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THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US

Third Sunday of Advent

17 December 1978

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio audience, for three weeks now we have been trying to give concrete expression to the spirit of this time we call «Advent». The Lord is drawing near, and we want to be ready for him. We sense that the Lord is close by, but we need faith to feel how really close God is to us. Another feeling we have is that of spiritual hunger and poverty. There is no desire to eat if there is no hunger. We cannot experience a need for God if we are proud and self-sufficient. Only those who are poor, only those who are hungry will be filled. This is the spirit of poverty that Mary the Virgin, whose canticle we have recited today in the responsorial psalm, proclaims in the name of all humankind; she gives voice to the need and the hunger we have for God. Blessed are those who see the coming of Christmas in the same way that a hungry person sees the arrival of a plate of food. We cannot long for freedom and liberation if we don't realize that we're enslaved. Still another feeling we have is a positive one; it is the missionary attitude of being present in the world, realizing that our mission is to make God present in a world that needs him.

In our reflection today I want to stress especially this third attitude of presence. I do this precisely because the readings you just heard highlight the mystery of the incarnation that we are now celebrating. The incarnation is the mystery that gives meaning, mystique, and unity to all our anticipations of Christmas, and Christmas cannot be understood unless we have faith in the great mystery of the incarnation. The incarnation is God's becoming present among the realities of this world in a man called Christ.

This will be the theme of our homily today, drawing on the words of the Gospel: «The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us» (John 1:14). We will develop this theme as we usually do, but reflecting on three thoughts. First, Christ is the Word of God who has become man. Second, as church, we are the prolongation of this mystery of Christ's incarnation; the God who became man in the bosom of Mary continues to become incarnate in the world through this church, which prolongs the incarnation. And the third thought with which we will approach the altar today is this: God has become human so that we human beings can become God.

Christ is the Word of God who has become human

Our first thought, then, is this: Christ is the Word made flesh. Today's readings tell us that this Christ—the one pointed out by that great witness by the Jordan River, John the Baptist—is not just any man. In him there is a mysterious, divine nature. The Gospel of Saint John describes

John the Baptist by saying, «There was a man sent by God to testify to the light. He himself was not the light, but he gave testimony about the light» (John 1:6-8). Anyone reading the Gospel of Saint John becomes aware of how the evangelist plays with these precious symbols. In this case, for example, the light is God, and John presents his Good News as the light that came into the world and provoked two different reactions. In some people it inspired faith, and they followed it; but others rejected it, preferring the shadows to the light (John 3:19). When John testified about this man, Christ, and said that he was the light, he was really saying, «This is God». When faced with Christ, people reacted by following him—knowing that they needed light in the night—or by rejecting him and sinking deeper into darkness, like those whose eyes are blinded by bright light. These are the symbols in today's reading that tell us that Christ is truly God.

Today's gospel also tells us that some onlookers asked John, «Are you Elijah?» He answered, «No, I'm not!» «Are you the prophet or the spirit of prophecy that has disappeared from Israel? Are you perhaps bringing back the charism of prophecy, of speaking in God's name?» «No!» is John's abrupt reply. «Who are you, then, so that we can inform those who sent us?» That's when John declares, «I am nothing more than a voice crying out in the desert: "Prepare the ways of the Lord"» (John 1:21-23).

If we look at this dialogue and study Saint John's style, we will discover a new presence of God in Christ. John's abrupt denial—«No! ... No, I'm not!»—moves us toward another affirmation, one that you'll soon hear in the Gospel of John. When people seek Jesus out, he identifies himself with a simple «I am», or he says, «I am the Light», «I am the Way», «I am water for the thirsty» (John 4:26; 8:12; 14:6; 4:10). In the Old Testament there are so many beautifully mystical pages about the divine that evoke the «I am» of God, such as when Moses asks him, «Who are you, so that I can tell my people that God is sending me?» And God answers, «You will tell them, "I am who I am"» (Exod 3:13-14). That «I am» is the affirmation of a presence in creation that is not creature but Creator. It is a commanding presence, before which everything else is nothingness. John the Baptist cries out that he is not worthy to loosen the straps of his sandals (John 1:27): «It is not I!». It is not anybody! Only God is! Only God exists!

The third proclamation of Christ's divinity comes when John says, «I am only a voice crying out!» (John 1:23). Saint Augustine has a beautiful reflection: «Speech is a noise that reaches the ear, but that speech carries the word, the idea»¹. That is what is happening here this very morning, here in this cathedral and through the radio. You hear a voice, but the voice stops speaking. The noise ends, but the word remains, and in the word is the idea.

This sublime philosophy found in the language of Saint John the evangelist means this: all those who preach Christ are voices, but the voices pass away, the preachers die, John the Baptist disappears—only the word remains. The word remains, and that is the great consolation of those who preach. My voice will disappear, but my words, which are Christ, will remain in the hearts of those who will have embraced them.

