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ADVENT, A TIME OF JOYFUL HOPE

**First Sunday of Advent
3 December 1978**

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:3-6

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:33-37

Today is the church's New Year. The liturgical year begins today, on this Sunday that is called the First Sunday of Advent. And as I share with you these first moments of the new liturgical year, I have the impression that we are about to begin a new course in our school of liturgy. I urge all of you who are reflecting together with me at this moment: let us feel like students who are beginning a new school year! How enthusiastic students are when they're taking another step forward in their formation, whether it's a graduate studying training in a university or a small child just entering second grade! Our enthusiasm is a sign of the joy we experience as we begin a new course of study.

I was delighted by the comment of someone who told me that this Mass in the cathedral and my words as a teacher of the faith are like a real university. Many people here with us now are studying religion not just intellectually but experientially, because the liturgy is not merely about intellectual faith; it is above all a lived reality.

When speaking of the liturgical year, the Council said, «Within the cycle of a year, the church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation and birth until the ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the coming of the Lord» (SC 102). This is the broad outline of the path we are going to travel starting today as we prepare for Christmas and reflect on the great mystery of the incarnation and of a human family awaiting a Redeemer who will come at last to save this world.

And just as when we begin a new course in school, we also open a new book in the liturgy, the eternal book of the Gospel, and the text this year, beginning today, is the Gospel of Saint Mark. That is the gospel text we will read all this year, in accord with the way the biblical readings are organized in the liturgy. Take note of this so that, as you read the Bible in your homes, you'll consider the Gospel of Saint Matthew as the liturgical text of this year.

I'm fortunate to have before me an ancient testimony, going back the beginning of the second century, when the history of Christ's life was still recent. At that time a priest named Papias commented on another, still older testimony, which tells of how the Gospel of Saint Mark originated. Papias wrote that another priest had told him that «when Mark acted as Peter's interpreter, he carefully wrote down everything he remembered about what the Lord

said and did, but not in an ordered way»¹. Papias then offered his own comment: «Peter used to adapt his teaching to the needs of the moment, but did not establish an order in the Lord's oracles»². Last Sunday I mentioned to you what the present pope, John Paul II, stated, «I am the successor of Peter. I follow in a long history of popes, of pontiffs, but I am the bishop today, and I will try to shed light on the realities of today».

That is what a homily is, quite precisely. It is the eternal word applied to the circumstances of today. And that is the same as what Saint Peter did, according to this second-century testimony: he did not preach the life of Christ in an ordered way; rather, he took from Christ's preaching the teachings he needed for the moment. That explains how Mark, as Peter's secretary, wrote his gospel: it contained, as Papias said, «everything he remembered, but not in an ordered way». He did not write in the orderly way that one would write a biography. The gospel should not be read as a biography of Christ. It should be read as a real life story. This is very typical in the Gospel of Mark: Christ not only preached, he made himself *present*. He was, he *is* the Light. He doesn't need to speak words. It's enough for him just to be present, just as light speaks nothing but illuminates realities.

What we'll have as a gospel text this year, then, is the living example of Saint Peter, the first pope. He will be speaking of the Gospel and of Christ not in an ordered, theoretical fashion but as a practical way of life that sheds light on the realities of El Salvador, on all that is happening here week by week, on the injustices but also the beautiful things. We will therefore try to imitate Peter, sisters and brothers. Please do not take it amiss that your bishop is using this *cathedra* in order to preach not a disincarnate Gospel but an incarnate one that sheds light on the reality of our time. Which of you is not hoping today for Gospel words that will shed light on the death of our dear brother, Father Ernesto Barrera? I must speak about that! Which of you is not hoping that something will be said today about the kidnapping of a Dutchman and two Englishmen in our country? That also must be spoken! By doing that we are not putting aside the Gospel in order to meddle in politics. We are *applying* the Gospel, as Peter did, to the needs of those who are listening.

I will therefore call my homily today, «Advent, a Time of Joyful Hope». I always like to sum up my homily with a succinct title so that the message is more easily grasped and perhaps better remembered. As I develop this theme, «Advent as a time of joyful hope», I will draw from today's biblical readings some of the sentiments Christians should have during this time of Advent. That is the purpose of preaching in the church: it gives people a Christian orientation and makes the lives of those listening more Christian. I have no other aim than that. I am nothing more than a preacher of the word of God, and I realize that my success depends on you, on your good will in accepting my preaching and trying to live it out. I also will try to experience joyful hope during these four weeks of Advent, this time of preparation for Christmas. But that means practicing these virtues that the word of God points out to us: first, poverty and hunger for God; second, watchfulness and faith; and third, active Christian presence in the world. That is what Advent is about! That is Advent's message of joyful hope! As you see, then, the word of the Gospel brings us joy and optimism. Even without escaping from the harsh reality in which we live, our Christian hearts are full of joy, expectation, and fortitude. Nothing can take away from us the joyful expectation of the Lord.

