

120

I ANNOUNCE TO YOU GREAT JOY: TO YOU IS BORN A SAVIOUR

**Christmas Eve
24 December 1978**

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

Fellow priests and dear sister and brother Christians, it is the church's greatest honor to proclaim to the world every year those words spoken by angels and first heard in Bethlehem: «I announce to you great joy: to you is born a Savior» (Luke 2:10-11). The church has no other reason to exist in the world except to be ceaselessly announcing that great news bulletin, that Gospel—a word that means «Good News». Evangelizing means announcing to the world this news of salvation. That is why we rejoice on this Christmas Eve to see this church, this cathedral we have here, full of faithful followers of Jesus Christ who come to honor his holy birth. The church's heart overflows with joy because this feast gives her an opportunity to fulfill her mission.

Along with you, dear sisters and brothers, I also have to take into my soul the good news of this night. As a pastor I have to announce it, but I also have to be one of those humble shepherds of Bethlehem and hear from the angels this news that enlivens hearts. Let us hope that all of us can hear this news with the same simplicity and humility as did those shepherds. The more simple and humble we are, the more impoverished and dispossessed, the more filled with anxieties and problems, the tougher the course of our lives, then all the more must we look toward the heights and hear the great news: «A savior has been born for you» (Luke 2:11); and all the more must we hear the song about that great news that is being sung throughout the universe: «Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those whom God loves» (Luke 2:14).

God loved us so much that he gave us his only Son to redeem the world. In today's three readings from Isaiah, Saint Paul, and the Gospel of Luke we find the precious elements of the Christmas message, and we should keep them in our hearts, just as the Bible tells us that the Virgin Mary kept in her heart everything the shepherds told her they had seen and heard (Luke 2:19). She reflected on these things in her heart because, even though she was the chosen mother of Christ, she was still a Christian who knew how to absorb in her soul the great message of this night. She also needed it. Who does not need Christ? Mary was supremely holy, but she owed all the privileges of her holiness, all her profound sanctity and closeness to God to that Christ who comes to save us.

In the middle of night, a great light shone

The prophet Isaiah presents us with a light that illuminates the night. Christmas has its origin in the winter equinox, December 25, the longest night of the year. The ancient Romans believed

that halfway through this winter night it was as though the sun were being born again. From that point on the nights became shorter until the summer solstice, when the shortest night of the year marks the sun's triumph over the darkness. The Christian church adopted this pagan feast of the sun, which the Romans called the feast of the «unconquered sun», the sun that is not overcome by darkness. But it was precisely at that moment when the darkest and longest night seemed to be overpowering the sun that the sun took up once again its procession toward victory. The church, therefore, baptized this pagan feast and marked December 25 as Christmas Day. But now the object of adoration was not the physical sun which will one day come to an end, but the eternal sun of justice, Christ our Lord. This is the night foretold by the prophet Isaiah: «In the middle of the night, a great light shone» (Isa 9:1).

Sisters and brothers, is this not a magnificent message for our hearts? Which of us has not felt at some time that our lives had become pitch-dark nights because of doubts about faith or the uncertainties of life or our ignorance about where we're coming from and where we're going? What great darkness there is in the hearts of individuals and societies and nations! The more confused our lives and our history appear to us, the more we need the brilliance of this sun. And tonight, the longest night of the year, how consoling it is to think that on this very night, the longer and darker it is, the light of Christmas shines forth, converting night into day so that «the people who walked in darkness will see a great light», as Isaiah says (Isa 9:1). Let us also walk in the splendor of that light!

This Christmas night invites us to faith; it is a night that says to the hearts of all, «Let us believe in Christ». He has told us, «I am the light, and whoever follows me will not walk in darkness» (John 8:12). My wish for all of you, dear sisters and brothers—and for myself as well—is that our lives never become shadowy nights but may always be illumined by the serene light of Christmas and by the joy of this great news. At every stage of our life we can count on the bright light of a Redeemer.

The kindness of our God has appeared

In the second reading Saint Paul presents the mystery of the birth of Christ under another aspect: «The merciful kindness of our God has appeared» (Titus 2:11). Paul invites us to respond to this coming of God by living honest and modest lives in order to be prepared for the second coming. Just now we chanted the beautiful prayer of Christmas: «Lord God, since every year you allow us to rejoice in celebrating Christ's coming, help us prepare ourselves so that when the Judge comes, we can go forth to meet him with a tranquil conscience».

Sisters and brothers, this coming of Christ at Christmas is a humble coming, so humble that theology calls it kenosis, which means abasement to the point of disappearance. Saint Paul tells us that Christ, though he had the dignity of God, paid no heed to that dignity but humbled himself to be born as a simple man (Phil 2:6-8). Being made man, he led a life of humility and poverty and suffered the horrible disgrace of being executed by crucifixion, the most shameful death sentence that history has ever known. It is for that that Christ was born, for his kenosis, for his degradation. Today's gospel told us that there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7). Not even a tiny room was available for the birth of the greatest of persons to be born; he had to find refuge in a stable for animals, in a manger. It was there in a stable that Joseph had to clean up the rubbish and find a place for Mary, who was about to give birth. That was the most

decent setting that their situation of poverty allowed. That was how the Redeemer was born: into humiliation, into poverty.