The word is the thought of humans—that is the Greek idea. Greek philosophy conceived of the word as a type of emanation: the Word of God is an emanation from God, what we Christians call the Son of God. All our thoughts are like our children—that's why we say, «I've

¹ SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Sermons*, 288,3: PL 38,1304.

conceived an idea». Everyone who thinks is conceiving. Just as a woman conceives and becomes pregnant, so any person who thinks is conceiving. And just as a woman gives birth to what she has conceived in her womb, so our thinking also gives birth to the words that are expressed by our voice. Christ, therefore, is the emanation, the Son, the substance, the image of the divine. We don't have human words for describing this mystery of the eternal God «thinking himself» in such a way that the thought is his Son, the Word. He pronounces that word, and things are created because his word is powerful, it is omnipotent. Everything that exists has been created by God (Col 1:16).

Sisters and brothers, I hope this reflection doesn't sound like some dry philosophical theory but reveals the true beauty of our living, vivacious God. He thinks and pronounces an eternal Word that drapes us in love, for it is his Divine Son who becomes the incarnate Word. That is why Saint John the Baptist can speak these words at the climax of his testimony this Sunday: «Among you stands one whom you do not know. He is coming after me, but he existed before me, and I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal» (John 1:26-27). What a magnificent confession of Christ! «Before I existed, he already existed», declares the Baptist (John 1:15). Christ will say the same thing one day when he tells his adversaries, «Before Abraham, your father, existed, I already was. Before the world began to be, the Word of God already existed» (John 8:57-58). Such is the consistency of this Word, which is the eternal Word of God!

That is why we must now profess our faith in that prior existence of the child who will be born in Bethlehem. He already existed before Mary conceived him in her womb. The famous poem, *The Divine Comedy*, addressed Mary as «Mother of your Creator!»². She is the only woman who can say, «I have conceived in my womb a child who existed before me. I am his human mother, but he created me, for he existed before me». If we lose sight of this divine, eternal, omnipotent, loving, infinite character of God, then we miss the true meaning of Christ. Christ is the one about whom John the Baptist says, «Before I existed, he already existed» (John 1:15).

In today's second reading Saint Paul tells us to make ourselves worthy of the definitive encounter with Christ; he is announcing an existence that is beyond history and will have no end. In the case of Christ, we hold that he always existed as God, with no beginning. That is how the beautiful prologue of the Gospel of Saint John begins: «In the beginning was the Word» (John 1:1). Notice the past tense, «was»—he already existed. At the beginning, when God began to create things, the Word already existed, he already was. So Saint Paul is telling us, «When your life ends, when your history finishes, when the history of humankind is over, may we then be found worthy of encountering that eternal river that is Christ and continue living for all eternity». The truth is that history is nothing more than a short stretch of time that began and will end. But Christ, as God, is the Lord of history because he existed before history and will exist after all the worlds have ended. He had no beginning and will have no end. This is the Word that becomes human. This is incarnation, his becoming flesh.

Saint John uses here a word that is very biblical but is also used in Greek philosophy: «flesh» (John 1:14). Flesh means tangible human beings. We are all flesh, all of us who are here. We are human beings on whom time leaves its mark: the child begins life, the young person grows strong, the old person declines. The flesh is marked by time. Flesh is the concrete human

² DANTE ALIGHIERI, *The Divine Comedy*, III, 33.

situation. Flesh means sorrow at our situation of human sin and anguish at our country's distress because its history has headed it down a dead-end alley. We are incarnated in this flesh, this fragile flesh that has a beginning and an end, this flesh that sins, that gets sick and dies, that lives miserably or happily according to our obedience to God. That is what the Word became: the Word became flesh.

We once tried to explain here a word I analyzed for you: kenosis. You'll recall that kenosis means humiliation, obliteration, disintegration, disappearance. That is the word used to describe the infinite, eternal God's act of humility in confining himself to the womb of a young virgin in order to be born in the flesh. The child we are going to adore in Bethlehem is flesh, the fragile flesh of a child. It's like a valuable gift wrapped in plain, ordinary paper: «The Word became flesh» (John 1:14). Christ's flesh is not what is most beautiful about him, but without flesh he is not Christ. In his flesh he wants to take on himself everything that our flesh involves. As the theology of Saint Paul tells us, «He became like us in all things except sin (Heb 4:15).

In recent times the Second Vatican Council has told us that the mystery of humanity cannot be understood apart from the mystery of the incarnate Word: «Since the human nature Christ assumed was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity with respect to us as well. For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, he acted by human choice, and he loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin» (GS 22). We weep tears of joy and gratitude knowing that this infinite God became flesh like us and dwelt among us. If Christ were to become incarnate today—right now in 1978—he'd be a thirty-year-old man; he could be sitting here in the cathedral, and we wouldn't be able to pick him out from all the rest of you. He'd be a *campesino* from Nazareth, thirty years old, sitting here in the cathedral like any *campesino* of our villages. He'd be the Son of God made man, and we wouldn't recognize him. In everything he'd be like us!