¹ EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 59, 15.

² Ibid.

Poverty and hunger for God

The first thing I have to say is this: Advent calls us to the spirit of poverty and hunger for God. Advent is a time for conversion as we prepare for Christmas. Those who experience conversion seek God. But how are they going to seek God if they don't realize that they need God? Nobody desires freedom if they're not aware that they are wearing chains, that they are enslaved to some situation. You can't desire liberation if you don't realize that you're oppressed. So poverty is precisely that. When we speak about the church of the poor, we are not engaged in Marxist dialectic, as if there were also a church of the rich. Rather, we are repeating what Christ, inspired by the Spirit of God, said: «The Lord has sent me to preach the Gospel to the poor» (Luke 4:18). What this text of the Bible means is that you have to become poor in order even to hear the Gospel. The poverty of Advent consists in hunger for God, and the poor are hungry.

The hunger Advent seeks to foster is the hunger you heard mentioned in the first reading. The first reading, from the book of the prophet Isaiah, describes the social and religious situation of the Jews who were returning from exile. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they found the temple abandoned; there was nothing there. They did not find there the warmth and joy that were needed to form a human community, and they longed for community. Among those returning from exile was one devout man who sadly contemplated that desolation, those abandoned streets, those remnants of the foreign oppression that had destroyed the city. He also contemplated himself and the other survivors who were returning from exile, and he saw the negativity and the sinfulness of many of them. «We have not learned the lesson», he thought; «God has punished us for our sins».

So he rose up—just read the whole of chapters 63 and 64 of Isaiah. There you find the beautiful prayer of which today's reading gives us just a fragment: «You, Lord, are our Father. Why do you harden our heart and let us wander from your ways? Return out of love for your servants and the tribes of your inheritance!» (Isa 63:16b-17). Then follows a prayer that is perfect for the liturgy of Advent: «May you rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you!» (Isa 64:1). This is hunger for God. Those who feel themselves empty are contrasted with those who feel self-sufficient—in this sense being «rich» means being proud. The term «rich» applies even to those poor people who have no wealth but who think they don't need anybody, not even God. This is the wealth that is abominable in God's sight, as the humble but feisty Virgin declares, «He sent the rich away empty»—those who thought they had everything—«and he filled the hungry with good things»—those who felt in need of God (Luke 1:53).

This is the primary virtue of Advent, sisters and brothers, so I beg you: let us try to empty ourselves of our self-sufficiency. Let us practice this very appropriate virtue as we prepare to receive the gift of Christmas. Let us hope for it from God, who alone is rich and who comes to fill the emptiness in us that cannot be filled by all the Christmas gifts in the world if there is pride and vanity in our hearts. Let us examine our hearts to see whether we feel truly poor, whether we are honestly honoring the church of the poor, the church of those who hunger for God, the church of those who feel that without God everything is emptiness and pollution. The psalmist prays, «We have all become impure, and our justice is like a filthy rag. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away» (Isa 64:6)³. Oh, that this beautiful confession would become the prayer of Salvadorans! How badly we are in need of

³ The citation is actually from Isaiah, not from a psalm.

peace! So much blood, so much crime, so much terror! And when we speak of terrorism, we are not thinking only of those who attack the men in uniform. We are also thinking of that terrorism which wears a uniform, a terrorism that is equally horrendous as it slaughters people and fills them with fear. (Applause)

The second reading also tells us that this hunger for God is a reason for us to hope. Why do we put our hope in God? Are we alienated, as the materialists say when they criticize us? «You people don't fight on earth because you're waiting for everything from God». That's not true! We work hard, but we still hope because «faithful is the Lord», as Saint Paul reminds us today (1 Cor 1:9), and all goodness comes from on high: life, intelligence, the human qualities that can make our country better. But, sadly, many are using their intelligence to destroy and oppress and get obscenely rich, not to be God's instruments for bringing happiness to others. That is why the primary virtue for this season is the attitude of putting our hope in God, but we also need the attitude of working hard and doing what we have to do as humans.

Vigilance and faith

The second virtue that appears in today's biblical readings is staying alert, which Christ himself commands to us in the Gospel of Saint Mark, this new book which we'll be treating with all respect during this coming year. Saint Mark has written a page that is like the beginning and the synthesis of all that he is going to tell us in the course of the year. Mark's is the shortest gospel because for him the one most necessary message is also short: «Beware, stay alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and assigns each of his servants a task and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, stay awake!» (Mark 13:33-35). This is what I tell you and what I tell everyone: stay alert! This is the key message of Advent: stay alert!

