week: Los Llanitos, a pleasant village in Ayutuxtepeque; the parish of Concepción, where we initiated a clinic with the generous assistance of several doctors; San Matías, where Father Guardado with his people gave us a warm welcome as we celebrated their patron; Monte San Juan, a picturesque hill where a beautiful church was built under the direction of Father Antonio Alfaro. How we enjoyed the company of all these good people! Also, the Christian Cursillo movement in their meeting last Monday recommended an updating of their renewal movement in accord with the contemporary demands of the church.

We ask you to pray also, sisters and brothers, for the health of our dear brother, Father Uberto Calderón, who is hospitalized in the Polyclinic. We ask many prayers and much participation in the preparations being carried out throughout Latin America for the third general meeting of Latin American bishops, which will take place in October in Puebla, Mexico. Clergy, religious, and laity must be mindful of this meeting of the bishops and contribute all they can so that it truly gives voice to the authentic concerns of evangelization in Latin America.

As I told you, sisters and brothers, today's sacred word follows a pattern set down many centuries ago. It is like a school lesson plan that is offered to the catechumens, the people who are preparing to receive baptism on Holy Saturday evening. Thanks be to God, we are already baptized, but the Second Vatican Council invites us to become more aware of the meaning of our baptism during Lent (SC 109). We received it as babies without understanding it, but every year Lent gives us a new awareness of what it means to be baptized. Accordingly, the readings used in former times for catechumens are also helpful for Christians today. They speak to us about baptism, and at the same time they tell us about salvation history in a fascinating way.

Remember that two weeks ago, the first Sunday of Lent, we saw how salvation began with creation in Paradise, Adam and Eve, the first sin, and the promise of redemption. Last week the figure of Abraham was highlighted, the man chosen from an ancient people to form a people of God from the midst of whom would be born Jesus Christ as the promise of redemption for all peoples. He is the son of Abraham and the son of David. And today a third person appears: Moses.

³PAUL VI, «Address before the El Salvador Ambassador» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 December 1977).

Moses, the instrument of God for the liberation of his people

I invite you, sisters and brothers, to read for yourselves the book of Exodus during this week. Biblical scholars tell us that the exodus is for the Old Testament what the incarnation of Christ is for the New Testament. The Gospel makes no sense without the angel's announcement to Mary about a God who becomes human (Luke 1:26-38). So too, all the ancient history of the Bible is rooted in that initiative of God to form a people, to lead them out of bondage in Egypt to freedom, and to establish a covenant with them. The central figure of the exodus is Moses. He is God's instrument for this covenant and for liberation; he is called to forge a people that is distinguished from others by its laws and institutions; he is a gigantic figure, the pillar of the Old Testament. We cannot go through Lent without dedicating some thought to him since Lent is a time that prepares us for the feast of our redemption. In the history of salvation persons appear who foretell and announce this redemption. Moses is presented to us in today's readings in a quick glimpse, like a photo taken with a flashbulb. Moses strikes the rock with his rod, and abundant water gushes forth (Exod 17:6).

In order to understand the great beauty of the figure of Moses, we must remember the historical setting in which this event occurred. It was when the Israelites were fleeing from Egypt and found themselves in the desert dying with thirst. Almost blaspheming, they cry out, «Is God with us or not? Are you going to allow us to die of thirst? It would have been better if you had never freed us from slavery» (Exod 17:3). How difficult the people can be for those who want to save them! So Moses calls on God (for prayer is the escape of all the prophets): «Lord, what shall I do with this people? They are going to stone me! They are going to kill me!» (Exod 17:4). And God calms Moses with the serenity of one who is all-powerful and guides the people along difficult paths that appear impossible.

This, then, sisters and brothers, is the attitude of those people dying of thirst in the desert. The history of Israel is the history of this people of the steppes and arid lands. Water speaks a unique language, that same water that our thirsty mouths drink with such avidity. By satisfying the people's thirst, Moses takes on the role of liberator and transmits to future generations the meaning of redemption.

