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GOD COMES TO SAVE US

**Fourth Sunday of Advent
18 December 1977**

Isaiah 7:10-14

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

As we get closer to Christmas, the readings of the word speak to us about God's nearness, and they should fill us with great hope. The title of today's homily could be «God Comes to Save Us». God is coming despite the pessimism and distress we feel during these times when the horizons of life and history appear to be closed. God comes to us and opens paths of light, and all God asks of us is that we respond with faith and trust in him.

Feeling God to be near us, we should be intensely hopeful. We should reflect on this with joy in our hearts, but our joy should not be the superficial kind that many have at Christmastime. Rather, it should be the profound joy of faith, a joy that we project onto the realities that surround us because we are people who have our feet firmly planted on earth. We live our history while remaining true to our convictions and our dearest hopes, no matter how we are affected by the reality around us. Each one of us must confront our own realities and personal problems. Every family has its own history as well, and the family of families, which is the nation, is also constructing its own history. The kingdom of God is formed by all of us who humbly desire to follow Christ the Redeemer. As Jesus said, we must be a people of light, a people of strength, a people that is leaven in the dough (Luke 13:20-21), a light to the world, and salt of the earth (Matt 5:13-14). This is the aim of our Sunday preaching. I am grateful to the Lord for the good will of all of you who listen by radio and all of you who fill the cathedral, because your presence and your attention are a sign of profound hope. Let all of us who feel responsible as persons baptized in Christ form ourselves into this people that redeems the world. Let us build within our community a kingdom of God that is solid, intimate, and holy so that it radiates the beauty, hope, and light that our country is searching for.

Events of the week

It seems to me that there is a marvelous harmony between the thinking of our archdiocese and the message the pope addressed just this week to the new ambassador of El Salvador to the Holy See, Don Prudencio Llach. According to the notice we read in the press, the pope «praised the determination of the Salvadoran people to better their general condition of life, based on the global vision of humanity taught by the church»¹. The pope said that the church's views on the human collectivity must be kept in mind in order to improve the general living conditions of our people. The pope also told the ambassador of El Salvador that the church wishes «to

¹ PAUL VI, «Address before the New Ambassador of El Salvador to the Holy See» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 December 1977).

respect in a permanent way the competency of temporal powers, that is, the government, and she accepts a constructive dialogue with the civil authorities»².

The pope asserted that the Salvadoran church needs «the freedom necessary to preach the faith, to teach her social and moral doctrine, and to exercise her mission among women and men without hindrance»³. The church's path, according to the pope, can «prevent evils and overcome the climate of violence that unfortunately has caused tragedy for the church herself»⁴. The pope did not forget our victims, the priests and their collaborators in the evangelization of our country. The pope also stressed the need to create «a social atmosphere that would correct the evident injustices that prevent created goods from being distributed in a more equitable way among all people»⁵.

When the complete text of the pope's message arrives, we will publish it, but even this brief summary gives me great joy because I find that the pope's thoughts provide a perfect grounding for the evangelical stance of our archdiocesan church. We have not said anything different from what the pope has just stated. We have defended here in El Salvador the global vision of humankind which the church presently preaches, and we have insisted that this global vision should not be confused with other ideologies that are not part of the church's mentality. We have also proclaimed that temporal power should be respected, and there has been no interference in temporal power on the church's part. We have also accepted, as the pope says, «constructive dialogue». «Constructive» means dialogue that is based on deeds and on sincerity. We are ready, as the pope indicates, to enter into dialogue, but it must be in an atmosphere of trust where there are not only promises but deeds and sincerity.

This is marvelous. It is what we have always defended. The pope defends the church's freedom to preach the faith and exercise her ministry among the people without any hindrance. The ministry of the church also involves human rights because she is the defender of the law of the Lord on earth so that everything that violates human dignity and freedom is part of the church's mission. That is why the pope supports the exercise of this mission of the church among the people without any hindrance at all. The pope laments that there has been «tragedy in the church herself», and he calls upon people to prevent these evils and overcome the climate of violence. Along with the pope, we also have cried out against violence, whether it be the institutionalized violence that represses or the subversive violence of the oppressed. The church cannot tolerate any violence that is stained by sin and hatred and resentment.

