

THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US

Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 1978

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Beloved sisters and brothers and radio audience.

Let us try to make concrete the spirit of the season of Advent that began three weeks ago -- let us make this spirit concrete by focusing on three attitudes: one, faith and vigilance: the Lord draws near and we want to encounter him. We feel that the Lord is near and we need faith in order to experience this nearness of God; two, spiritual hunger and poverty: people have no desire to eat when they are not hungry. People also have no need for God when they are proud and/or self-sufficient. Only the poor, only those who are hungry can be satisfied (1). This is the spirit of poverty that we saw in Mary, the Virgin whose hymn we sang today as our responsorial psalm. In the name of humanity she expresses the need for God and a hunger for God (2) --- this same need and hunger that we experience. Blessed are those who see the coming of Christmas in the same way that those who are hungry see the gift of food. People cannot desire liberation or freedom unless they are conscious of being enslaved. Three, finally, we refer to a positive attitude of presence and mission in the world. This missionary virtue or attitude makes present the divine that the world needs.

In our reflection today I want to highlight this third attitude of presence. I do this because the readings that we have just heard highlight the mystery of the Incarnation which we now celebrate. The Incarnation is a mystery that gives meaning, unity and an aura of mystique to this waiting for the feast of the Nativity. The Nativity cannot be understood if we do not have faith in the great mystery of the Incarnation. This Incarnation is the celebration of the presence of God in the midst of the realities of the world, the celebration of God who becomes man in the person of the one called the Christ.

This is the theme of today's homily with the words of the Gospel: *the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us* (3). I will develop it as usual in three points: first, Christ is the Word of God who became flesh; second, the Church prolongs in history the mystery of Christ's incarnation; third, God became man so that we might become like God.

Christ is the Word of God who became flesh.

Today's gospel tells us that this Christ who is spoken about by a great witness, John the Baptist, as he preaches by the river Jordan --- this Christ is not just any man. This man, this Christ has a mysterious, divine nature. In John's gospel John the Baptist is described as *a man sent by God who came as a witness to testify to the light* (4). Those who read John's gospel are aware of the role of these beautiful symbols. For example, in this case the light is God. John presents his gospel as the light that came into the world and that provoked two reactions --- some people responded with faith and these persons followed the light while

others reacted by rejecting the light because they preferred the darkness rather than the light (5). When John the Baptist comes and gives his testimony about this man, Christ, when he refers to him as the light, he is saying: *this is God*. People are going to react to Jesus' presence in the world: they will either follow him as those who have a need for light in the darkness or they will reject him and enter more deeply into the darkness like those whose eyes are molested by the light. Because of this characteristic of light today's reading tells us that Christ is true God.

Let us listen to some more words from this morning's gospel: "*Are you Elijah?*" and he (John the Baptist) said, "*I am not.*" "*Are you a prophet or the embodiment of the prophetic institution that has disappeared from Israel?*" "*Has this charism of speaking in the name of God returned?*" "*Are you a prophet?*" He answered, "*No, I am not*" (6). This denial of John the Baptist, *No, I am not* invites us to affirm a reality that we will soon hear in Saint John's gospel when people are looking for Jesus. Jesus says: *I am! I am the light! I am the way!* (7). *I am the living water* (8). How many beautiful, mysterious passages remind us of this divine element, remind us of the *I am who am* (9) of the Old Testament. When Moses asks God: *when I go to the Israelites and say to them, "the God of your fathers sent me to you," if they ask me, "what is his name?" what am I to tell them? God replied, "I am who am!"*. This response, *I am who am* is an affirmation of the presence of one in creation who is not a creature but the presence of the Creator. This is the affirmation of unshakeable presence, a presence before which everything else is a denial. Thus, John the Baptist who says *one is coming after me whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie* (10) also states: *I am not he! Only he is! Only he existed!*

When John the Baptist states: *I am the voice of one crying out in the desert* (11), we have the third proclamation of Christ's divinity. Saint Augustine places before us a beautiful statement when he says: *The voice is a sound that is heard by the ear, but in this voice one hears the Word, an idea*¹. This is what is happening here this morning in the Cathedral and through our radio broadcast. People are listening to this voice but once this voice is transmitted, it ends --- it is a sound. The word, however, remains because the word is an idea.