But when that Christ who is God—through whom the world was made—becomes human, then he lifts all human beings to the category of God. This will be a new concept for us to meditate on, but first I want ask: what human being could ever be responsible for this great marvel of the Word becoming flesh? In today's first reading we hear of the great secret that one day an angel will announce to the Virgin Mary. But the Virgin responds to the angel that she intends to remain a virgin for her God: «How can this be that I will conceive and give birth to a child?» (Luke 1:34-35). The angel tells her what the prophet Isaiah spoke some seven centuries before: «“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me” (Isa 61:1). The child you will conceive is not the work of a man but a marvelous, virginal work of the Holy Spirit». As a man, Christ will have a human mother, but there will be no father who brings about his incarnation; it will be a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

But what is this about the anointing of the Holy Spirit? During this time of Advent and Christmas, we must keep in mind what the Holy Spirit signifies, for he is the power of God. As the catechism explains to us with simple words, from the blood of Mary God formed a small body in her bosom into which God infused a human soul, as into any child, but he also infused into it the second person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word. That pregnant woman was therefore already the mother of God. Nine months after that miracle of the incarnation in her bosom,

Mary received the child Jesus in her arms, and she knew that it was the work of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit of God had worked this miracle of a God-man, that the child was going to grow up and give his life for the redemption of the world, and that the Spirit of God would be guiding him. Because the Spirit of God led him to the cross, the redemption of humankind was a work of God. And because the same Spirit of life raised him from the dead, that resurrected man of Nazareth, as Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, gives himself as a pledge and a surety of faith and hope for the resurrection of all who believe in him: «All those who believe in me, even if they die, will live (John 11:25) because the Spirit who made me also gives life to the people of God through baptism and to all Christians who believe in Jesus Christ».

This morning, then, we owe the Holy Spirit our homage of adoration and gratitude because the Holy Spirit made it possible for a virgin to join the honor of virginity with that of maternity and to give us the wondrous reality of a God made flesh. That's why the church takes as her meditation psalm today the Magnificat of Mary: «My soul glorifies the Lord» (Luke 1:46). Imagine if you will, especially you young women sixteen years of age—what would that young girl of Nazareth have been feeling when she was chosen to be the virginal instrument for giving humanity the longed-for Redeemer? What young woman would not be inspired by that same Spirit to sing a song of gratitude for the miracle she was carrying within her bosom and even more in her holy soul and her living faith. «My soul glorifies the Lord because the Mighty One has done great things in me» (Luke 1:49). Truly the Son of God has done great things in the bosom of Mary.

Mary cannot be left to one side during this time of Advent and Christmas. No one can teach us better than Mary the spirit of worship before Christ, who is the Word of God made flesh. No one experiences him as intensely as she did since it was in her very womb that he became flesh. In the name of all human flesh, Mary offered him her small virginal bosom in which to become incarnate, and thus did he take onto himself, as the Council just told us, all the hands of workers, all the brains of thinkers, all the hearts of lovers, all the agonies of sufferers, all the hopes and joys of humans (GS 22). Nothing human is strange to Jesus Christ because he became flesh, wanting to assume into his dignity as Son of God all that human flesh signifies.

We could prolong this meditation much further, sisters and brothers. During this season of Christmas I urge you to prolong it yourselves by asking who this child is who is born in Bethlehem. And instead of thinking so much about gifts and banquets and Christmas cards and other things that waste our time and keep us from meditating, just meditate on this. This is the heart of Christmas. We shouldn't let them commercialize it. We shouldn't let them profane it and paganize it. Let us welcome and venerate Christmas with a spirit of respect in our homes and even in our poverty—the more poor and infirm we are the better. Say, «I am the flesh that Christ has taken on. Blessed be God who wanted to become part of my life by making himself flesh like me!»

The church is the prolongation of the mystery of Christ's incarnation

My second thought is that this wondrous incarnation did not remain back there, twenty centuries in the past, as something just to be remembered. The beautiful thing is that the Lord has desired to prolong that incarnation in his church. Here I want to read you another sublime thought of the Second Vatican Council. It states that this church that Christ created to prolong his redemption in the world is composed of a human element and a divine element: «This

society we call church is structured both as an institution with hierarchical organs and as the Mystical Body of Christ. These are not to be considered as two realities. It's not that there is a visible assembly in contrast to a spiritual community, nor is there an earthly church in contrast to a church enriched with heavenly things. Rather, they both coalesce to form one complex reality which possesses both a divine and a human element. That is why it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word, a remarkable analogy. As Christ's assumed human nature is inseparably united to him and serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so in a similar way does the visible social structure of the church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies the church, in the building up of the body» (LG 8).