Advent—now I'm going to explain to you the liturgical meaning of this beautiful word. Advent is the name given to these weeks of preparation for Christmas because the spirit of this season consists in waiting for the One who is to come. Advent means just that: «coming». In today's reading Saint Paul tells us that we are preparing ourselves for this coming (1 Cor 1:7-8). Advent recalls the first coming of Christ, which was foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament; they announced that God would come in suffering and humiliation to save the people. Advent gathers together all the sighs of the Old Testament. Advent gathers together all the pages of the prophets. Advent gives voice to all the longings of the prophets as they are expressed today in the people's hunger for God: «Please come, Lord, to save the people!» Advent celebrates the coming of salvation in Christ some twenty centuries ago, but it is salvation of the future, not just history. Advent also means the second coming of Christ, when he will come to judge, when he will come to bring his saving work to completion.

Right now we are doing this work in the church; we are making God's kingdom. Outside the church as well, all those who fight for justice and all those who cry out for justice in unjust situations are working for the kingdom of God, even if they aren't Christian. The kingdom of God goes beyond the borders of the church, and that's why the church applauds every effort that is in keeping with her struggle to implant God's kingdom. A church that tried to keep herself pure and uncontaminated would not be a church that helped God serve the human family. The authentic church is one that is ready to converse even with prostitutes and publicans, as Christ did (Mark 2:16). She converses with sinners, with Marxists, with members

of the Bloc, with diverse movements, all for the purpose of bringing them the true message of salvation. Christ comes to save people wherever they are found. Christ wants to go forth, in his church and in his followers, to the crossroads of the world to announce the final judgment when history will reach its climax, when the new heavens will be created in which there'll no longer be any injustices (Isa 65:17). The injustices will be set apart in a place that corresponds to them, for the final word will be spoken by the Lord.

Advent calls for vigilance and faith, a vigilance that makes present now, in the middle of today's world, this Christ who is preparing the new heavens. Christians don't sit around and wait for everything to come in some future age. Christians know that Christ has already been working among us for twenty centuries. He is recreating humankind, but that means we need a social order that will organize the world according to the heart of God.

The Council solemnly stated that the restoration of the world has already begun. When Christ came, he brought God's life and grafted it into the heart of history. Christ has already put the divine leaven into our humanity; blessed are those who find it and join forces with it. That's why it is repugnant, sisters and brothers, that a church that is trying to bring the saving presence of Christ into our modern-day sins and errors should be criticized in order to perpetuate a false reading of the Gospel, a reading that is so disincarnate that it totally dissociates from the world whose job it is to save. Christ is already there in history. Christ is already there in the entrails of the people. Christ is already working on «the new heavens and the new earth» (Isa 65:17). The work of Advent is precisely having faith, becoming aware that Christ is constantly coming. Advent is not just a few weeks when we prepare for Christmas. Advent is the life of the church. Advent is the presence of Christ putting to work his preachers, his priests, his catechists, his Catholic schools, and every other institution so that the authentic kingdom of God becomes a reality. In this way we tell people that the prophecy of Isaiah has come true: «Emmanuel, God is with us!» (Isa 7:14).

And in this context of faith that feels Christ truly present, I invite all of you now attending Mass as a Christian community in the cathedral to grow in your faith, for that is why we come to Mass. The church's liturgy does nothing more than make the mystery of Christ present through the sacraments and the liturgical life (SC 102). When the church speaks of the liturgical year, she means the way she replicates year after year the mystery of Christ and displays it for Christians to meditate on, but she is not simply cherishing a memory. It's not like the fifteenth of September, when we recall the great historical date of September 15, 1821—that is no more than a memory. The liturgy is not history; it is not just recalling the past. The liturgy has the power to make present the whole mystery of Christ (SC 7). For us Catholics, for example, this season of Advent means that spirit with which Christ comes to save the world makes itself wholly present to us; that spirit seeks to become the hope and strength of the Salvadoran people. And the Lord *can* save us today because the entirety of his saving mystery will make itself present if only we know how to accept it.

In this regard I also officially announce to you that on this day I have promulgated a pastoral instruction on the sacraments⁴. It will come out in published form, sisters and brothers, but at this solemn moment of the beginning of Advent I call on you to take advantage of these treasures called the sacraments, about which Pope Paul VI has said, «We can never sufficiently stress that evangelization does not consist only in the preaching and teaching of a

⁴ The full text was published in *Orientación* in its editions for 17, 24, 31 December 1978 and 7 January 1979.

doctrine, for evangelization must touch life. It must touch natural life, to which it gives a new meaning thanks to the evangelical perspectives it reveals, and it must touch supernatural life, which is not the negation but the purification and elevation of natural life. This supernatural life finds its living expression in the seven sacraments and in the admirable radiation of grace and holiness which they possess. ... But if the sacraments are administered without the solid support of instruction regarding these same sacraments and without a general catechesis, they could end up losing their effectiveness to a great extent» (EN 47). This is regrettably true: we have accustomed our people to receive the sacraments without sufficient awareness of what they mean.