The redemption that Christ brings to the world

That is why Christ our Lord uses this language of water when he wants to explain the meaning of the redemption he brings to the world: «Let those who are thirsty come to me and drink» (John 4:13-14). I believe that among Christ's many explanations of redemption, none is more beautiful than this passage about the Samaritan woman that was read today.

This passage contains an excellent catechesis concerning baptism. If we want to understand what Christ did with us when our parents brought us to be baptized, then we simply have to read this passage about the Samaritan woman, and we'll see why we have reason to give thanks to God for being baptized. It's a shame, sisters and brothers, that we possess such exalted dignity because of our baptism and yet fail to understand the meaning of that important event. It is perhaps something we left behind in the memories of infancy, but it does not lead us to be grateful to God, nor does it lead us to make a commitment with our Lord.

Thanks be to God, many communities today are studying and reflecting in depth on the responsibilities of baptism. That is why we now insist, sisters and brothers—listen carefully—that it is necessary to participate in pre-baptismal talks in order to baptize a child. We should not make baptism simply a social event or an occasion to have a party in the house; it should not aim just at establishing bonds with godparents for social or political reasons. No, that is not baptism! Baptism creates a new relationship with God who was born of flesh and blood. Listen to how Christ instructs this woman so as to convert her to faith.

The scene begins with a physiological need: being thirsty. A woman carrying her water jug to the well encounters a Jew who makes a request: «Give me to drink because I am thirsty» (John 4:7). It was noon, and Christ was really thirsty. He asked the Samaritan woman for water, but the first impulse of that woman was to respond out of human, political considerations: «How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink? Don't you see we're not on speaking terms?» (John 4:9).

Christ uses her small-minded human attitude as a starting point to guide her toward transcendence. «Ah, if you knew who is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him and he would have given you living water that springs forth into eternal life» (John 4:10). The woman still sees things in material terms: «How can you give me water since you have nothing to draw it out of the well? Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well?» (John 4:11).

How limited people's vision is when they see only the immediate things of earth! That is why I told you before: do not confuse Christ's perspective with a merely human perspective. Never confuse Christian liberation with temporal, economic, social, or political kinds of liberation. Sadly, much slander is uttered against the church out of a desire to obscure her transcendent, rightful intentions. Like the Samaritan woman, many find it hard to understand; they say that «the church is meddling in politics», or «the church is subversive», or «the church only preaches to the poor».

This is the myopic vision of earthly liberation, sisters and brothers. When a liberation movement attempts to manipulate the church for its temporal goals, it is misusing the church, and the church will not allow it. Likewise, when influential persons with political power want to use or manipulate the church for their own ends, the church refuses to let them. Christ does not want to lose the perspective of eternity that he is offering the Samaritan woman just to satisfy his thirst. He prefers to sacrifice the thirst of his throat rather than betray the thirst for eternity that he is trying to satisfy in that woman who thirsts for so much more than water.

In the second scene Christ goes further and invites the woman into a relationship of faith. When Christ tells her, «Go call your husband», the woman is honest and says, «I do not have a husband». Christ is frank also: «You are right. You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband» (John 4:16-18). How sad is the reality of those who think they have no thirst for spiritual realities when they are dying of moral misery! That is why, sisters and brothers, the church relates to earthly types of liberation, but it does so to give them transcendent meaning. She tells them, «Do not be content just with earthly things. Look beyond».

When the Samaritan woman is surprised at his knowledge of her personal life, she confesses, «Sir, I see that you are a prophet» (John 4:19). Then, perhaps like someone wanting

to change the topic of conversation, she mentions a prophetic theme: «Since you are a prophet, what do you think about this controversy between Jews and Samaritans? You Jews say that God must be worshiped in the temple of Jerusalem, and we say that he should be worshiped here» (John 4:20). She is referring to Jacob's well there at the foot of Mount Gerizim, where according to Samaritan tradition the people of God built the first altars. Christ responds with the freedom of the true children of God: «Do not focus on religious controversies, for the hour is coming and is now here». As Redeemer he knows that the hour is coming when God will be adored neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. God will be worshiped «in spirit and truth» (John 4:21-23).