The pope also stresses that a social atmosphere should be created in El Salvador in which «evident injustices» are corrected. We should be very clear about this idea. The pope points out that there are evident injustices in our society, and he asks that the country be organized in such a way that created goods are distributed more equitably among all people. So you see, sisters and brothers, at this Christmastime we have been given a great gift by the magisterium of the church. The pope's words show that the preaching of our archdiocese is truly in harmony with the Gospel. I say this because the pope has always been for me the touchstone for the authenticity of the doctrine that God has revealed to humanity.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

That is why I rejoice, sisters and brothers. Not everything calls for pessimism. We have repudiated injustices and laws that are not in accord with Christian thinking, but now I am happy to learn about a proposed law that deals with taxes on rural properties⁶. The provisions of the law do honor to a government that is concerned about the well-being of those sectors that have fewer resources, particularly in the rural areas where it is necessary to provide services and means to deal with the problems of health, education, and housing. Naturally these resources have to come from the agricultural sectors, but this must be done in a way that does not diminish the enthusiasm to continue making progress in the technical area of agricultural systems. In other words, we are talking about Christian and social justice.

Hopefully, in fulfillment of the pope's desires, we will one day have in El Salvador laws that take into consideration the sectors that have fewer resources. Then we will see that a country which eliminates social injustices will at the same time overcome the dangers of terrorism. Hatred and conflicts will disappear when the laws themselves provide us with national institutions that are in accord with the thinking of God, who has created us all to be sisters and brothers to one another. In light of this thought, sisters and brothers, I also want to express my solidarity with the 280 girls, 280 boys, and 60 adults at the Concha Viuda de Escalón School, which was founded thirty-four years ago and is in danger of being unjustly dislodged. I call upon those who have the competency to resolve this problem to do so justly. I also hope that just solutions that respect human dignity will be found for the labor problem that has arisen in the Quality factory and for the eviction of *campesinos* from the estate of San Francisco in Zácatecoluca.

Life of the church

I rejoice also in this Christmas season, sisters and brothers, because during this week the church has experienced some delightful moments. For example, on Thursday we had a very worthwhile clergy meeting in which we evaluated the circumstances in which we have worked during this very complicated year. I think that I can characterize this meeting of the priests as having three qualities: sincerity, solidarity with the bishop, and optimism.

There was sincerity as the priests spoke openly about their own deficiencies and even about the sins that we may have committed in the extraordinary circumstances of our ecclesial lives during this past year. This sincerity led us to look to the Gospel to find authentic means for collaborating with Christ in building the kingdom of God in El Salvador.

The solidarity of the priests with the bishop moved me so profoundly that, as I am speaking here this Sunday with my voice, I feel as though I am being supported by all the priests and religious and committed laity working in the pastoral ministry of the archdiocese. It is not my voice alone, a voice crying out in the desert. I know that in every parish and every community there is a priest, a religious community, a group of faithful laity who are in full solidarity with the thoughts of this unworthy servant who has been chosen to lead this diocese and to be the expression of the life of the church in this whole region. I thanked the priests profoundly, and they have committed themselves to even stronger solidarity. They went so far, in fact, as to turn around that phrase I spoke before. Whereas I said, «Whoever touches a priest

⁶ A few days later the legislative assembly approved this law under the title «Law of Territorial Agricultural Tax». See *Diario Oficial* (22 December 1977).

touches the bishop», the priests said instead, «Whoever touches the bishop touches all the priests».