I especially regret what happened last Sunday when a huge crowd of people brought their children to be confirmed. There were more than two thousand children here, and it was a sheer miracle than no one was suffocated. One person remarked that it was like judgment day! News had gone out that there were to be no more confirmations, but what I'd actually said is that we are no longer going to confirm small children, the ones too young to understand the sacrament. We're going to wait for the children to reach eight years and older to attain the use of reason; we want them to realize, as far as they're able, that they are receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What I'm saying about confirmation I also want to say about baptism. It's true that children should be baptized as infants because «unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven» (John 3:5). Nevertheless, with baptism there is an obligation on the parents: children are baptized only on the understanding that the parents are committed to educating them in the faith. If parents are not aware of the meaning of baptism, then the sacrament cannot be given even to the children. These are sacraments of faith, and they should not be treated lightly. And what we say about baptism we say also about matrimony. We're going to require our priests to be more rigorous in requiring pre-sacramental talks, following the example of my venerated predecessor, Archbishop Chávez. These instructions will help the faithful become aware of what it is they're receiving in the sacraments. We don't want people to marry without reflection and then separate after just a few years. Matrimony, baptism, and confirmation are sacraments of faith and give us the light of faith: in them Christ our Lord becomes present to us.

There's a beautiful passage in the personal diary of a Protestant man who became Catholic. He wrote, «I wasn't a Catholic because I didn't like the sacraments. I thought they were human inventions that hindered my direct relation with Christ. I wanted to believe in Christ without the church, but now I understand that the sacraments are actions of Christ, and I give thanks to God that there is a church that carries out Christ's redemption in the name of Christ». That's how we should all view the sacraments. The Italian writer Manzoni used to say, «When I go to confession, I don't know whether the priest who grants me pardon is more in need of forgiveness than I am, but at that moment I know that in his gesture and his words, "I absolve you of your sins", it is not the priest forgiving me but God through him».

Christ is present in the life of the church through his sacraments, and that is one of the spiritual aspects of Advent: we keep watching for the Lord who will come one day. Or even better, we discover that he's already living among us and we fail to recognize him. Still, he will be revealed: «Whatever you did to one of these poor sisters or brothers of mine, you did it to me» (Matt 25:40). How close Christ has been to us, and how often we've failed to recognize

him! Advent should enable us to discover the face of Christ in every sister and brother we greet, in every friend whose hand we shake, in every beggar who asks for bread, in every worker who seeks to exercise his right to organize a union, in every *campesino* who looks for work in the coffee groves. If we recognize Christ in them, then we won't rob them, deceive them, or deny them their rights. They are Christ, and whatever is done to them Christ will take as done to him. This is what Advent is about, Christ living among us.

Christian presence active in the world

Finally, sisters and brothers, Advent is Christian presence in the world. Don't forget that we are celebrating the incarnation. We are celebrating the infinitely loving gesture of God who so loved the world that he sent his own Word, his own Son, to become man in the womb of Mary (John 3:16). Mary should be a central figure during Advent. Thanks to her great purity, God was able to find the bosom of a holy woman where the holy Word of God would become man.

But notice that Christ became a man of his people and of his time: he lived as a Jew, he worked as a laborer of Nazareth, and since then he remains enfleshed in all men and women. If many people have distanced themselves from the church, it is precisely because the church has distanced itself somewhat from humankind. But a church that identifies with all that is human, a church that seeks to encompass the pain, the hope, and the anguish of all those who suffer and all who rejoice—that church will be Christ present, the Christ we love and hope in. And that depends on us.

We are the ones who are going to make Christ present, and here I invoke the second reading from Saint Paul, who is writing to the Christians of Corinth. Those of you who know the history of Paul's time will realize what a dissolute city Corinth was. Its reputation was such that prostitutes everywhere were dubbed «Corinthians», and men who were giving free rein to their appetites were said to be «going to Corinth». That will give you some idea of the licentious society where Paul was trying to sow the seed of Christianity. Despite all this, a community was born there! So we should not be afraid of difficult situations. Even if they're more difficult than the situation in Corinth, we should work all the harder to produce ferment in our society.