God is spirit and does not need temples. The temple of Jerusalem had only a relative meaning like all the earth's temples. Let them rob the churches in Quezaltepeque—who cares? That is not religion. Let them rob the material temples; the church's history is full of that. That is not why the church is on earth. The church is something different, says Christ. The church seeks worshipers of God «in spirit and in truth», and that can be done under a tree, on a mountain, or by the sea. Wherever there is an honest heart that seeks God sincerely, there is true religion. This scandalizes many, sisters and brothers, because many have wanted to tie the church to these material things. They call it prestige; they call it faithfulness to their traditions, but sometimes this is betrayal of the truth of the church. God is spirit and does not need the powers and things of earth. He seeks sincerity of heart. A call is extended to the Samaritan woman to be converted and to rise above her traditions and all the controversies. This sinful woman is now reaching the place where Christ wants to find her.

That is why this interesting dialogue at the well concludes with the Samaritan woman saying to Christ, «Sir, I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will teach us everything» (John 4:25). The beauty of this dialogue is seen in his brief response in verse 26: «I am he, the one who is speaking with you» (John 4:26). What an incredible revelation it is when someone in the midst of misery, limited by myopic vision and worldly cares, lets herself be led little by little by Christ, and then Christ lets himself be discovered in the depths of her consciousness: «I am he, the one who is speaking with you». Each one of us today encounters Christ, dear sisters and brothers, if we have come to this Mass with faith. That is why I tell you that it is not my person or my human words that matter in the message I deliver as a minister of Christ. As the French woman told me, I am only «the voice of that hidden being who wants to meet with you». Hopefully my poor words will awaken this concern in the many people who, like the Samaritan woman, desire redemption but look for it in a jug of water or an underground well. They have not been raised up with Christ to encounter him in the beauty of that true redemption: «I am he, the one who is speaking with you».

When the woman discovers that she has found the one whom her people were expecting for so many years, she forgets about her water jug, which she no longer needs. She runs to the city of Shechem and announces to everybody, «Come and see! Could this be the Messiah? He has told me everything I've done!» (John 4:26). She is no longer ashamed of her sins. Similarly, sisters and brothers, the church is not ashamed of her sins; she knows that she is human; she knows that she is composed of people like us who are fragile and miserable. When our enemies throw the sins of the church in our face, they don't realize that they are in fact praising our authenticity. Yes, we are a church of human beings, a church of fragile people, a church of sinners! We are the church of the Samaritan woman who tells her compatriots, «He told me that I've had four men and do not have a husband. He told me the truth. Come and see!» (John 4:39)

When this discovery of our miserable condition is received with humility and illuminated by faith, when there is good will, sisters and brothers, then Christ is found even in the church's defects. But when the eye is infected, when those who slander us have evil intentions, when the poison pens set out to malign us, when the radio announcers speak lies as readily as truth, then there is no sincerity. Christ himself could speak to these people, and they would not change for he said, «Not everyone will receive this message and this word with good faith».

Thus the Samaritan woman has become an apostle, and like an apostle she attracts many people to Christ. This is the final scene of this precious dialogue between Christ and the Samaritan woman. We could call this final scene «the hour of the church». It is no longer Christ himself who preaches; rather, he preaches through the Samaritan woman; he preaches through all those who come to believe in him. All those Samaritans came to see for themselves and to believe. They said to the Samaritan woman, «We no longer believe because of what you told us. We have seen him and heard him, and he has told us he is the one» (John 4:42).

My sisters and brothers, this is how every act of faith comes about. It may begin with the advice of a mother or a spouse or a friend or with something read in a book (at times through reading something occurs to us and sends us searching). Then a moment arrives when it is no longer the book nor the mother nor the girlfriend nor the spouse, but a voice is heard clearly: «I am he, the one who is speaking with you» (John 4:26). The voice is heard in the silence of prayer, in the quiet of the church, in the sincerity of the heart. We have found ourselves. At that point you are a Christian. This is what Lent is all about. That is why Christ ends this conversation by telling the apostle, «Lift up your eyes, and look at the fields of Gerizim, these fields watered from this well. Do you not say that there are four months between planting and harvesting? But I tell you: this harvest of God, these wheat fields of the church, do not need time for planting and maturing because the harvester is already receiving the payment of the one who planted» (John 4:35-36). This is the work of God, the hour of the church.