The whole of this eighth section of the constitution *Lumen Gentium* explains this mystery of the incarnation, which is the mystery of God becoming flesh and prolonging himself in the church, which is also God as the Body of Christ in history. As you'll remember, that was the title of my second pastoral letter, «The Church, the Body of Christ in History». That means that those of us who are living now in 1978 are assumed by baptism into the body of the church and so become the flesh of Christ here and now. No one is excluded from this dignity except those who wish to exclude themselves and who betray the church by staining her with manifold calumnies, forgetting that «those who spit at heaven get their faces wet». All those who are spitting at the church at this time are spitting at themselves for they, like us, are baptized and so are living members, part of the Body of Christ.

Christ makes use of this human organism which is the hierarchy—the pope, the bishops, the priests, the institutional church—even though perhaps we often discuss it with much disrespect. Let us be aware that it is the flesh of Christ, and as we said before, it is flesh in its concrete sinful situation. We shouldn't be shocked at what we see in the hierarchy, in the priesthood, or in married Christian couples. We all have an obligation to be holy because we are the Body of Christ, but we are also made up of miserable flesh. Let us not be upset, I tell you, by the fact that sin exists in all the human aspects of the church because flesh is ever in need of conversion to the true God. If Christ became flesh, it was to redeem flesh, and even this church, as the flesh of Christ in history, needs redemption at all times. Right now in 1978, we all need redemption—bishops, priests, and faithful. We are rotten flesh; we are fragile flesh. We are the flesh of Christ in history, and no one can claim the right to throw the first stone because we are all sinners. That's why we said that it's true that the church has the courage to denounce the sins of the world, but it's not because she thinks she is spotless; rather, it's because she is always ready to be denounced even as she denounces others. The church also has the obligation to be corrected and to be converted to God, as Saint Paul tells us today in the second reading.

Today's second reading talks to us specifically about the community of Thessalonica, a church community that could be compared to our own community of San Salvador or any of our parishes. Saint Paul speaks about the mysteries by which the Spirit of God inspired the Son of God made man and now gives life and stability to this church which is the prolongation of Christ in history so that she can truly be a community that honors Christ.

Paul talks about joy. In these days when there seems to be no room for joy in El Salvador, I urge you to listen to Saint Paul repeating to us, «Sisters and brothers, rejoice always! Be constant in prayer. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus» (1 Thess 5:16-18). The Christian community should not despair. If someone in

our family dies, we should not weep like people without hope. If thick clouds have darkened the history of our country, we should not give up. We are a community of hope, and like the Israelites in Babylon, let us trust that the hour of liberation will come. The day will come! «It will arrive because God is faithful», says Saint Paul, and so our joy must become a prayer: «The one who calls you is faithful and will fulfill his promises» (1 Thess 5:24).

It is our own church community that is singing today's first reading: «I overflow with joy in the Lord, and I rejoice with my God because he has clothed me magnificently and has wrapped me in a mantle of triumph»—what a comparison!—«like a bridegroom wearing a crown or a bride bedecked in her jewels» (Isa 61:10). It's a beautiful thing to see a young man and woman who love one another approaching the altar in their finest clothes. They hand themselves over to love. It is this comparison from the Old Testament that God uses today to describe this pact between the God who wants to save us and the people who need salvation.

But Isaiah's comparison becomes even more poetic: «As the earth brings forth its plants and a garden makes its seeds spring up, so will the Lord make justice and praise spring up before all the nations» (Isa 61:11). I imagine that when a person sows a garden, she hopes that flowers will sprout from the earth, but it is she who has planted the seeds. This is what God has done in redeeming us, as the prophet says, «He has sent me to evangelize the poor, to announce the Good News to those who suffer, to bind up the hearts that are broken, to proclaim amnesty for the captives and freedom for the prisoners» (Isa 61:1). Listen, is that not the voice of the church here in El Salvador crying out, «Amnesty! Freedom! No more torture! No more suffering!»? This is the voice of God himself, who wants to sow goodness and justice on earth so that this land will prosper. The Lord has promised this, and he will not fail. When will it come about? We don't know, but let us hope, like the farmer who sows and is not impatient—in due course the garden will flourish.

«I have faith that everything will change»—that's the lovely song that the young people sing these days. Let us sing it with great joy: «I have faith that everything will change». This is true because God has come and the Word has been made flesh, and the Word wants to live, but not just in individuals. Please, let us be very aware of this for it is the cause of very great conflict in today's church, this change from individual devotion to community devotion. We're past the time when we should be saying, «I'll try to save myself; I don't care about others», because if you're not saved *with* others, it may be that you won't be saved by yourself. The salvation that Christ has brought is salvation in community—it is the church.