Saint Paul tells the Corinthians that he thanks God for them and he keeps them present in his prayers because «in Christ you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, and the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of the Lord» (1 Cor 1:5-7). It is like telling a group of young people in San Salvador, «Even though you see how your dissipated companions are enjoying themselves with prostitution and drugs, you have found your own complete happiness. Keep living in that precious joy, for you have been given the fullness of the Lord's delight».

Advent wakes us up to the fact that people can experience extraordinary joy even in a very depraved sort of world, and they can bear witness to Christ even before a corrupt society. In a world like ours, which so evidently needs social transformation, how can we fail to ask Christians to make the justice of Christianity incarnate in their homes and in their lives? How can we not ask them to become new men and women who are agents of change? Medellín tells us that «it is useless to change structures if we don't have new women and men to manage the

new structures» (M 1,3). Even if the structures change, even if there is agrarian reform and all the rest, but they are run by the same people with the same selfish vices and the same egotistic mentality, then all we'll see is new rich people, new assaults, new reasons for outrage. It's not enough just to change structures. This is what Christianity is about. I have insisted on this, so please understand me: the change that the church preaches starts with the human heart. We need new women and men who know how to be the leaven of a new society.

Events of the week

Sisters and brothers, making Christ present in society is the serious duty of every Christian, especially during Advent and Christmas, and it is precisely in the context of this duty that I take time every week to include a little news report, offered in the light of the Gospel. This is the moment when I tell something of what our church is celebrating and suffering.

Last Sunday, for example, the church celebrated the arrival of some new priests from Maryknoll, a congregation in the United States. They are going to be working with us in the districts of Dulce Nombre de María and San Francisco Morazán in the department of Chalatenango. And yesterday another team from Maryknoll went to work in Ciudad Barrios in the Diocese of Santiago de María.

Another cause for the church to celebrate is the flourishing of lively communities such as the one I encountered last Sunday in San Marcos. There I confirmed a group of young people who made clear their commitment to remaining faithful to Christ, who was bestowing his strength on them through confirmation.

I also celebrate those in the church who are promoting the matrimonial apostolate; last Tuesday they held an encounter for married couples in the church of El Carmen in the Colonia Roma. I rejoice also when I see so many of you lay folk who are enthusiastic about working as pastoral agents. On Wednesday in El Paraíso they had an evaluation meeting that I was supposed to attend, but because of the circumstances surrounding the death of Father Neto I couldn't be there.

But I did go, as I say, to Father Neto's parish, San Sebastián, to offer my condolences to that orphaned community. And what joy it was on that first Friday night to encounter a community which, despite their grief at losing their pastor, still showed itself to be a vital Christian community. You shouldn't have the idea that they're a bunch of revolutionaries. They are a group of caring Christians who are trying to put into practice what Father Barrera taught them, for he it was who dedicated all his efforts as a young priest to that parish of San Sebastián in Ciudad Delgado. In that regard, I invite you to come to that parish next Saturday evening at seven o'clock, when they'll be celebrating the end of the novena for the death of Father Neto. Someone asked me, «Why didn't you celebrate a "single Mass" for Father Neto, like the one they celebrated when Father Grande was killed?» I responded, «These are very serious matters. I wouldn't dare to decide about them by myself, but I do invite you to come for the grand funeral at the end of the novena». Likewise, I invite you and everyone to come next Saturday night at seven o'clock to Father Neto's orphaned parish so that we can offer prayers for his eternal rest.

I also took part in the graduation of a group of young women who successfully completed a course in sewing and dressmaking in Mercedes Umaña. Another group will be graduating in the parish of San Rafael Cedros.

Last night I had a good time in the parish of San Martín, the place where they robbed the consecrated hosts. As I witnessed last night, the people there have great devotion to the Eucharist; they filled the parish church to make an act of reparation to the Lord. The hymns and the prayers were incredibly beautiful, especially that oft-repeated «Pardon, Lord, pardon». I congratulate the parish of San Martín, which I believe will become even more fervent because of this blow of having lost the eucharistic presence.

This evening at seven o'clock they will also be celebrating a novena in Plan del Pino, the hometown of Valentín, one of the men who died with Neto Barrera. In San Sebastián they told me that Father Neto had gone out with Valentín that same morning to look for some wood to make desks for the parish school, but they never returned. The news reports have flung a great deal of mud, but they never make any mention of the money that Father Neto had with him—and it must have been plenty since they were going to buy wood.

I would like to unite myself to the pain of the family of the youth, José Ricardo Alfaro Durán of Colonia Miramonte, who died in a traffic accident this week. I remember him fondly because he was perhaps the greatest spiritual fruit of Father Alfonso Navarro, whom they murdered last year. I also unite myself to the pain of the religious superior of the Oblate Sisters, Mother Carmen Scaglietti, whose mother died in Costa Rica.