In the language of Saint John the Evangelist, this means that everyone who proclaims Christ is a voice. The voices, however, pass away, preachers die, John the Baptist will disappear but the Word remains. The Word remains and this is a great comfort to all preachers --- their voice will disappear but their words which are a proclamation of Christ, will remain in the hearts of those who desire to accept them.

The word is the thought of a human being. *Word* is a Greek idea. Greek philosophy sees the concept of the word as an emanation --- thus the emanation of God is the Word of God and as Christians we call the Word of God the Son of God. Every thought is like one's child and for this reason we say: *I have conceived an idea*. Everyone who thinks is conceiving. Just like a pregnant woman is conceiving so too the person who thinks also conceives. As a woman gives birth to the child that is conceived in her womb so too the thoughts of an individual give birth to words that are proclaimed aloud. Christ then is the emanation of God, the Son of God's substance, the image of the divine substance. We do not possess human words that adequately describe this mystery of the eternal God thinking of himself, words that describe this thinking that is his Son, the Word. When this Word is proclaimed, creation comes into existence because his Word is powerful. Everything that exists was created by him (12).

My sisters and brothers, hopefully this reflection is not some dry philosophical theory but something beautiful because here we are talking about the living God, moving, thinking, proclaiming an eternal Word that embraces us in love --- here we are talking about the divine Son who becomes the incarnate Word. Therefore, John the Baptist is able to proclaim the following words as the climax of his testimony which is shared with us today: *there is one among you whom you do not recognize. The one who is coming after me, existed before me and I am not worthy to untie his sandal strap* (13). How beautiful is this confession of John the Baptist: *Before I existed, he was!* (14). One day Jesus will speak to his persecutors who said: *You are not even forty years old and you say that you have built this temple* (15). Jesus responded: *Before Abraham came to be, I am; before the world began, the Word of God existed.* How consistent is the Word of God!

It is for this reason that we now make an act of profession in the pre-existence of this child who will be born in Bethlehem. This child existed before he was conceived in Mary's womb. As we read in the *Divine Comedy: Mother of your creator!*² Mary is the only woman who can say, *I have conceived in my womb a child who existed before me. I believe that I am his human mother, but he existed before being conceived in my womb.* If we lose this divine, eternal, all-powerful, loving perspective of the infinite God, then we lose the true significance of Christ. As Saint John the Baptist said: *before I existed, he was!* (16).

Today Saint Paul speaks to us and exhorts us to make ourselves worthy of the definitive encounter with Christ. He announces an existence beyond history that will have no end. In this case we see a reference to Christ who as God has no beginning --- he was. As we see in the beautiful prologue of Saint John's gospel: *in the beginning was the Word* (17). Note the past tense of the verb: *was* --- he existed. In the beginning, when God put things into motion, the Word existed, the Word was. Now Saint Paul tells us: *when your life ends, when your history ends, when the history of humanity ends, may you be worthy to encounter this eternal river that is Christ so that you might continue to live for all eternity.* Thus it is that history is nothing more than a fragment that has a beginning and will eventually end, but Christ, as God, is the Lord of history because he existed before history and will exist after the world ends. He had no beginning and will have no end. This is the Word that becomes man. This is the incarnation that becomes flesh.

Saint John uses another word of great biblical significance, the Greek word *flesh*. (18). Flesh refers to a concrete human person and flesh is all of us who are here this morning: men and women in whom one is able to see the marks of the years that have passed, children who are beginning their lives, strong young people, and elderly women and men who are in the final phase of their lives. The flesh is being marked by the passing days. Flesh is also the concrete situation of the human person, the person in sin, the person in anguish because of his/her present situation, the person of this country with a history that seems to have placed so many people on a dead-end street. Flesh is all those persons who are being encountered. Flesh! This fragile flesh! This flesh that has a beginning and that will eventually end, that becomes ill and dies, that sins, that becomes sad and happy according to the way in which people obey God --- this is what the Word of God became. Yes, the Word of God became flesh.

One day we explained here a word that I tried to analyze: *kenosis*. Remember *kenosis* is humiliation, anonymity, disappearance and disintegration. This word expresses an act of humility by God who is infinite and eternal and who placed himself in the womb of the virgin

to become flesh. The child that we are going to adore in Bethlehem is flesh, the fragile flesh of a child. But in the fragile flesh, like a wrapped package, there is a great gift: the Word becomes flesh! (19) The most beautiful aspect of Christ is not in his flesh but in the fact that without flesh there is no Christ. In flesh Christ wants to take on all that is implied in our flesh for as we read in Saint Paul's theology: *he became like us in all things except sin* (20).