I thank you sincerely, dear brother priests. Be assured that I will never in conscience betray this profound vote of confidence and solidarity. I also congratulate you for your joyful optimism to the point of suffering, if need be, for the name of the Lord. Your sense of purpose fills all our people with great hopes, and I call upon the people to show their solidarity with and gracious appreciation for the work of our beloved priests.

In Suchitoto we had a meeting with all the priests of the department of Cuscatlán after the celebration of the feast of their patroness, Saint Lucy. The meeting gave us a great sense of promise and solidarity. I want to express here publicly the gratitude of that parish and of the whole archdiocese to our beloved Bishop Chávez y González, who has retired with the satisfaction of being able to say, «Mission accomplished!» May God bless you, bishop, and may the Lord continue to bless your years. May the Lord make you a beautiful example of priestly fidelity to ministry, to the hierarchy, and to the people of God!

In Tacachico we celebrated the feast in honor of the patron Saint Paul and the Immaculate Conception. This is a beautiful, enthusiastic, joyful, and welcoming community. I want to congratulate the pastor, young Father Jorge Salinas, for the balanced way in which he is developing the ministry in that parish. Yesterday, Saturday, we introduced a community of Passionist Sisters to San José Villanueva. I was very happy to see the spirit of commitment with which these sisters have gone there, and I rejoice too at the generous welcome the people have given them. Yesterday afternoon also we warmly embraced Father Agustín Griseri as he celebrated in El Calvario fifty years of priestly life. May God bless him!

I will conclude this section, sisters and brothers, with three announcements. The first is that tomorrow morning at 9:00 o'clock the patronal feast of Saint Joseph will be celebrated in the Colegio San José of the Dominican sisters in Quezaltepeque. Several communities will be present at this parish celebration in the spacious locale of the sisters' school. The second announcement is that on Christmas Eve here in the cathedral we will celebrate Mass at 7:00 o'clock in the evening. Given the circumstances, we want to move the hour forward. So I invite everyone to gather here in the cathedral on the twenty-fourth at 7:00 o'clock at night. We hope that this Mass will be transmitted by this radio station.

After the Mass the mothers, wives, and family members of those who have disappeared will gather together as a family for a Christmas dinner. A call has gone out to all the homes that have someone missing. The dinner, which will be here in the crypt of the cathedral, serves a purely human and religious purpose. We ask those families who will be celebrating Christmas without the anguish of a disappeared relative to pray earnestly to the Lord that these disappeared loved ones may soon return to their homes and that the arrival of the new year will bring greater joy to those homes. The church would experience great joy, sisters and brothers, if the ambassador of El Salvador in Rome were to tell the pope that our government was declaring a wide-reaching amnesty as a gesture of benevolence during this Christmas season. This would bring joy and comfort to so many homes. And finally, I want to announce that the World Day of Peace promoted by Paul VI will have a strong echo here in El Salvador. On January 4, 5, and 6, here in the cathedral, there will be conferences given by distinguished persons. Archbishop McGrath from Panama has confirmed that he will be here, and there will

be other speakers as well. I invite everyone to experience these days as days of prayer of solidarity with the pope's desires that there be true peace in the world.

In such an environment, sisters and brothers, Christmas arrives. God comes to save us! That is the cry of the word of God this Sunday. I want to propose three ideas on which we can reflect deeply during the coming week: first, God has a plan to save the world; second, the church has the job of working out this plan of God in history; and third, the reaction of humankind that God expects in order to save the world.

God has a plan to save the world

My first thought is that God has a plan to save the world. The apostle Saint Paul has described this for us today with incomparable words. «This Gospel that I preach», says Paul, «was promised previously through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures. It is the Gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received the grace and this mission to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles and among the people of the whole world» (Rom 1:2-5).

