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CHRIST, CENTRE AND GOAL OF HUMAN HISTORY

Second Sunday of Advent

4 December 1977

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-9

Matthew 3:1-12

... Saint Paul¹, speaking to us in his letter to the Romans, utters the words that were proclaimed today on this Second Sunday of Advent. During this season the church is reflecting on the great love of God, who sent us his own Son to save us from all the problems of history. The first words of Saint Paul impressed me greatly as I prepared this homily because I believe they help describe my modest contribution in spreading the word of God in this very difficult environment of El Salvador.

Saint Paul says, «Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope» (Rom 15:4). Be aware that preachers in our days are meditating deeply on the Scriptures because there is no other source for the church's message than Sacred Scripture, the word of God. But this word of God is not something written centuries ago that remains ethereal, theoretical, and disembodied. Rather, the preacher must incarnate this word in our present reality. That is why Saint Paul says that we need endurance—here he is speaking about the endurance we need in the present time in order to live in this historical time. These writings enable us to maintain our hope by joining the ancient Scriptures with the endurance and encouragement we need today.

That includes, sisters and brothers, all our present-day history, the events of this week and this very day, not only national events but also the events of our families. Every family has had its problems during this week. What is more, each of you and I myself have had our troubles, our personal or family difficulties, our problems in the neighborhood, in the town, in the nation, and in the world. The preacher cannot lose sight of these actual circumstances unless he wants to preach a Gospel that says nothing to the people of today. This is very easy to do, and that is why people often ask, «Why are there no problems in that church or in that place?» There can't be any problems if we're talking about the stars or about things that do not touch on all the difficulties that test our patience, our strength, and our present commitment.

According to Saint Paul in today's reading, the word of God has to be a word that is rooted in the ancient, eternal Word of God but that touches the present wounds and the injustices of today. And this is what creates problems. People begin to say, «The church is meddling in politics. The church is becoming communist». These accusations have become tiresome. Let me tell you this once and for all: the church is not meddling in politics. Rather,

¹ The greeting and opening words were not recorded on the tape of the homily.

God's word is like a ray of sunshine that comes from on high and illuminates. What fault does the sun have when its pure light finds filthy puddles and manure and garbage here on earth? The sun has to shine on all of this. Otherwise it would not be sun; it would not be light. It would not uncover the ugly, horrible things that exist here on earth. Just as the sun illuminates the beauty of flowers and the enchantment of nature, so also, sisters and brothers, the word of God illuminates the horror, the ugliness, and the injustice of earth. On the other hand, it also encourages those good hearts, which are numerous, thanks be to God; it brightens them with the eternal light of his divine word.

This is what it means to preach the word of God today. Such preaching, as in the days of the prophets, must create problems and awaken hatreds and stir up resentments. Indeed, we have been subject to the most vulgar forms of resentment. Nevertheless, sisters and brothers, it is the glory of light that garbage feels hatred toward it. It is an honor to be slandered by those who are made to feel bad for the injustice they commit. That is why I tell you, sisters and brothers, that I do not feel grieved by these slanders. I thank you for the countless manifestations of solidarity that have reached me during these days, but I want you to be joyful and confident because I am not afflicted by all of this. On the contrary, I am honored.

Events of the week

As we hear the word of God, sisters and brothers, how can we not feel grieved by the crimes that continue to occur in our country? Alfonso Muñoz was captured in Tacachico, and his whereabouts are unknown. Inés Merino was beaten near Zacatecoluca, and again no one knows where they took him. Thirty prisoners were deceived on the Hacienda El Porvenir in the canton of San Carlos Lempa; they were led away and have also disappeared. Pedro Medina was captured while seeking work. My sisters and brothers, this situation cannot continue. Many people were imprisoned and accused for participating in the occupation of the Ministry of Work², but these accusations have not been supported even by the witnesses from the Ministry. Yet none of those who were captured has been seen. There is no legal reason why these people should continue to be imprisoned.

We have heard about these cases, sisters and brothers, and we want an end to the terror. But who is sowing this terror? I want to remind you of some of the pontiff's words so that no one will say that these are just my words. The Holy See announced that the theme of the next World Day of Peace on January 1 will be: «No to violence! Yes to peace!» Take careful note of what the official Vatican press release states: «Violence can proceed from persons or groups who have handed themselves over to a craze for domination or a craze for consumerism. This tends inevitably to limit and suppress the lives of other persons and societies and often leads to racism and genocide, including the forceful imposition and maintenance of unjust and discriminatory political and economic structures»³. These are words of the Holy See. I am not inventing these words. I am simply repeating that there exists among us a craze for power and a craze for possession. There are people who defend their

² The building of the Ministry of Labor was occupied on 10 November 1977 by members of the Popular Revolutionary Bloc (BPR), who were demanding a solution to the labor conflicts in the Central American Nylon Industry (INCA) and El León factories and an increase in the minimum wage. See *La Prensa Gráfica* (11 November 1977).