And now, speaking with full confidence as a pastor speaks with his people, I want to tell you that today's second reading contains thoughts that are just like the norms in my pastoral letter. Saint Paul tells the Thessalonians, «Do not quench the Spirit! Do not despise the gift of prophecy. Test everything; retain what is good» (1 Thess 5:19-21). What does it mean not to quench the Spirit? This word awakens in me a great sense of responsibility as bishop and pastor because I know that the Spirit of God—the Spirit that created the body of Christ in the womb of Mary, the Spirit that is creating the church in history here in the archdiocese—is a Spirit that is hovering over a new creation, as it says in Genesis (Gen 1:2). I sense that there is something new happening in the archdiocese. I am a fragile, limited man, and I don't know what's happening, but I do know that God knows. And my role as pastor is just what Saint Paul is telling me today: «Do not quench the Spirit». If I peremptorily order a priest, «Don't do that!», or if I arrogantly command a community, «Don't go that way!» and in so doing try to set

myself up as if I were the Holy Spirit trying to shape the church to my liking, then I would be quenching the Spirit.

But Saint Paul also tells me, «Test everything. Examine it, and retain what is good». I pray hard to the Holy Spirit for the gift that is called discernment. I urge you, sisters and brothers, and the older you are, the more I urge you: understand this difficult task of discernment. The older you get, the more you think that you have the real truth and that young people just talk about crazy fads—«No need to pay them any mind!» Be very careful! «Do not quench the Spirit. Test everything, and remain with what is good» (1 Thess 5:19-21). To be sure, we're not going to learn to smoke marijuana from the young people; we're not going to learn about dissolute behavior from them; we're not going to learn about vices from the world. Nevertheless, over that world of vices and marijuana and dissipation, the Spirit of God is hovering. That's why I say in my pastoral letter, «The church must accompany Christ without being afraid that they will say of her, "She is eating with tax collectors and prostitutes"» (Mark 2:16). The church is Christ incarnate in real, tangible flesh, and that flesh, which today may be the flesh of a prostitute, can tomorrow be the flesh of a repentant saint like Mary Magdalene. That flesh, which today is the flesh of an Augustine who is caught up in dissolute, worldly flirtations and thinks he could never be chaste, can tomorrow be the flesh of Saint Augustine, the repentant sinner. Young people and their communities perhaps do things that seem extravagant—well, let us choose what is good. Help me, dear fellow priests, dear catechists, dear sisters. Let us be understanding and let us ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of discernment so that we can discover the true values of this beautiful archdiocesan church. Be aware that the Spirit is not repetitive; rather, as that very significant biblical phrase points out, «The Spirit makes all things new» (Rev 21:5). It is only we who grow old and want everything to be done in our old folks' way. The Spirit is never old; the Spirit is always young.

Yesterday when I was confirming a group of young people in the Colonia Santa Lucía, I recited that phrase to them. What delight I felt with those youngsters receiving the Holy Spirit with such awareness! One of the youngsters told me, «We have made a commitment with the Spirit, and we want to be faithful to it». This is the church the prolongs the incarnation of Jesus Christ! This church is incarnation and therefore contains much that is good and much that is bad.

There is a statement of the Second Vatican Council that reveals a lot to us: it says that our human vocation is a unique, divine vocation, and «therefore, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers every person the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery» (GS 22). This statement is very revealing even for me, for I don't limit my thoughts only to the Catholic church, much less to the narrow confines of the priesthood, the episcopacy, or religious life—as if what is good were to be found only there and everything else were bad. That's a lie! The Council has just told us here that the Holy Spirit is also working outside the Catholic Church because all women and men are called to this divine vocation in a manner known only to God. They are called to participate in this mystery of Christ even if they are not Christians. What shame we should feel to think that perhaps there are people who are pagans, who have no faith in Christ, but who are better than we are and closer to the kingdom of God!

Do you remember when Christ received the visit of a pagan centurion? When Christ told him, «I will go to cure your servant», the centurion very humbly and confidently said to him,

«No, Lord, I am not worthy to have you go there. Just say one word, and my servant will be healed». Christ was amazed, says the gospel, and exclaimed, «In truth, I have not found faith this great in Israel». Now let me tell you something. Christ will also say about this church: «Perhaps there is more faith and holiness outside the limits of Catholicism». That is why we must not quench the Spirit: the Spirit knows no borders. The Spirit is not monopolized by any Christian movement or by any hierarchy or priesthood or by any religious congregation. The Spirit is free and wants all people, wherever they are found, to fulfill their vocation of encountering Christ, the Christ who became flesh to save all human flesh. And yes, I'm aware, sisters and brothers, that even people who have lost their faith or who are not Christians come to this cathedral—they are welcome! If my words say something to them, then I invite them to reflect on them in the intimacy of their conscience because I can tell them, as Christ would, «The kingdom of God is not far from you! God's kingdom is within your heart! Seek it, and you will find it!» (Luke 17:21).

