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IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF MARY

**La Libertad
8 December 1977**

*Genesis 3:9-15, 20
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12
Luke 1:26-38*

... the valuable collaboration of helping us with priestly ministry¹. I want to take this opportunity to thank the North American priests for their exceptional service, which our diocese appreciates tremendously. I also want to thank the Sisters of Saint Joseph who together with the priests are cultivating this message of God's word for the nourishment of our people.

I want also to express my joy because, together with the priests and religious, there are groups of men and women—catechists, celebrators of the word, parish councils, Catholic associations—who feel responsible for the church at this crucial moment in the history of El Salvador. May they not become discouraged in the difficult mission they have of proclaiming this message of the Lord.

As we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, we are given an opportunity to draw near to the very source of this river that will not cease to flow until the end of the centuries. Just as a flowing river encounters boulders, reefs, and abysses, so the church's message will encounter a thousand obstacles. But no matter, the river bears a promise: «I will be with you until the end of the age», and «the gates of the nether world shall not prevail» against this will of the Lord (Matt 28:20; 16:18). What is the Lord's will? Seen in the light of the readings we've just heard, the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of Mary tells us what God's plan is for us and for all humanity.

Original sin

The first reading has recalled for us the great tragedy. Our first parents were created in the grace of God, and originally they were to transmit to us not only the gift of natural life but also the gift of divine adoption. The condition was that they remain obedient to God, but they were seduced by the devil and disobeyed God. After Eve seduced Adam, the two parents of the human race lost their friendship with God because of their disobedience. From that moment humanity fell into what is called original sin, the sin of our origins, the sin that we inherit from our first parents. Now many people will ask, «What fault do I have that Adam and Eve sinned so that I also am now a sinner?» We should distinguish two types of sin, sisters and brothers, original sin and personal sin. Personal sin is that which you commit by your own will when you disobey a commandment of God's law. When you have sinned, you are responsible for this sin. When Adam and Eve personally disobeyed God, they committed a personal sin. What happens

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

when someone commits personal sin? Friendship with God is lost when the sinner is disobedient to God's law. All those who sin break off their friendship with the Lord, preferring their own passion to the will and the law of the Lord.

Thus, Adam and Eve preferred to achieve happiness not by the paths of God's law but by the deceits of the devil, who later laughed at how he had duped our first parents. He made them fall into sin, and they ended up miserable and deprived of God's grace. Having lost the grace of God, they were no longer able to transmit God's divine life to the children born of them at the moment they were conceived. Since they had lost this divine life, they could not transmit it; they could transmit only natural life. Adam and Eve transmitted this natural life to their children, and that same life has been transmitted to us by our fathers and mothers, but it is a life deprived of God's grace. The lack of grace is not a matter of personal fault but of inheritance. Let us suggest a comparison: suppose the owner of a large estate tells the administrator, «As a reward for the confidence that I have in you, you will possess my farms as long as you will obey me. All your children will become heirs of this estate as long as they obey me». Then one day this administrator, thinking that he is owner of everything, begins to squander the estate's resources and to disobey his boss, the owner. The owner tells him, «I told you that I was giving you all this on the condition that you obey me, but you have disobeyed. I am very sorry, but you must leave my estate. You are disinherited». Naturally, from that moment the children who would have shared in the happiness of this estate are born outside it, and they also are disinherited, dispossessed by the owner.

This is what happens with original sin. Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, and God cast them out of Paradise. God withdrew from them his divine friendship so that their children, we among them, would thenceforth be born deprived of God's grace. Original sin is not our fault; it is the fault of our inheritance. God is not obliged to give us his divine friendship since those who lost it lost it for the whole family. It is an inheritance that was lost. This is what the first reading tells us.

The redemption of Mary

Mary was a daughter of Adam, and therefore she should also have been born in sin, without the inheritance God's grace. Nevertheless today we are celebrating the fact that Mary was conceived without sin. How can we explain this exception? Today Saint Paul has given us the explanation. As Christians baptized by a priest, we now have the good fortune of finding ourselves once again in God's grace. The child born with original sin, a child like myself, has this sin removed through baptism. By Christ's blood on the cross the original sin is removed, and the baptized child becomes again a child of God. Paradise is regained thanks to Christ. If after baptism I have the misfortune of committing a personal sin by disobeying God's law, Christ has given us a sacrament of reconciliation. The priest in the confessional restores paradise to many souls who have lost their friendship with God.

If you've had the good fortune of making a sincere confession, sisters and brothers, then you understand what I'm saying: it's like returning to paradise. The young man or woman, the unfaithful spouse, the disobedient child—anyone who has committed a sin feels God's reproach in their conscience and feels unhappy. Those of you who are gathered here today but are in sin, do not deceive me with your joyful appearance; in your hearts you are remorseful and filled with guilt. You have lost paradise and will not be happy until you repent and obey the Gospel of

Christ. When you return with remorse to ask pardon of God, then in God's name the priest receives you back into the paradise of the church. It is as if a boulder has been removed from your heart; it is as if the sinful soul has emerged from the tomb where it was buried in decay—it has now returned to paradise. How is there forgiveness of sins? Through Jesus Christ, as Saint Paul has just told us. Only Christ redeems us from sin.