³ «No to Violence! Yes to Peace!» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (30 October 1977).

power and their possessions, and they do so with manifest injustices; if necessary, they eliminate anyone opposed to their power and wealth.

At the same time let us not forget that we must be just. «Violence», the Vatican document goes on to say, «can also characterize the reaction of those who are or who believe themselves oppressed and whose desire for life and justice ends in an explosion. This is the violence of the weak, of those who are deprived of certain fundamental rights»⁴. Those persons may also yield to fanaticism, especially if they don't make an effort to understand how the Gospel and history relate to their fantastic ideas about their commitments in life. It is not that they despise us as Catholics who live this life that has nothing to do with communism, but they disregard the historical, temporal, and social dimensions which are the fundamental principles of the Divine Redeemer.

Life of the church

I rejoice and want to congratulate the promoters of the Fe y Alegría movement. This is an educational system promoted by the church, especially in the marginal zones. In the chapel of the Externado San José eighty-one young men and women received their diplomas, the young women as seamstresses and the young men as electronic technicians. I was very happy to tell them that this is the meaning of the church: she not only speaks but also acts. In those areas where Christ saw many people as sheep without a shepherd there has arisen, thanks to the work of the Jesuits and the collaboration of religious women and lay people, this movement that has given an evangelical dimension to the development of young people. Fe y Alegría is also doing many other things in these areas.

Concerning Christmas, dear sisters and brothers, I want to propose to you an initiative of the diocese of Santiago de María where Bishop Rivera has made a call to his people. Instead of spending money on Christmas cards and gifts, he is asking that they make a contribution to some charitable work that will benefit those who are truly in need. For my part, I tell you that I'm going to save the money I would have spent on Christmas cards and will happily deposit it in a fund that we are using to assist many poor people. For example, we are helping a widow with nine children, the oldest of whom is only twelve; her poor husband was killed by the authorities in Dulce Nombre de María⁵. So give the money for good works if it is not a problem for you. I don't say you should give it to the church. We do not want to give any opening to those who would malign us by saying that we are robbing these alms. Just act charitably toward whomever you wish to help. Near your house there may be someone who does not receive any Christmas cards; give the person a plate of tamales or something else that will be of assistance. There are many children who don't receive any toys. Don't give them toys, especially toy guns; let's not teach them violence as little children. Help these children with things that are more necessary. I invite you, then, to celebrate a true Christian Christmas, one that does not consist in banquets or drunkenness or an exchange of meaningless gifts, but that truly reaches the destitution of our poor people.

The contest of nativity scenes is now open, and the pastors of the different parishes are invited to choose local winners and bring them to the cathedral on January 6, the feast of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Reference to José Justo Mejía captured by the Hacienda Police on 9 November 1977 and found assassinated a few days later.

Epiphany, to receive their prize. We are promoting the use of Bibles in every home, especially in those homes that have made artistic nativity scenes in whose center is the child Jesus, the Virgin, and Saint Joseph. We invite you to continue to meditate on the word of God throughout the year.

Do not forget, sisters and brothers, that Thursday of this week, December 8, is the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which is celebrated in many places. I will be celebrating it in La Libertad. There used to be a custom that we seem to be losing. On the night of December 7, as a sign of our joy with the Virgin, bonfires were lighted, and doors and windows were illuminated with lanterns. Those who wish to rejoice and honor Mary for this privilege of the Immaculate Conception can do so in a beautifully folkloric way by decorating some corner of the house. On the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe we are promoting a procession that will be transmitted by radio so that all can hear the message of the Virgin. The Mass will be celebrated outdoors in the atrium of the basilica. I also want to let you know that today in La Vega the people began a novena in honor of Our Lady of Los Remedios. This is a very beautiful Salvadoran devotion to which all are invited. Lastly, in agreement with the pastor of this cathedral, Monsignor Modesto López, we are going to suppress the 9:00 o'clock Mass since this Mass at 8:00 is the principal Mass of the diocese and often extends beyond 9:00 so that those who come for that Mass are inconvenienced. I ask your forgiveness both for eliminating that Mass and for talking too long.