The eighth, as you know, is the feast of the Immaculate Conception, a mystery that our peoples celebrate with great joy—and not only in Nicaragua. Indeed, this year poor Nicaragua probably won't be able to rejoice as they customarily do on this feast of the *Purísima*. Here in El Salvador, in any case, let us honor the Virgin the best we can. The sisters of Citalá have asked me to give them special publicity because they're promoting pilgrimages in the villages of that district, which will culminate on the eighth with a magnificent celebration.

Also I want to congratulate Father Plácido because today, the First Sunday of Advent, he is celebrating ten years of working with *El Minuto de Dios*, a program shown every Sunday on Channel 2 at nine in the morning. The other day he told me that I was giving him unfair competition, but I believe he always has a much bigger audience than I do. The good that he does is great, so I congratulate this priest while rejoicing and giving thanks to the Lord.

In the parish of Santa Lucía there occurred something painful but also noble. In that parish Father Astor has the custom of making the church available to poor people who have nowhere else to hold a wake for their deceased loved ones. Well, they were holding a wake recently when two uniformed agents appeared and opened fire. When the people reproached the agents, they became insolent and insulted the people. The priest recognized the two men as guards from the women's prison, so he went and spoke to the commander there. The commander very nobly heard Father Astor and promised to dismiss the agents. A few days later he told the priest, «Father, everything is fixed. Those men have already been dismissed». That is an example, I think, a tiny light in the darkness. How wonderful it would be if all the assaults committed by uniformed men were properly sanctioned! To be sure, they are citizens

as well, but it's not right for them to assault their unarmed fellow citizens just because they have arms themselves.

A married couple has asked to remind people that their son, Óscar Roberto Orellana Martínez, will have been imprisoned for two years on January 3. He was captured in the Colonia Guadalupe along with the *campesino* Julián Pérez, both aged twenty. Other prisoners who were able to escape report that the two of them are still alive. The parents' letter specifically reads: «My poor wife is so distraught that only those who are not mothers can fail to understand. Don't they see that two years of absence and suffering are just too much?» The parents are asking the government to free the two young men or at least to try them in the courts. I take advantage of this circumstance to repeat what is the great desire of the church: a Christmas without political prisoners, a Christmas that brings peace back to all the homes that suffer distress because their sons, their husbands, their brothers have disappeared.

The pope spoke recently about those who are persecuted for being faithful to truth and justice⁵. Stressing that their suffering was identified with the suffering of Christ, he mentioned circumstances very similar to the ones our own communities experience, even though the pope was referring to the countries behind the Iron Curtain, according to the news commentary. So you see, many people claim to be motivated by anti-communism, but anti-communism of that sort is sometimes more cruel than communism itself.

We learned from the newspapers that the foreign minister of El Salvador was received recently by the pope⁶. Nothing is known about what they discussed, but I believe the pope must have followed the line that Paul VI took when speaking with our ambassador Don Prudencio Llach: he reminded him that in our country the church must be granted freedom and the evident injustices of our social order must be corrected⁷.

The church in Chile is pressuring the government there to reveal the fate of hundreds of disappeared persons. We unite ourselves also with the anguish of the archbishop of Managua, who is making every effort to resolve the political crisis of his country through peaceful means.

Sisters and brothers, I want to express my gratitude for your many expressions of solidarity with the petition of the English parliamentarians; to my great honor they have nominated me for the Nobel Peace Prize⁸. In particular, the CUTS and the CTS have sent statements supporting the nomination, as have other organizations and persons whom I consider to have good judgment. I wanted to express my gratitude for these expressions of solidarity by writing a little article for *La Prensa Gráfica*, as I do every week, but this week they apparently didn't have room for the article. I hope they publish it for me next week. In any case, I send my gratitude to everyone through the radio, which provides us a large audience, thanks be to God. However, I want to tell you that this is only a nomination, not the prize. I thank the

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, «Allocution on the Solemnity of Christ the King», 26 November 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (3 December 1978).

⁶ On 1 December 1978 John Paul II received in private audience Dr. José Antonio Rodríguez Porth, Minister of Foreign Relations of El Salvador. *L'Osservatore Romano* (10 December 1978).

⁷ PAUL VI, «Discourse to the Ambassador of El Salvador in the Vatican» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 December 1977).

⁸ In October 1978, 118 parliamentarians of the United Kingdom of Great Britain proposed Archbishop Romero as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. The official letter nominating Romero was published in *Orientación* (10 December 1978).