Life of the church

Given this reality of flesh that is good and flesh that is bad, let us examine our concrete church. From our local church here I direct my gaze toward the pope as the center of Catholicism, and I rejoice to find in him confirmation of our pastoral plan. On the thirtieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, the pope wrote this sad message to the United Nations: «Although we cannot deny that some progress has been made, we feel obliged to note an apparently growing gap between the momentous declarations of the United Nations and the wide-spread violations of human rights in all parts of society and the world»³. In this precious letter addressed to the secretary general of the United Nations, Pope John Paul II, with all the seriousness of his office, shows how in many nations human rights are being trampled upon and power is being abused by governments. Expressing special concern about the situation in Nicaragua, he uses firm but courteous words to remind the Nicaraguan ambassador that the church should have freedom and the government authorities should show respect toward their people with regard to human rights⁴. The pope also encouraged Chile and Argentina to overcome their differences. When their foreign ministers met on December 12, the pope wrote to them⁵. It is sad to think that a nation like Argentina is spending 2.5 billion dollars on armaments. Is there no poverty in that country? What a mania for armaments! That's why the pope tells them to move beyond such things. Even the Montonero guerrillas asked the pope to intervene to prevent war⁶.

In Santiago de Chile there was a symposium that concluded on November 25. I was given the conclusions and reports of those who participated. I had received a kind invitation to attend from the cardinal of Santiago de Chile, but due to the situation in my own country I preferred to remain close by my people, which is the best testimony that can be given. Still, they have been good enough to inform us about the attendance at the symposium of Cardinal Silva Henríquez, Cardinal Arns of Brazil, and other key figures of the ecclesiastical and diplomatic world, including Protestants and others. Among the declarations of the symposium

³ JOHN PAUL II, «Message to the United Nations», 2 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (24 December 1978).

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the Ambassador of Nicaragua in the Vatican», 7 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (17 December 1978).

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, «Message to the Presidents of Argentina and Chile concerning Fraternity and Harmony between Both Peoples», 12 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (17 December 1978).

⁶ *El Diario de Hoy* (13 December 1978).

was one that stated that «many governments have imposed systems which relativize the value of the person and make state interests a sufficient pretext for exercising the most varied forms of institutionalized violence and torture». They exhort people of faith in Chile and the entire world «to unite together in a common effort of prayer and action so that, by the impulse of faith, they may courageously pursue truth and justice and renew the work of creating solidarity among groups, peoples, and nations». Very detailed reference is made to the violations of freedom, justice, and life in many countries, especially on our continent.

The pope has also set the theme for the 1980 world synod, which will be: «The Tasks of the Christian Family»⁷. In due course we will also take up the topics that have been sent from Rome, which cannot be anything else than working to make our families better.

Also in Chile, church-state relations are seriously strained because of the conflicts between the government and the people. Concretely, the church is asking for information about the fate of 650 disappeared persons. The church in Chile is also being called «communist», as always happens when the church touches the interests of government or capital. Well, that's the way she'll be baptized!

Our archdiocese also take delight in its own household. In these days the Franciscan Sisters are celebrating their golden anniversary of arriving in the country; they work in San Salvador, Zácatecas, Cojutepeque, Usulután, and Berlín.

The Somascan Sisters have left the community La Ceiba to begin pastoral work in Brazil. Remember that ours is a missionary church for whom there are no borders; she goes wherever the laws permit and some good can be done.

I also want to express thanks for the public support I have received from the priest's senate, from the people's movement, and from *Eco de Oriente*, a weekly paper of San Miguel.

With regard to the life of our communities, this week has been quite packed. Last Sunday in San Rafael Cedros there was a meeting of the laity from the whole department of Cuscatlán. I'm delighted to see how Christian lay people are living out the commitment of their baptism. That same Sunday I was in Portero Grande, Aguilares, celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe.

On Monday the eleventh I had an interview with some people who knew Father Neto Barrera very well. They expressed with sincere gratitude and even with tears the affection they felt for this priest who taught them to love one another. They told me, «Before he came we were selfish; we looked out for ourselves. But he began to teach us to understand one another and to help one another». It seems to me that if a tree is known by its fruits, then this fruit is saying a great deal about the priestly work of Father Neto. At this time I renew the position stated in my pastoral letter, which calls for supporting all that is just wherever it may be found and rejecting all that is unjust and abusive wherever it may be found.

On the twelfth, the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe, our people showed once again how devotion to Mary is very alive among them. This is a very Marian people, and I want to

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops», 16 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (24 December 1978).

congratulate them publicly. The pastor of La Ceiba told me that at least sixty thousand people took part in the pilgrimage on the feast of Guadalupe, traveling far to see the dark little lady of Tepeyac. I celebrated the feast in Dulce Nombre de María, where I greeted the new pastors, who are Maryknoll Fathers, and the Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who have been working there for some time. I learned that three of the Oblate Sisters have recently celebrated their silver anniversary of religious life, for which I congratulate them: Sisters Angela Cáceres, Elena de Jesús Cáceres, and Josefina Nuñez. May the Lord give them long life and enthusiasm in their ministry. At night on that same feast we celebrated in the Colonia Las Delicias of Santa Tecla. I enjoyed talking with a youth group there and seeing how Father Aguilar is promoting fervor in that parish. I'm sorry that I couldn't oblige Father Eliodoro Orellana, who also celebrated the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Colonia Guadalupe of Soyapango.