I know, sisters and brothers, that for many people these words are boring. People have told me as much in some notable anonymous letters. I repeat here the answer I gave them: those who do not like my words can turn off their radio or simply not come to the cathedral. But I see the attention you give me, and when I speak with friends who sincerely tell me the truth, they say that the occasion demands it. This time of confusion and the slanders against the church cloud the environment in such a way that it is necessary to throw light on these situations in some extraordinary way. That is what we try to do here, within the limits of my voice and my poor resources. I thank you, sisters and brothers, for the many manifestations of solidarity with these homilies here in the cathedral. Your very presence here as you fill the cathedral is a powerful motivating force. I know also that, together with this multitude in the cathedral, many parish communities have placed loud speakers in the bell towers so that the people can listen to these homilies. Other communities record these homilies so that they can later reflect on them together and learn from what they hear. I have no doubt, sisters and brothers, that I am nothing more than the Lord's humble instrument. «Blessed are those», said Jesus, «who are not scandalized by me» (Luke 7:23).

Christ, center and goal of all human history

The message of this Sunday in Advent, sisters and brothers, is a precious one. To begin I have here some words of the Council that are very important for us today. Ask yourselves whether these words do not reflect what each of us is experiencing in our conscience. Speaking to the world today, the Council says, «The imbalances under which the modern world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man. . . . No doubt many whose lives are infected with a practical materialism are blinded against any sharp insight into this kind of dramatic situation; or else, weighed down by unhappiness they are prevented from giving the matter any thought» (GS 10). Look at the two great evils of today. On the one hand, there are some people who live with great comfort and wealth; they are practically

materialists; they give no time or importance to analyzing the dramatic situation of the country or their own conscience; they are happy in their golden cages. On the other hand, there are those whose extreme misery leaves them no time to reflect on what is happening. What time does a poor person have who is wondering today whether he will find work tomorrow? Early in the morning he takes his bag and leaves home in search of work, but instead of finding work he ends up in prison or among the disappeared. These two extremes spoil this season of Christmas; neither allows us to see the Christ who comes among us.

The Council also says (and I ask you to note this well so that you do not confuse the church with communism): «Many look forward to a genuine and total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort; they are convinced that the future rule of man over the earth will satisfy every desire of his heart» (GS 10). This is the illusion of some forms of liberation that do not think of God but rather make everything rely on revolution and the powers of this earth. This is also the error of the practical atheism called materialism, which seeks happiness in the things of earth; it has no time for God but thinks it can find paradise here on earth. They will not find paradise, nor will they be able to build their paradise with repressive laws. A better world cannot be constructed only with human hands.

«This is the insolence of those who believe that human existence has no meaning and therefore make every effort to give a purely subjective meaning to their life» (GS 10). This is another temptation in our day. There are many, especially young people, who follow the philosophy of nihilism: if existence has no meaning, then what do we live for? Since life has no meaning, they put a bullet in their head or ingest poison.

What does the church say as she listens to these false answers to the dramatic situation of the present moment? The Council sums up my homily: «The church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to man by which it is fitting for him to be saved. She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history» (GS 10). This is the season of Advent, and this is the word that I proclaim today.

Isaiah cries out again when he sees that his kingdom of Judah is trying to form an alliance with Syria and Israel in the north and then with Egypt against the threats of powerful Assyria. The prophet tells his nation, «Do you not see that all of this is a betrayal of the Lord's covenant? Do you want to place your trust in armies? Are you saying that without an army there is no Judah or that without an army there is no republic? Do you really believe that the efforts of men are able to save Judah from the present situation? Do you not realize that the evil is much deeper?» The people began to desert their God, and injustice became established among them. There were great abuses, and all of this caused problems. «Be converted and return to the Lord», Isaiah tells them, «and then you will see how a fresh green shoot will sprout from the house of Jesse» (Isa 11:1).

Do you know who Jesse was? Jesse was the father of David, the king chosen by God to form a dynasty from which would be born Christ the eternal king. When Isaiah lived, this dynasty of Jesse was losing its splendor. It appeared to be a dead trunk, a tree that had died.

But the prophet announced to the people, «God has promised that from this dead tree will come forth a prince who will do justice».