In more recent times the Second Vatican Council says that the mystery of the human person cannot be understood apart from the mystery of the incarnate Word: *Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and 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* (21). We cry tears of joy and gratitude to know that this infinite God became flesh like you and I and dwells among us. If Christ would have accomplished his incarnation today, if today he were a man of thirty years and were here in the Cathedral, we would not be able to distinguish him from anyone else. Jesus, a man of thirty years, a *campesino* from Nazareth, present here in the Cathedral like any other *campesino* from our villages --- this was the Son of God who became flesh and we did not know him --- a man completely like us.

But this Christ who is God – for whom the world was made – made man, raises all men to the category of God. This is another idea for our reflection. But before, I want to concentrate on: who is the author of this great mystery of the Word made flesh? In today's first reading, we hear the proclamation of the great secret that one day the angel announced to the Virgin Mary. When the Virgin tells the angel that she is a virgin and intended to remain a virgin, dedicated to God, she says: *how can this be that I will conceive and give birth to a child* (22). The angel proclaims that which was announced seven centuries before by the prophet Isaiah: *the angel of the Lord is upon you because the Lord has anointed you. The Child that you will conceive is not the result of human intervention but is a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.* Christ, as man, will have a human mother but no human father who brings into existence the incarnation because he is the prodigy of the Holy Spirit.

How is this the anointing of the Holy Spirit? During this time of Advent and Christmas it is necessary to keep in mind the significance of the Holy Spirit, the power of God who (as we are told simply in our catechism) formed from the blood of Mary a body in her womb. Like every human being this child was infused with a human soul but this child was also infused with the person of the blessed Trinity: the Word. Thus this pregnant woman is the mother of God. Therefore on Christmas Eve, nine months after the prodigy of the incarnation is conceived in her womb, she receives in her arms the child Jesus. Mary knows that he is the work of the Holy Spirit and that the spirit of God has made this prodigy, this God-man. The child is going to grow and will give his life for the redemption of the world. The Holy Spirit will lead him. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, Jesus is raised from the dead and this resurrection of the man from Nazareth is a work of the Holy Spirit and is given as a pledge, a principle of faith and hope to all those who believe in Christ: *everyone who lives and believes in me will never die* (23). Just as this Spirit created us so too this same Spirit animates the life of the People of God, of Christians everywhere because this Spirit has been given in baptism to all those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Thus this morning the Holy Spirit desires our homage of adoration and gratitude because thanks to the Holy Spirit there was a virgin woman who was able to join together the honor of

virginity with the honor of maternity and give us the prodigy of a God made flesh. For this reason the Church today uses the canticle of Mary as a responsorial psalm: *my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord* (24). Imagine, if you will, especially you, young women who are sixteen years old --- what would that young woman of Nazareth feel as she is chosen to be the virginal instrument who would give a redeemer to all people? What young woman would not sing, inspired by this same Spirit that enabled her to conceive this prodigy in her womb? What young woman would not have in her holy soul, in her lively faith, a hymn of thanksgiving: *my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord ... because the Mighty One has done great things for me* (25). Truly the Son of God has done great things in the womb of Mary.

Mary cannot be forgotten during this season of Advent and Christmas. No one teaches us like Mary, the spirit of adoration before Christ who is the Word of God made flesh. No one else experienced in her womb the presence of the Word who became flesh. In the name of all human flesh she offers the Word her womb where Christ became incarnate in order to assume in himself, as the Council recently told us (26), the hands of all workers, the mind of all intellectuals, the hopes of all people, the hearts of all those who love, the anguish of all those who suffer, and the joys of all people. Nothing human is foreign to Jesus Christ because he has become flesh and has desired to assume in his dignity as the Son of God all that is implied by the flesh.

My sisters and brothers, during the days of Christmas I invite you to prolong this meditation: who is this child that is born in Bethlehem? Instead of thinking about gifts and banquets, greeting cards and other things that can consume our time, again I invite you to make this meditation: who is this child that is born in Bethlehem? This is the primary aspect of this Christmas season. Let us not allow this time to be commercialized and profaned. Let us embrace this season with a respectful spirit and venerate this mystery in our homes and in our poverty. The poorer and more infirm we are, the better we are able to reflect on this mystery. I am the flesh that Christ has assumed. Blessed be God who desired to become part of my life and become flesh like me.