We must understand that Christ was born to redeem the world, but the redemption of the world cannot come about except by following the opposite path from the one traveled by those who have offended God. We have offended God by pride, by vanity, by selfish wealth, by power, by everything that goes by the name of sin and disobedience to God. As a consequence, redemption must take us back along the paths of humility, obedience, austerity, and self-denial. On those paths will appear the merciful kindness of the God who forgives us. None of us should have fears about the Lord's forgiveness as long as we return by the same paths of redemption that Christ has shown us. This Christmas night is an invitation to simplicity of heart and humbleness of life, and that's what Paul invites us to in today's reading: to a life of sobriety and sacrifice (Titus 2:12).

Dear sisters and brothers, the kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ has appeared, and with that kindness comes every grace of redemption and all the treasures of God's life. That is why the moment when Christ became incarnate and was born from the Virgin Mary's womb is called «the fullness of time»: it means that all God's promises are to be fulfilled in that child. The fullness of time means that in that child born of the Virgin is to be found the treasure of redemption that we all need. He is the source of our glory, our hope, and our joy. Let us open ourselves, then, to our Lord Jesus Christ, even though he appears as a poor little child, even though he dies by being humiliated on the cross, even though he is always on the road, as he told those who wanted to follow him, «Look, the birds of heaven have nests, the foxes have dens, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head» (Matt 8:20). «Those who wish to come after me should deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me» (Matt 16:24).

That is why the church preaches from the perspective of the poor and why we are never ashamed to talk about the «church of the poor». It's because it was among the poor that Christ wanted to teach his lesson of redemption. It's not because money is evil but because money often turns people into slaves who worship the things of earth and forget about God. We'll truly understand that redemption has come when we're able to rise above the things that make people happy according to the world's criteria, when we're detached and courageous enough to make our happiness consist in the way of the Beatitudes: «Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice» (Luke 6:20-23; Matt 5:6). If we understand that, then we'll know that redemption has come but that it comes only on those paths where people don't want to walk. On this night let us accept the message of the Lord's mercy and kindness so that we'll be ready when he comes a second time as judge. That second coming will not be in humiliation; it will be the coming of justice and will restore God's honor in the face of all those who debased it. In that second coming Jesus will gather all the blessed of the Father who have followed him. At that time, sisters and brothers, we will experience the joy of Christmas just as we are experiencing it here tonight.

I believe that our Christmas joy tonight, especially here in El Salvador, is a calm joy, a joy of Christian hope. Today I heard many voices tell me, «How sad this Christmas feels! It's as though it weren't really Christmas!» And the fact is that there are no external decorations. There is anxiety, there is uncertainty, there are so many people suffering; there are so many homes where loved ones are missing. Here in El Salvador there is indeed sadness this Christmas of 1978, but as Christians we know that there is a deeper joy, a joy that comes from

faith and hope, a joy that comes from hardship and from knowing that God does not repent of giving so freely of the mercy we have found. I encourage everyone to celebrate Christmas with that peaceful joy. We can thank God that we have a Christmas without so many commercial ornaments and transitory joys like the fireworks that explode and leave behind only trash. What I wish for all of us who are reflecting here today is the deepest joy—joy even in the midst of the sadness, the terror, and the anguish of our history. Despite all our distress there is a hope: «You have come, Lord, and we have found you. We put our faith in you, knowing that you come to save us. We know that the darker the night becomes and the more closed the horizons, even more still will you be our Redeemer». This is a night for prayer, a night when we stand by the altar of Jesus, who is born and comes to save us. This is a night when we pray with full confidence and with the serene joy that comes only from the true hope of which Christ spoke, «I give you peace not as the world gives peace» (John 14:27); it is the peace that is the fruit of sincere conversion and that awaits everything from God.

For us has the Lord been born

Finally, dear sisters and brother, the gospel tells us how Christ is born in history. He was born in concrete circumstances: there is mention of Roman emperors, governors of Palestine, and other particular people in history, all by way of telling us that Christ is born into the gritty history of humankind. The times we live in are not the same times as twenty centuries ago, as described by Saint Luke in the passage read today. If the birth of Christ were to be written today, in 1978, other names would be mentioned, and they'd include our own. It is for us that the Lord has been born. The birth we are recalling here is not of some other time and place, as if Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, and the magi, all of whom lived and died, were just leaving us something quaint to remember. No, the liturgy and the celebration of the church have the power to make immediately present to us the mystery that we are commemorating. Today is Christmas here in this cathedral. Christ is being born for us today. That is what the prophet Isaiah has told us: «A child has been born to us; a child has been given to us» (Isa 9:5). He is here now for us.

Let us truly experience it this way, because I know that each one of you feels the need, just as I do, to embrace as our very own child that Jesus who is born for all and who, in giving himself to all, gives himself to me in particular. Indeed, each of us can speak in the first person as does Saint Paul: «He loved me, and he handed himself over for me» (Gal 2:20). Let each of us truly proclaim, «The Lord is the Redeemer of my family; he is my companion in life, my confidant in time of anguish, my own redeemer who is at the same time the redeemer of all».

Let us therefore celebrate this Christmas Eucharist with profound faith and hope. It doesn't matter that the longest night of the year is just beginning. What matters is the light of faith that shines in our hearts. What matters is the hope we have in the midst of the sadness and distress of the present moment, a hope that inspires in us full confidence in this child who was born for us. Let it be so.