What does this mean? It means that God is not improvising. When God foresaw the fall of humanity and the rupture of the dialogue that had been established at the beginning of history, he also foresaw redemption, a redemption in which his Son would personally come to this earth. And we are assured by the Gospel of Saint Matthew that this eternal plan of God was not an illusion. The prophets foretold the coming redemption. In today's reading the prophet Isaiah tells about the day when he gave a sign to King Ahaz, who was afflicted because two neighboring kings (the king of Israel, that is, northern Palestine, and the king of Damascus in Syria) were plotting to remove him from the throne. King Ahaz sought the support of the powerful king of Assyria who he hoped would come and defend him. Isaiah told the king not to trust in men but to trust in God and God's promise of an offspring of David. Ahaz was a descendant of David and was soon to have a son to succeed him, Hezekiah. But God's promise had in view not just the fertile wife of Ahaz but considered the promise that God had made long before to David. God had told David that an extraordinary woman would be the sign of God's power because this woman, while remaining a virgin, would become the mother of a child who would be called Emmanuel, God-with-us (Isa 7:14).

How beautiful is this image of Mary, our Lady, in the earliest times. Mary cannot be absent from our Christmas hopes. A Christmas without Mary is a Christmas without tenderness. A promise of salvation without a beautiful woman who is an enchanting and holy virgin would not be a human redemption, because God wants to give us his graces through the tenderness of a mother. In these days of Christmastide, sisters and brothers, may our hearts grow in love for the Virgin Mary, the mother of Emmanuel, God-with-us!

King Ahaz did not want such a sign but trusted more in the king of Assyria, and so Isaiah rebuked him, saying, «Is it not enough for you to weary men? Must you also weary my God?» (Isa 7:13).

When the fullness of time had arrived, as we heard in Saint Matthew's gospel today, the promise made through Isaiah seven centuries before was fulfilled. A virgin of Nazareth

received the angel's greeting and the promise: «You shall conceive in your womb and bear a son, and he shall save his people from their sins». When Joseph, according to today's reading, became concerned about the pregnancy of his betrothed, who through a miracle of the Spirit of God was to have a virginal birth, he also heard the words of the promise: «You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins» (Matt 1:21-23). This is the God who saves us, Emmanuel.

In the second reading today Saint Paul develops a theology that through the centuries became a favorite theme for theologians. Even today the theology we call Christology is a very popular field of study; it treats of the nature of Christ. Saint Paul laid the foundation for an authentic Christology. He says that on the one hand this Christ was a descendant of David according to the flesh; this Christ was a man who belonged to a kingly dynasty as God had promised. As a man he belonged to our history; he suffered as every human suffers; he carried in his human heart the anguish of one and all; he was human. How wonderful it is, sisters and brothers, to think that Emmanuel, God-with-us, is a man, a human person who understands us, accompanies us, consoles us, and enlightens us. On the other hand, says Saint Paul, this man was the Son of God anointed by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the blessed woman who would bear him (Rom 1:4).

One day this Christ anointed by the Holy Spirit was born in Bethlehem. He was not the fruit of the marital union of a man and a woman but was miraculously and virginally conceived. The one whose immaculate flesh was to be immolated on the cross for the salvation of all people was born of a virgin. Then, three days after dying he rose up. That flesh of the Virgin that became the flesh of Jesus was also destined to ascend as the Son of God to be seated at the right hand of God the Father. And there he lives eternally, the son of David according to the flesh, made Son of God by the Spirit. And from heaven he sent his divine Spirit. That is the plan of salvation for all people. This Divine Spirit, won by the son of David who becomes the Son of God through the resurrection, is a Spirit that can invade every person who surrenders to the overwhelming power of redemption. Don't forget that in this letter Saint Paul is writing to the Romans, who were pagans not Jews. He tells them, «I, who have been chosen to preach this redemption to the Gentiles and not to the Jews, am happy to come to you, the people of Rome. I am going to bring you the redemption that Christ also brought to you because you are also the people of God» (Rom 1:5-6).