On the thirteenth, the feast of Santa Lucía, patroness of Suchitoto, I had the tremendous pleasure of sharing with that immense church full of the faithful as they paid devotion to that holy patroness of eyesight. I told them that the truest eyesight is faith and that when faith is lost people are blind even if their physical eyes are still quite good.

Also, Father Jorge Benavides was named pastor for Suchitoto. There I greeted the Society of Jesus the Nazarene, whose members told me that they study the Bible. I also had the good fortune of meeting with all the priests of the vicariate of Cuscatlán except Father Moreno, who was sick—I hope he is better now. That same Monday, the feast of Santa Lucía, I had a pleasant visit to the Colonia Santa Lucía, where they told me about their reflections on the pastoral letter. I felt great joy in seeing how people, when they're sincere, accept the initiatives of their pastors.

I'm sorry that I couldn't attend the event to which I was invited in Apaxtepeque, which belongs to another diocese. I hope that they had a wonderful celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe there. But I did go to San Pablo Tacachico for the patronal feast of the Immaculate Conception. Father Jorge Salinas, other priests of the vicariate, and many catechists of the region paid very beautiful honor to the Immaculate Virgin. There was also a very good meeting of the pastoral agents.

In the Colonia Santa Lucía Father Astor has been preparing a group of children all year to receive first communion, and yesterday, Saturday, they received it. Specially noteworthy is the fact that the parents arranged the first communion without a lot of fanfare; the children's clothing was simple. But the best thing was the catechesis the children received so that they really knew who it was they were receiving. There were first communions also in the church of El Calvario in the morning, and also some young people were confirmed, as in Santa Lucía.

Today the Christian base communities and lay movements are holding a Christmas celebration in the Colegio Guadalupano. There'll be about a thousand people there, and I'll be celebrating Mass at noon. The theme for reflection is «community», which is exactly what we were talking about just now. That's what Saint Paul taught emphatically: Christianity cannot be lived by individuals but only in community.

This afternoon I'll be Rosario de Mora, where the Oblate Sister of Divine Love has prepared communions and confirmations. At eight o'clock tonight in San Sebastián parish, now

orphaned by the murder of Father Neto, the people will receive their new pastor, Father Juan Antonio Gutiérrez. Tonight at eight we'll have the pleasure of greeting that community

I urge you also to support our attempts to have young people confirmed with a better idea of the sacrament. A minimum age of eight has been set as a norm, but pastors will be preparing groups of even older youngsters so that they receive confirmation with greater awareness. We will continue confirming here in the cathedral until Holy Week, but with those conditions. After Holy Week there will be no more confirmations in the cathedral. Instead, the confirmations will be organized by vicariates and parishes. We're doing this because this sacrament is one where the sense of community and the parish element should be strong. The confirmations we've already celebrated in various communities make it clear to me how rich confirmations can be when they're well prepared and celebrated in communion with the pastor and the community. And so I urge all of you who have children or teenagers to get busy organizing for this extremely important sacrament in your parishes and your vicariates.

Events of the week

Since we're mentioning concrete matters, I want to invite you to read the «Solidarity» page in *Orientación*, which contains the declaration of Francisco Baltasar Campos Mendoza⁸, now granted asylum in the Mexican embassy. This declaration, which was certified before an attorney, recounts how he was horribly tortured and then threatened with being blown up with dynamite along with the other men being tortured. The others were in fact blown to pieces by the dynamite blast, but by pure miracle he was able to escape; somehow he managed to wake up after the mysterious injection they gave him, and he got away. In his declaration he mentions that while in prison he obtained information about Pedro Arístides Pineda, José Victoriano Arévalo Romero, Domingo Chávez Martínez, Lil Milagro Ramírez, and Doctor Carlos Madriz, who also told him about Jorge Luís Zelayandía.

A commission studied the declaration of Campos Mendoza and came to the following conclusions: «First, it is one more proof that there are political prisoners in the prisons of the security forces despite their systematic denial of same. Second, it demonstrates that in our country habeas corpus is ineffective. Third, it confirms the fact that cruel tortures are being used during the interrogations that the security forces carry out. Fourth, it reveals the illegal use of drugs during these interrogations. Fifth, it delegitimizes the extrajudicial declarations presented to the courts by the security forces to accuse a prisoner. Sixth, it makes manifest the unjust and arbitrary character of the Procedural Penal Code disposition that recognizes extrajudicial confessions made to the security forces in the presence of witnesses named by the same forces as sufficient proof for decreeing provisional detention. Seventh, it unmasks various maneuvers used by the security forces to effect the definitive disappearance of some of the persons they have captured. Eighth, the declaration truly represents the cries of an oppressed and tormented people, and it invites all people of good will to collaborate so that the tortures in El Salvador cease, so that the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order is repealed, so that the political prisoners and the disappeared are freed, and so that genuine social justice is made to prevail as the solid basis for a lasting peace».