English parliament for this gesture, but I know that there are many other persons who are much more deserving of the prize than I am. Meanwhile, while I make no pretension of winning that international prize, the voice of the English parliament has given me very powerful support, and I will be forever grateful. Many thanks! (Applause)

I also want to give thanks for the many expressions of condolence that have arrived in the wake of the violent death of Father Rafael Ernesto Barrera⁹, who was pastor of San Sebastián in Ciudad Delgado. I want to tell you that the funeral was truly impressive. I believe that there we heard the voice of the people who love their priests. I'm very sorry that the People's Revolutionary Bloc caused problems with their shouting and their slogans. More impressive was what took place in the church, a place of prayer; there we heard the Christian hymns of people who prayed as they heard the news of that death.

The commission named to investigate the case has already issued two bulletins. The first one¹⁰ was sent to the media but was not published in its entirety; some people even think that they want to distort the information a bit. The investigating commission has found contradictory evidence. For example, in *El Diario de Hoy* we read, «The police were pursuing the driver of a car with such-and-such license plates, and when he got out of the vehicle he left it blocking the street in front of the house». Another contradiction is between one press report that speaks of a group of «five youths» and the report in *La Prensa*, which speaks of about thirty or of about «twenty-eight men». *La Prensa Gráfica* also informs us that «according to those leading the operation, the men in the house received them with gunfire». But according to the eyewitnesses, «each time that the security forces opened fire, the sound of whistles could be heard from inside the house». The official communiqué and *El Diario de Hoy* mention «four men», and *La Prensa* «about twenty-eight».

The official communiqué is the only one—and this is most important—that mentions the case of José Isidro Paz. The official communiqué points out that «he was seriously wounded and on the verge of death». According to *La Prensa Gráfica*, «He was wounded and left the house when his companions weren't paying attention». The same paper published a photo in which he appears to be leaving on his own feet; that's the way he appeared on television as well; he didn't give the impression of being so seriously wounded. Later on *El Diario de Hoy* reported that he came out with his hands up. With respect to the death of Mr. Paz, the official communiqué says that «he was on the verge of death in a medical center», whereas *El Diario de Hoy* says that «according to official sources, he died when he was being transferred to a medical center» and the bulletin of the public relations department of the National Police states that «Portillo Paz died in the confrontation».

The bulletin of the investigating commission concludes, «There are well-founded reasons for doubting the veracity of the different versions that have so far been published»¹¹.

⁹ Father Rafael Ernesto Barrera Motto and his companions, José Isidro Portillo Paz, Rafael Santos Ortiz, and Valentín Martínez Piche, were assassinated on 28 November 1978.

¹⁰ «Information Bulletin No. 51 of the Secretariat for Social Communication of the Archdiocese of San Salvador» in *Orientación* (3 December 1978). The quotations from the newspapers cited in this bulletin can be found in the issues of *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* for 29 and 30 November 1978. The official communiqué of the Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic was published in these papers on 29 November 1978.

¹¹ Ibid.

The commission consequently issued a second bulletin¹², which makes this serious allegation: «There exist decisive proofs that José Isidro Portillo Paz, one of the four men who were killed in the incident of Tuesday 28 November, was captured alive after he had come out of the house on his own feet. After being presented to reporters and television viewers, he was murdered by the same security forces while he was in their power. He died as the result of a bullet shot into the cranium; it destroyed the brain mass, according to the report of the forensic doctor». So he came out on his own feet, and the forensic doctor issued a statement that that man's brain was destroyed by a bullet.

The commission concludes, «There is sufficient reason to believe that the security forces killed him to prevent him, once he was free from coercion, from revealing the true facts before a court and unmasking the maneuvers of the security forces». Therefore, sisters and brothers, even though the church doesn't have any other sources of information, let us not forget this deed. In keeping with our demand for human rights, we accuse the security forces of murdering this man who could have been saved; they obliterated the life of this man by destroying his brain.

The commission also states, «Since the forensic doctor did not specify, as he should have done, whether rigor mortis had set into the corpses or how long they were dead, we were unable to determine whether the other three, among whom was Father Ernesto Barrera, died during the supposed confrontation or previously. For this reason, we are not surprised that some persons claim that they had been killed before the shootout. With regard to the priest, there are strong indications that lead us to assume that he was tortured and that the fatal shots were delivered at close range».

It seems to us rather unlikely that four persons with two light arms could have done battle with one hundred fifty members of the security forces that had all kinds of weapons and that the battle would have lasted so long.

Another thing should be borne in mind, namely, «That same day, at around seven o'clock at night, the same security forces captured the youth José David Ramos García near the house where the military operation was carried out. He was weeping when they captured him and clearly suffering a nervous attack. We have learned that this young man was undergoing psychiatric treatment; therefore, any declaration he may have given should not be considered credible». I say also in the name of human rights: it is only just that they set free this poor sick young man.