That is what I also want to say to you, dear sisters and brothers and beloved radio audience. I want to say to you what Saint Paul said to the Romans of his time: «All of you whom God loves and whom God has called to form part of his holy people, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ» (Rom 1:7). This means that the redemption planned by God is reaching all people without any exception. It is reaching even those who feel they are sinners, those who feel that their sins are unforgivable. Who knows if my words are reaching the person whose hands are bloody with Father Grande's murder or the one who shot Father Navarro? Who knows if I'm being heard by those who have killed and tortured and done so much evil? Listen, there in your criminal hideouts! Perhaps you are already repentant. You too are called to forgiveness! Whenever I have cried out against violence, I have always added something about repentance for your sins so that you become children of God. Paul preached to the Romans, a pagan people among whom crimes and injustices abounded, but he told them, «This redemption in Christ is summoning you, but it summons you in Christ, in Christ brought by the Virgin».

This redemption is a redemption from sin, sisters and brothers, for that is what the angel told Saint Joseph, «You are to name him Jesus because he will forgive the sins of the world» (Matt 1:21). That is the starting point of Christian liberation. When we struggle now for human rights, for freedom, for dignity; when we feel that the church's ministry means showing concern for those who are hungry, those who have no school, or those who suffer exclusion, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that the consequences of sin are all these injustices and crimes. That is why the church knows that she is saving the world when she undertakes to speak of such things.

The pope has echoed the views of the bishops who participated in the synod of 1974. We have heard from the bishops of the world, the pope said, the cries of millions of people asking for the church's help in obtaining their liberation. The church cannot be deaf to these cries; she is concerned about promoting liberation from sin and all its consequences. The pope then spoke this beautiful phrase that is found in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: «The church strives always to insert the Christian struggle for liberation into the universal plan of salvation which she herself proclaims» (EN 38).

What does this mean? The church continues to carry out the saving plan of God; she has not withdrawn herself from this task. When she sees the great desire for liberation in the peoples of America, she incorporates this desire and this struggle into her mission of Christian liberation in Christ. She tells all who work for liberation that a liberation without faith, without Christ, without hope, is not authentic; a liberation brought by violence and revolution is not effective. Liberation must begin with the redemption of Christ, the redemption from sin. Laws and structures are meaningless as long as people do not renew themselves interiorly and repent of their sins and try to live more justly.

The church has the job of working out this plan of God in history

This is the plan of God, and so I present to you my second idea, that this plan of God is communicated through the church. The church today in 1977, and in a few days in 1978, is doing nothing more than what Saint Paul said, She is «proclaiming the Gospel of God, the plan of God to save the world in Jesus Christ» (Rom 1:1).

That is why the church is pained when her mission is viewed with suspicion. Her dignity is wounded when people want to make themselves judges of her way of preaching. The church has received this mission from God. And the pope has just told the ambassador of El Salvador in Rome that no obstacles should be placed in the way of the church's evangelizing or her preaching. This saving plan of God is to be developed by the church in El Salvador free of all hindrance. This is the freedom that the church will always demand, and she will not allow herself to be chained even when she is forced to be silent.

Sisters and brothers, the church is not just the bishops and the priests; the church is all of you who have been baptized, you as Christian families, professionals, students, workers, and *campesinos*. When I say here that the church is working out this saving plan of Christ, sisters and brothers, I call upon all who are baptized to be enlivened and enflamed with enthusiasm for this plan of God, this plan that no one can detain, this plan that must be realized because God wants to save humanity in Christ. God wants to make Christ known through Mary, the

Virgin who gave birth to Emmanuel, God-with-us. This is the great duty, the sweet duty, the sacrificial obligation of all Christians.

The reaction of humanity that God expects in order to save the world

Finally, sisters and brothers, let us look at the reaction of human beings to this plan of God which continues to be the plan of the church. We find here some interesting figures.