That is why, sisters and brothers, a great theological problem arose when theologians asked about how the Virgin Mary could have been born immaculate if Christ is the Redeemer of all people. If Christ is the Redeemer of all, if no sin can be forgiven except through Christ's redemption on the cross, then Mary also had to be a sinner if she was to be redeemed by Christ. This was a difficulty that continued for many centuries, and that is why this belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary has a history of centuries. Many theologians, many scholars, and many biblical commentators studied this question, and it was only in the last century, on December 8, 1854, that this doctrine was defined. Engrave this date in your minds because as Catholic children of La Libertad, you should know the origin of this feast of the Immaculate Conception.

It was Pope Pius IX who on December 8, 1854, crowned the study of so many centuries². During the Middle Ages there was a great Franciscan theologian named Duns Scotus who provided the key for the solution of this question. Take careful note of his great argument: Christ is the Redeemer of all humankind, and therefore Mary is also redeemed. But there are two kinds of redemption. One kind saves a person from the fall; in this case a person who has fallen into a pit is saved from the pit. Christ has redeemed us all in this way because we have all fallen into the abyss of original sin and we are all stained with Adam's disobedience. But there is a second type of redemption that is called redemption of preservation, which consists in not allowing an individual to fall into the pit. The person is told, «Before you fall into the abyss, I gather you in my arms and keep you from falling. You should have fallen like all who have fallen before, but you have not fallen because I have preserved you through a special love».³

Such is the case of Mary who is preserved from sin. She should have fallen into original sin because she is a descendant of Adam and Eve; she is a member of our sinful race. That is why Christ redeems her with a unique redemption, the redemption of preservation. She is the only person who has been redeemed with a redemption so luxurious that one is prevented from falling into sin. In a short while you will hear us sing the preface of this Mass of the Immaculate Conception, in which the church says, «The flesh from which the Redeemer of mankind was born had to be pure and immaculate»⁴. Christ desired a mother who would not have the shame of saying, «I was conceived in sin». He anticipated the merits of his redemption: «I am going to preserve you, my mother, because from your pure womb I the Redeemer will take my flesh».

Who among us, sisters and brothers, if we had the power to choose a mother as we wished, would not have chosen the most beautiful, the most pure, the most holy woman? None of us has chosen our mother. We were born of the woman God appointed for us. But he, the eternal God, could choose his mother as he wished; he could form her with all the extravagance of his generosity, redemption, and love. That is why we can say, sisters and brothers, that the

² Reference to the solemn proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*.

³ DUNS SCOTUS, *Ordinatio*, 3, d. 3, q. 1.

⁴ *Roman Missal*, Preface of the Immaculate Conception.

Immaculate Conception of Mary, the feast the parish of La Libertad is celebrating this morning, is a celebration of God's love. It is a celebration of the great love of a Son who has chosen the most blessed of mothers. Therefore, children and mothers, let us rejoice this morning because there was at least one case in which a child like us could make his mother immaculate and pure, as Christ did according to his desire and pleasure.

Mary, principle and image of the church

As I was telling you, sisters and brothers, when we draw near to this mystery of original sin and Mary's redemption, we draw near to the source of the church. You are also going to hear in today's preface that Mary is the principle and image of the church. Saint Paul tells us that Christ was nailed to the cross to bring forth a spouse, the church immaculate, without spot or wrinkle; the church is Christ's beautiful spouse for all eternity. Mary Immaculate is the image of what we all are: the church. You baptized faithful and we baptized priests are the church that is guided by the words preached by the bishop, by priests, and by religious; we are taught by catechists and celebrators of the word. We do nothing more than preach this redemption of Christ. We do nothing more than denounce sin.

Note what would have happened, sisters and brothers, if when Christ was choosing the greatest woman to be his mother, he had the idea that human greatness meant economic greatness; then he would have made her the world's richest woman. Or if Christ had focused on political power, then he would have made Mary a great queen who ruled over a vast empire. Or if Christ had viewed beauty from the perspective of so many women and men—an attractive face and body—he would have made Mary the most beautiful of women. If Christ had made Mary's greatness consist of the great things of earth, then she would have had in her hands all kinds of power, beauty, and wealth. But Christ came to save all those things of beauty from sin, and so he made Mary without any stain of sin. That was Christ's greatest desire, and that is what he left to the church's charge: «Be careful with sin! I die on the cross for having denounced sin. I die on the cross because I became responsible for humanity's sins. In order for sins to be forgiven, God punishes me with the horrible torments of the crucifixion». This is what we read in the prophet Isaiah: «He bore on his back all our iniquities. Therefore, in his blessed flesh God punished the sins of all of us» (Isa 53:4-5). And now the church has been given the task of ridding the world of sin.