As regards the political affiliation and activities of Father Ernesto, which they have tried to vilify, I can tell you with all sincerity: I have no personal knowledge of them. You all know what I think in this regard in any case. In my third pastoral letter I spoke about the role of the priest, and I stated the norm that is obligatory for all: «It is normal, and indeed frequently happens, that priests and their closest lay collaborators, precisely because they desire to preach an incarnated, committed Gospel, will have a keen interest in political problems and that as citizens they will feel more sympathy for one political party or popular organization than for others. Indeed, it is quite understandable that, when asked, they will collaborate in

¹² «Informational Bulletin No. 52 of the Secretariat for Social Communication of the Archdiocese of San Salvador» in *Orientación* (10 December 1978). The passages that follow in quotation marks are textual quotations from this bulletin.

giving a Christian orientation to the political activities of the faithful who are working for justice. But it is our duty to remind them and insist with them that, in whatever priestly work they do or in whatever pastoral labor that is requested of them by individuals, parties, or organizations, they must always strive first and foremost to be animators and promoters of Christian faith and of the justice that faith demands, in accord with the great Christian principles that we have here cited»¹³.

For the sake of those who would involve the church in terrorist actions, I also want to recall what I previously expressed in the pastoral letter: «The violence which some people call “revolutionary” we prefer to classify as “terrorist” or “seditious” since the term “revolutionary” should not always have the pejorative meaning with which it is used here. Another type of violence is that which emerges from what Paul VI called “explosive revolutions of desperation”. This violence is usually organized, and it takes the form of guerrilla activities or terrorism; it is mistakenly thought to be the ultimate and the only effective way to change the social situation. It is violence that provokes and produces fruitless, unjustified bloodshed; it leads society toward explosive pressures that cannot be rationally controlled; and it disallows in principle every form of dialogue as a possible means for resolving social conflicts»¹⁴.

I have also condemned fanatical violence, that is, «the kind that some groups or individuals consider “mystical” or “religious”. They worship violence as the only source of justice; they propose it and practice it as the only method for implanting justice in the country. This pathological mentality makes it impossible to check the spiral of violence, and it contributes to the extreme polarization of different groups in our society»¹⁵.

We have in this pastoral letter, sisters and brothers, a clear expression of what the church thinks about becoming involved in dangerous activities which the church can neither support nor be responsible for.

We are now celebrating the anniversary of the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. We feel great pain when we realize that those rights are for us pure fantasy. For example, the fourth principle states, «The child shall enjoy the benefits of social security. He shall be entitled to grow and develop in health. To this end, special care and protection shall be provided both to him and to his mother, including adequate pre-natal and post-natal care. The child shall have the right to adequate nutrition, housing, recreation and medical services».

We grieve with those persons whose properties have been consumed in fire, and we express our solidarity with them¹⁶. We continue to call on those who should be investigating what is causing these crimes and these misfortunes that remain unexplained.

We wish to unite ourselves also with the two English bankers who have been kidnapped¹⁷. No group has yet taken responsibility. We ask that these men be given the

¹³ *The Church and the People’s Political Organizations*: The Third Pastoral Letter of Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, and the First of Arturo Rivera Damas, Bishop of Santiago María (6 August 1978), 35-36.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁶ On 30 November 1978 a fire destroyed the municipal market in Usulután. *El Mundo* (1 December 1978).

¹⁷ Ian Cameron Massie and Michael Chatterton, manager and assistant manager of the Bank of London and South America, were kidnapped on 30 November 1978. *La Prensa Gráfica* (2 December 1978).

freedom that is their right. Regarding the kidnapping of the manager of Philips¹⁸, we unite ourselves with him as well. The FARN has claimed responsibility for that abduction.

Now you can perhaps understand what the priest Papias meant when he said the Gospel of Saint Mark was disorganized because it was trying to imitate the preaching of Saint Peter. Rather than deal with theories, Peter wanted to use the word of God to throw light on the realities of his time, which meant the realities of Rome and Nero's empire. Now we understand that the pages of the gospel should do the same for us as well: they serve as a light that illuminates the ways of justice and goodness; they help us to see and reject the evils of injustice and violence.

I invite you all to enter into Advent, this time of spiritual preparation for Christmas, with the spirit I have mentioned: hunger for God. Let us be poor in spirit and feel a need for God. Let us be watchful and attentive to the presence of Christ in the poor, in our friends, in our sisters and brothers. Let us not treat them in ways we would not treat Christ. Finally, let us as Christians commit ourselves to being actively present in this society where we are called to be heralds of the kingdom of God! Let it be so!

¹⁸ Fritz Schuitema was kidnapped on 24 November 1978. *La Prensa Gráfica* (30 November 1978).