The Church prolongs in history this mystery of the incarnation of Christ

The marvelous event of the Incarnation is not something that simply occurred twenty centuries ago. What is beautiful about the incarnation is the fact that Christ desired to prolong this mystery in his Church. I am going to read you another passage from the documents about the Church (27): *the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, 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 it, in the building up of the body.*

This whole section of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* explains the mystery of the Incarnation which is the mystery of God who becomes flesh and is prolonged in the Church which is the mystical body of Christ in history. As you remember, this was the title of my Second Pastoral Letter: *The Church, the Body of Christ in history*. This means that we, the people of 1978, have been assumed by baptism into the body of the Church and we are the flesh of Christ here and now. No one is excluded from this dignity, only those who wish to exclude themselves and those who betray the Church by staining it with so many slanders ---

those who forget that when *those who spit at the sky get their faces wet*. All those who spit upon the Church at this time are spitting at themselves. For they, like us, have been baptized and are living members who are part of the Body of Christ.

Christ values this human organization of the hierarchy: the Pope, the bishops, the priests, the institutional Church which we often speak against with scorn. Let us realize that this Church is the flesh of Christ and as we said before, this Church is flesh that is in a concrete situation of sin. We should not be surprised that we have to draw attention to the hierarchy and the priests and married people who call themselves Christian --- that we must draw their attention to being holy because they are the body of Christ. I say we should not be surprised that in all the human elements of the Church there exists sin because flesh is in need of conversion and turning again toward the living God. Christ became flesh in order to redeem all flesh. The Church, the flesh of Christ in history, is in need of redemption at all times. In 1978 the bishops, priests and faithful --- all people --- need redemption. We are unworthy flesh! We are fragile flesh! We are the flesh of Christ in history! No one of us can say that we will throw the first stone because we are all sinners. For this reason we say that the Church needs courage to denounce the sins of the world, not because she is spotless but because *those who denounce the sins of others must also be willing to be denounced*. Indeed the Church has an obligation to change her ways and as we heard from Saint Paul today, we also have an obligation to open ourselves to being corrected by God.

The second reading today speaks to us about the Thessalonian community which could very well be the community of San Salvador or any of our parishes --- the Church is community. Saint Paul shares with us the secrets of the Spirit of God who gave flesh to the Son of God made man. The Spirit continues to give life and consistency to the Church, the prolongation of Christ in history, a true community that honors Christ.

I invite you this week, in this hour when El Salvador seems to have to pray for joy, to listen to Saint Paul repeat to us: *Rejoice always! Prayer without ceasing! In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Jesus Christ (29)*. The Christian, the Christian community, must not despair. If someone dies in the family, we need not weep like people without hope. If the skies have darkened our nation's history, let us not lose hope. We are a community of hope and like the Israelites in Babylon, let us hope for the hour of liberation. It will come. It will come because, as Saint Paul says, God is faithful. This joy must be like a prayer: *the one who calls you is faithful and he will also accomplish it (30)*.

The Church community sings the hymn that we heard in this morning's first reading: *I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me in a mantle of justice, like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with her jewels (31)*. How beautiful to see a young man and woman who love one another and come before the altar dressed in their best clothes. They give themselves to one another in love. This is the comparison that Christ uses today and the comparison that God used in the Old Testament to describe the covenant that God made because he wants to save us and all people who are in need of salvation.

The comparison becomes even more poetic: *as the earth brings forth its plants and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before all the nations (32)*. I imagine that one who plants a garden hopes that flowers will spring up. But the flowers spring up precisely because one who is a gardener has planted the seed. This is what God has done in his redemptive act when he says: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to*

the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners (33). Does this not seem like the voice of the Church here in El Salvador shouting out: *No more torture! No more suffering!* This is the voice of God who wants to plant prosperity here on earth and then the earth will flourish. The Lord has promised this and will not fail. Like the farmer, God is patient because in its time the garden will be revealed.

The beautiful hymn of the young people today proclaims: *I have faith that everything will change*. Sing these words with great joy: *I have faith that everything will change*. This will be accomplished because God has come --- the Word has become flesh and wants us to live not simply as individuals. Keep this in mind because this is the cause of a great conflict in the Church today: the change from an individual piety to a communal piety. This is not the time to say: *I am trying to save myself and other people are not important to me*. If we do not save ourselves with others, it is impossible that we will save ourselves by ourselves. The salvation that Christ has brought us is a communitarian gift --- a gift for the Church.