This is the great mission of the church, and that is why Christ made Mary without sin. He wants his church to be responsible for purifying herself of sin and purifying the whole world of sin. The great conflicts of the church arise because she denounces sin: because she says to the rich, «Do not abuse people by sinning with your money!»; because she says to the powerful, «Do not abuse people with your politics or your weaponry or your power—don't you see that is a sin?»; because she says to the sinners who torture others, «Do not torture; you are sinning; you are doing wrong; you are establishing the reign of hell on earth!» The church condemns everything that is sinful, and that is why the church must face great conflicts. But the church cannot remain silent, sisters and brothers. The church will be authentic and persecuted to the degree that she unites with Mary Immaculate who is without sin. Relying on Mary's purity, the church attempts to purify herself and cleanse others from sin because she does not want to condemn. Like Jesus, she says, «I have not come to condemn but to save people. I want those who control money, those who control politics, those who control weapons, those who control power and beauty—I want them all to be saved. They should not be abusing these

things but should be using them as God desires, without sinning. For you can be rich without sin; you can be a politician without sin; you can also be a soldier without sin». The church wants to purify from sin all those persons who have often made their official positions into the art of sinfulness, crudeness, and inhumanity.

It is not enough that the church struggles against sin. In Mary the church sees not only the absence of sin; what is most beautiful about Mary is that she is «full of grace» (Luke 1:28). Being full of grace means that Mary has regained friendship with God. She is blessed among all women; she is a woman on whom God has poured all his perfume of his divine holiness. There is no woman more filled with grace than Mary Immaculate. But this is what the church also desires for her men, for her women, for her young people, for her children: that they develop themselves and not become slaves, especially not slaves of sin, for sin is the source of all wickedness and all barrenness. Sinners are not beautiful. Even if their faces appear radiant and their bodies beautiful, yet their souls are hellish, for their souls have not developed and their hearts are barren.

May God grant that nobody here be in a state of sin. But tell me, is the person in sin happy with that void that he carries in his conscience? Mary challenges us this morning to see who is happier: she who is full of grace or the sinner who enjoys the world but sinfully abuses the things of earth. Mary full of grace is the one who is supremely happy. There is no happiness greater than that of Mary who experiences herself filled with God. That is why we hear in today's gospel that hymn with which Mary greets her cousin Saint Elizabeth. As a poet and prophetess praising God, Mary sings her beautiful hymn: «My soul glorifies the Lord, and I am filled with the joy of God my Savior because my soul is filled with the almighty One. My soul is filled with a heavenly perfume that cannot be compared to any perfume on earth» (Luke 1:46-49).

The almost infinite holiness of Mary is the beauty toward which the church wishes to encourage all her Christians. When the church denounces sin, she is telling people, «Do not take delight in the things of earth, but rise up and take delight in the things of heaven. Use the riches of this world to gain friendship with God by managing these things according to God's will. Repent of your sins, and stop seeking joy in the pleasures of sex, fleshly vices, alcohol, and all those things that turn human beings into animals and beasts. Lift yourselves up to be true women and men, children of God like Mary who never sought delight in sinful earthly pleasures but only in the joys of heaven».

This is the human development that the church is promoting, and that is why, sisters and brothers, the church on a day like today seeks out the purest source, which is Mary Immaculate. From her blessed soul, sinless and grace-filled, the church realizes that her mission is to rid the world of sin and to fill humankind with grace, and so the church is filled with consolation and strength. I tell you, dear priests, dear religious, celebrators of the word, and catechists: take courage! Keep moving forward in our great task of cleansing the world of sin and filling it with the grace of God. There is no other task like ours.

I want to speak also to those who misunderstand this mission of the church, to those who persecute and slander us, to those who spy on us because they think we go about spreading subversion and communism. Be aware of whom you are persecuting. Be aware that it is Christ who continues to preach the redemption of humanity, and do not hinder him. Let

human development proceed as a fount of grace to root out all sin, for it is to the benefit of you who govern; it is for the benefit of you who are powerful. There will be greater honesty, there will no terror, there will be no crimes, there will be no vices when people hear the true message of the church, for she is working for the true good and the true greatness of the country. Oh, if you only understood, you would help this effort instead of blocking it, because those who benefit from this message of the church are the countries themselves, the governments, the people. We will all be happy when like Mary we can be less sinful and more filled with the Lord's grace.

It has given me great joy, dear sisters and brothers, to transmit from the port of La Libertad this message of encouragement that by means of the radio reaches the whole archdiocese. This message from the immaculate bosom of Mary is addressed to all you who work with the church. It invites you to be pure and clean in your message and always to embrace the great ideals of Mary: the ideals of abandoning sin more and more and of preventing sin from entering into the world; the ideal of being more and more filled with the life of God, with sanctifying grace. This is what was decided on December 8, 1854, and that is why every year, like today, December 8, 1977, the church gathers together in her communities, as in the scenic church of this port city, to celebrate this feast of Mary and be inspired by her to carry on this great work of the church.