Listen to the beautiful description you heard today: «Not by appearance shall he judge nor by hearsay shall he decide. He will judge the poor with justice and decide aright for the land's afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked» (Isa 11:3-4). Another beautiful description follows. Using the poetic image of conflict among the beasts of the jungle, the prophet says that when people are converted to God and place their trust more in God than in earthly armies or unjust human laws, then «the wolf will reside with the lamb». And he continues to describe a situation that seems impossible: «The panther will lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion will graze together; a child will put his finger into the cave of a snake, and no harm will come to him» (Isa 11:6-8). These images, sisters and brothers, tell us that now the world appears to be a jungle where human beings are beasts for other humans. We beat one another, we bite one another, we eat one another. But when we are converted, when we let God's kingdom enter our hearts, then it won't be wolf against wolf nor lion against lamb. Rather, all of us, rich and poor, will be brothers and sisters who eat together. Then we will experience the fatherhood of the kingdom of God. This is the Christmas the church desires.

In the second reading Paul also speaks to us about a separation of his time that even today kills people: the separation between Gentiles and Jews. Christ has come for all, says Paul (Rom 15:8-9). He came first for the Jews because so it was promised. In obedience to the plans of God, the mission was first carried out in Palestine, the Holy Land. But apostles turned to the Gentiles when they realized that the Jews, the Israelites, the chosen people, instead of repenting and returning to God, were placing a false trust in their religion, as if nothing were going to happen to them. Christ also saves us, the Gentile peoples who believe in God. Together with the faithful Jews we become the one people of God.

That is why today's gospel presents Saint John the Baptist addressing the crowds who came to be baptized. Among them were Pharisees and Sadducees for whom he had harsh words: «You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath of the day of the Lord? Hypocrites, you have taken the kingdom of God away from the people who should know the Christ who is coming. I address you leaders of the people, you religious leaders—because we priests also commit errors—and you political leaders—who also can commit errors. The people who should be guided by you to an encounter with God have been led away from God and have set up a false religion based on hypocrisy and appearances». This is the hour of the prophets, sisters and brothers, the hour of the authentic church. It is not the hour of those who believe they are saved because they think they are children of Abraham. «No», the Baptist tells them, «God is so powerful that he can make children of Abraham out of stones. You are children of Abraham, but you have become stones through the hardness of your hearts. You will not enter into the kingdom of heaven unless you are converted from your hearts» (Mt 3:7-9).

John the Baptist here makes a beautiful comparison: «The axe already lies at the trunk of the tree; God has already started to cut it; we are already in the last times of history. Be converted because the kingdom of God is near. The Son of Man is coming after me, and he is greater than I; I am not even worthy to carry his sandals. He is already beginning the harvest,

reaping the fields, winnowing with the wind so that the chaff is carried away and the wheat of good works remains» (Matt 3:10-12).

Good works, Christian hearts, true justice, charity—these are what God looks for in religion. A religion of Sunday Mass but unjust weekdays does not please the Lord. A religion of much praying but with hypocrisy in the heart is not Christian. A church that seeks to assure her own welfare with money and comfort but fails to protest against injustice would not be the true church of our Divine Redeemer. That is why the church must suffer and be persecuted, because many people set in their comfortable ways do not understand. Even priests can be an obstacle to the authentic kingdom of the Lord.

Dear Christians, this is the word that the church repeats once again as Christmas draws near: there will be no new continent in Latin America just by changing structures, passing new laws, or repressing with force (M 1,3). Doing that will only create more difficulties! There can be a new continent and a new people only when there are new women and men. As Saint Paul tells us today, people must renew themselves interiorly, clothing themselves in Christ and being converted. This is also the message of John the Baptist and Isaiah the prophet.

There we have it, sisters and brothers, and I feel tremendous joy because my word this morning, which follows the same lines as always, has found support in the prophet Isaiah, in John the Baptist, in Saint Paul, and in Christ himself. The authentic church cannot perish as long as she is supported by the true spirit of the Gospel. I want to awaken all my fellow Salvadorans, even those of you who are pessimists, even those who are terrorists and believe in repression, even those who pass crude laws against the people. To all you who are my sisters and brothers, Christians and non-Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics, I preach the word of a church that since the time of Christ has said there is hope. I tell you that El Salvador can be saved if it opens its heart to conversion, as Isaiah, the Baptist, and the church urge us to do. El Salvador will find peace if it is converted to love, justice, and the true well-being of all.

My sisters and brothers, I invite you to make this time of Advent a time of preparation for the birth of the child Jesus, a time for sincere examination of our own hearts. Let us put aside all that which hinders the coming of Jesus into the world, because we are all hindering it in some way. Let us begin by preparing the roads in the desert. May the dry trunks flower and the rocks be converted into children of God! May we Salvadorans, who have become fierce beasts fighting one against another, live together in joy as sisters and brothers, children of God! Let it be so!