Right now in the archdiocese, sisters and brothers, Christ invites us to lift up our eyes. See how the fields are ripe for harvesting. They are being fertilized by those who persecute the church, just as manure fertilizes and produces the harvest in the good souls that are persecuted and misunderstood. They are yielding abundant harvests. This is the church's hour.

Salvation is God's initiative

I conclude, then, sisters and brothers, with the second reading, where Saint Paul describes for us the secret of the church's harvest. Why was the Samaritan woman converted? Why were the other Samaritans converted? Only a few months ago a number of people left the church and are now returning—why have they now been converted? Why do we find conversion and repentance in the hearts of the sinful, the foolish, and the young? How wonderful it is to see now that young people who before squandered their love and their youth are now discovering something serious in the one who calls them away from the thirst for earthly things. He calls them to leave immoral passion and gives them this noble thirst for the kingdom of God. There are communities of young people and communities of married couples; they represent a harvest of souls that everywhere is begging for laborers so that they be gathered in. Why? Because, as Saint Paul tells us today, «The initiative is God's».

In this way we come to know the infinite love of God. As Holy Week approaches, let us spend time in meditation. When we behold «the man from Nazareth, robed in purple», as the poet says, let us not see him as poetry. Let us not view the beautiful celebrations of Holy Week as just some folkloric custom of our land. Let us recognize in the image of the Nazarene—the crucified Jesus, the risen Jesus—God’s infinite love, which Saint Paul describes for us today with matchless eloquence: «In this we know the love of God, that while we were still enemies of God and miserable sinners, he sent his Son to save us» (Rom 5:8).

How many would offer up their life for another person? As Saint Paul says, «For a good person, one might find the courage to die» (Rom 5:7), but to give one’s life, for God to offer his own life, for a sinner—that is the foolishness of love, the foolishness of God’s love. God is not disgusted with us, great sinners that we are, or with those who want to expose our many faults. But they are worse sinners because they do not see the beam in their own eye and yet want to remove the garbage from their neighbor’s eye (Matt 7:3-5). We are all sinners, and we all have to turn toward God. This is the call that the church extends to everyone, to all her children; she calls the holiest and also calls her sinful children; she calls those who are not of her kingdom, which means everybody. For the sake of all of them, the church wants to imitate the Lord, who gives his life even for those who are his enemies and yet are converted. This is Christ’s love.

There remains conversion. In today’s second reading Saint Paul describes the psychological panorama of the Samaritan woman. Take note, sisters and brothers, of how she first came to the well, and then compare it to later, when she returned to her village. She has been converted, and she feels what Saint Paul tells us in the reading this morning, «We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God» (Rom 5:1-2). How beautiful life is, sisters and brothers, when we meet up with the One who comes to save us! How beautiful life is when we experience interior peace and can hope for future goods! How courageous those Christians are who have no fear of arms or torture or assaults because they speak the truth in peace and hope for a reward for their fidelity on earth! This was the courage of the Samaritan woman; this is what all those who are converted will receive.

My homily today is a call directed to those who have been baptized as well as to those who are still not baptized; it is a call directed to those who have been faithful to their baptism as well as those who have betrayed it. As we approach our Holy Week, perhaps we are distracted like the Samaritan woman, seeking the water of this earth, but let us, like her, also be anxious to find the water that springs forth into eternal life. On this Holy Saturday let us remember that the baptism we received many years ago made a fountain of living waters burst forth in the depths of our soul. There it is within you—so why are you dying of thirst? Feel it, live it, make it flow! This is the Holy Week we desire, a Holy Week in which that fount of baptism within each of us flourishes and brings us back to Christ by faith, by penance, by prayer, and by love—to Christ who by the Father’s initiative has come to give his life for us. Let us make an act of faith in these sublime truths.