In the same vein I relate the sad news that four kidnapped men continue in captivity: Fritz Schuitman, a Dutchman; Ian Massie and Michael Chatterton, Englishmen; and Takakasu

⁸ *Orientación* (17 December 1978).

Suzuki, a Japanese. I have personally spoken with their family members and their companies in my sincere desire to help out pastorally. To whoever is within the sound of my voice, I want to explain that the two political conditions set down for the liberation of the kidnapped men are not within the capacity of the families or the companies of those kidnapped. The first condition is the release of the five prisoners, Lil Milagro Ramírez Huezo, Manuel Rivera, Juan Gonzalo Parada, Jorge Luis Zelayandia, and Sonia Estela Ramírez; and the second condition is the publication of the manifesto of the FARN in the country's newspapers. The commission that was formed to intercede in these kidnappings requested a meeting with the president, but its request was not granted. The commission is still ready to collaborate in every way it can. The families and the companies are also ready to negotiate for the release of these four men.

Therefore, in the name of the church I want to recall here something the pope said just recently. Speaking at the end of his audience this week, the pontiff stated the following: «Kidnapping is a plague that causes great suffering and is unworthy of civilized nations. In the name of God»—these are his exact words—«I appeal to those responsible to free the persons they are holding for a ransom, and I also remind them that it is God who will judge the actions of humanity»⁹.

I'm pleased that this statement of the pope also supports what I published in *Orientación* about celebrating a «Christmas without political prisoners and without kidnappings»: «If these lines come to the knowledge of those who have in their power our sisters and brothers who have been victims of “disappearances” or kidnappings, I want you to know that I feel solidarity with the pain and suffering of the victims and their families, but besides I want to express to you my heartfelt plea, inspired by Christian love and justice, that you respect the human life and dignity of your captives and that you recognize the human right to freedom that they enjoy, just as you do. Remember that your professed struggle on behalf of the welfare and the just claims of the people loses credibility and support when it is vitiated by violence and other injustices. With the combined efforts of everybody, let us celebrate a happy Christmas, a Christmas without disappeared persons, without political prisoners, without kidnappings—a Christmas that gathers all our families together at home without suffering and without fear»¹⁰.

God became human so that all human beings might become God

We're going to end this homily with a thought that will take us to the altar: in becoming human, God has taken on this fragile flesh with all its crimes and violence and inhumanity, with all its incredible pains and hopes and anxieties. That's what flesh is, a mixture of justice and brutality, of innocence and sin. All of this has been assumed by Christ. As we review this morning all the concrete things we experience in our community and in our country, we know that Christ has personally assumed all these fleshly realities. But Jerusalem is full of joy as it breaks free and beholds the justice and the love that are soon to burst forth from this earth (*Isa 61:11*). And Saint Paul exhorts us, «May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and body and soul be kept sound and blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ» (*1 Thess 1:23*).

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, «Allocution at a General Audience», 13 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (17 December 1978).

¹⁰ *Orientación* (17 December 1978).

I also want to say that I have been greatly encouraged by some statements I heard that relate to this theme of the incarnation that we've meditated on today. The cardinals of Paris, England, and Belgium wrote a letter giving me wonderful support that I wasn't expecting. Among other things they say, «We are reminded [in this struggle for human rights] that every human being is a visible image of the invisible God. In fact, in every man and woman we encounter God himself and his summons to strive for justice and love. The systematic violations of human rights are themselves a crude negation of Christian faith in the incarnation. We feel pain that your prophetic witness is countered by public attacks on the church. We have read with great sadness about the ways in which the press and other media are conducting a campaign of vilification that seeks to discredit your leadership. We want to take this opportunity to assure you of our fraternal solidarity»¹¹.

I rejoice because this letter speaks not about me but about what the incarnation of God means for our human dignity. I rejoice because everything we're doing, no matter how much it's criticized, is being done on God's behalf and in the light of the word of God on which we have reflected today. We see what God's love is capable of doing because he loves this flesh of ours. This flesh might well deserve God's utter contempt, but he still keeps loving us to the point of becoming a child in a manger in Bethlehem, to the point of letting himself be crucified on the cross, to the point of continually granting us this sacrifice on the altar every Sunday and every day of the year. Let it be so. (Applause)

¹¹ Letter to Archbishop Oscar A. Romero from Cardinals François Marty, archbishop of Paris; Basil Hume, archbishop of Westminster; and Leo Jozef Suenens, archbishop of Brussels, in *Orientación* (17 December 1978).