In the first place we find a king who out of false religiosity says, «I do not want to tempt God. I will not ask for the sign you offer me». And the prophet Isaiah reprimands him: «It is not that you do not want to tempt God, but rather you want to follow your own human plans because you trust more in the power of your armaments. You love the king of Assyria more than God's plans» (Isa 7:12). This rejection of God's promise was tragic because the same king to whom Ahaz appealed for help would only a few years later invade Judah, imprison the people, and lead them into exile.

This is a sad example of how to react to God's plans, for it rejects God himself. At this time in El Salvador, how many people are rejecting the preaching of the church, maligning her and discrediting her? As Jesus said to the Pharisees, the church can say to these people «Hypocrites, you yourselves do not enter into the kingdom of God, and you do not allow others to enter either» (Matt 23:13). My sisters and brothers, I appeal to the mature judgment of all of you: do not allow yourselves to be seduced, and do not yield to false religiosity like that of King Ahaz. Otherwise you will reject the simple word of the Gospel, a word that asks for sacrifice, renunciation, equality, and love.

Naturally this word is painful, and it is easier to reject it, but it sometimes happens, sisters and brothers, that reactions against God's plan also come from good people. We have a concrete case before us, and it would be good to meditate on it. Saint Joseph is upset: how is it possible that a good woman like his wife is going to be a mother without having any relationship with a man (Matt 1:19)? This holy and just husband is tempted to have bad faith about an equally holy wife. The Virgin was also upset, for she said to the angel, «How can I be a mother if I have no relations with a man?» (Luke 1:34). My sisters and brothers, the plans of God are way beyond human calculations, as the angel explained to Mary, «Your cousin Elizabeth, old and sterile, is also going to be a mother because for God nothing is impossible». At that point we see the faith of the Virgin when she says, «Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word» (Luke 1:38). And as today's gospel tells of Saint Joseph: «When he awoke from his dream, he accepted the word of the angel, and with no doubt and great trust took Mary as his wife» (Matt 1:24).

Saint Paul is another example of how to react to God's plans. He was a persecutor who thought that Christianity was contrary to his Jewish religion. But then the risen Christ knocked him from his persecutor's horse in order to make him the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:3-4). Notice, sisters and brothers, how there can be great trials even for people of faith. Why does this happen? Why does God permit this? This cannot be from God! Is it not true that this temptation has arisen in the heart of all of us more than once? This is the hour of trial, the hour in which God's plan wants to assert itself, not because people think it is possible but because God loves us and his love makes all things possible. Who could believe that God would become

a human being and end up despised and put to death on a cross? Well, this was so possible that without Christ there is no salvation.

Let us have faith, sisters and brothers. This should be our Christmas response. In congratulating Mary because she is going to be a mother, Elizabeth says, «Blessed are you who believed» (Luke 1:45). With these words we also are invited to profess that virtue that is today more necessary than ever: great faith. Faith consists in accepting God without asking God to adjust himself to our measure. Faith consists in reacting to God as Mary did: «I don't understand it, Lord, but may it be done to me according to your word» (Luke 1:38).

I know, Lord, that Christmas is the time when you draw near to our Salvadoran people. I know that our government, our collaborators, and our church are anxious for a happy future. I know that no one wants bloodshed, violence, or misfortune. Lord, teach us your ways even though we may not understand them. Give us a sign that you are with us, because Emmanuel, God-with-us, is not a promise of something over and done with. We know that you have remained with us, and you live among our people. This is our great hope during this Christmas season of 1977: God is with us. God comes personally to save us. We don't know how, but he comes.

Let us have great hope, sisters and brothers, and let us pray often. Let this be a Christmas of prayers and a Christmas of supplication! Lord, we suffer greatly. Lord, this people is very troubled. Lord, give us peace. Lord, you who save, count on our good will. We want to be like Paul, like Joseph, like Mary. We don't want to doubt you as Ahaz did. We want to be women and men of faith, committed to you, collaborators in your kingdom. May all of you, sisters and brothers, sow peace and optimism and hope in your professions and in your jobs. The Lord will come to save us. Let it be so.