Today's second reading also presents us with some other ideas that I, with full confidence as Pastor of this people, want to speak about. Saint Paul presents to the Thessalonians some norms that I also want to use as a guide for my pastoral ministry: *Do not quench the Spirit! Do not despise prophetic utterances! Test everything; retain what is good* (34). What does this mean *Do not quench the Spirit*? As bishop and pastor, I feel that these words place a great responsibility on me. I know that God's Spirit who formed Christ's body in Mary's womb and continues to guide the Church in history here in the Archdiocese is a Spirit that, in the words of Genesis (35), is hovering over a new creation. I sense that there is something new in the Archdiocese. I am a man, frail and limited and I do not know what is happening, but I do know that God knows. My role as pastor is what Saint Paul tells me today: *Do not quench the Spirit*. If I say in an authoritarian way to a priest: *Don't do that* or to a community *Don't go that way!* and try to set myself up as if I were the Holy Spirit and set about making a Church to my liking, I would be quenching the Spirit.

Saint Paul tells me: *test everything and retain what is good*. I pray very often to the Holy Spirit for this gift, for this gift that is called the gift of discernment. My sisters and brothers, I invite you --- and the older you are the more I invite you --- to pray also for this gift of discernment. The older one is it can appear that only older people know what is true and right and the ideas of young people appear to be crazy and novel and so we say: *pay no attention to them!* Be very careful. *Do not quench the spirit! Test everything and retain what is good* (36). True, we have no need to have young people teach us how to smoke marijuana or live dissolute lives --- no, we have no need to learn these vices. But in this world of vices and marijuana and defects, the Spirit of God is warning us. It is for this reason that I wrote in my Pastoral Letter: *The Church must go with Christ and without fear proclaim that she is eating with sinners and prostitutes.*(37) The Church is the incarnate Christ in real, concrete flesh. Today this flesh can be the flesh of a prostitute and tomorrow this flesh can be that of a saint who, like Mary Magdalene, repents. Today this flesh can be the flesh of Saint Augustine involved in all forms of worldly pleasure and seemingly incapable of living a chaste life and tomorrow this flesh can be the flesh of the sinner Saint Augustine who repents. I want to say to the young people today and to those communities that perhaps have a different way of doing things: retain what is good. My beloved priests, catechists, and religious help me to be understanding and ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of discernment so that we might discover in the Church that which is beautiful about our Archdiocese --- her true values. The Spirit does not repeat himself! The Bible has a very meaningful expression: *the Spirit makes all things new* (38). We who grow old very often want everyone made to our aged pattern. The Spirit is never old! The Spirit is always young.

Yesterday I was administering the sacrament of Confirmation to a group of young people in Colonia Santa Lucía and I spoke to them the words that I have just spoken to you. With great joy these young people received the Holy Spirit and were fully aware of what was happening. One of them told me: *we have committed ourselves to the Holy Spirit and we want to remain faithful to the Spirit.* This is the Church that prolongs the incarnation of Jesus Christ and this Church that is the incarnation of Jesus Christ contains things that are both good and evil.

Note the beautiful words that the Council speaks to us: *since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery* (39). These are very revealing words when I think about the extension of the Catholic Church and about the mission of the priesthood and the episcopacy and those consecrated as religious women and men --- one can easily believe that only here can be found that which is good and therefore everything else is evil. But I realize that this is nothing but a lie. The Council has just stated: *outside the Catholic Church there are people who are called to this divine vocation and the Holy Spirit leads them along paths that only he knows and makes them (even though they are not Christian) participants in this mystery of Christ* (40). How shameful to think that perhaps non-believers, people with no faith in Christ, may be better than we and nearer to God's reign.

Remember how Christ received a centurion and told him: *I will go and cure your servant.* (41) The centurion, full of humility and confidence said, *Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof ... but say the word and let my servant be healed.* The gospel tells us that Jesus marveled at this and said: *I tell you not even in Israel have I found such faith.* I say: Christ will also say of this Church: *outside the limits of Catholicism perhaps there is more faith, more holiness.* So we must not quench the Spirit. The Spirit is not the monopoly of a movement, even of a Christian movement or the hierarchy or the priesthood or some religious congregation. The Spirit is free, and he wants women and men, wherever they are, to realize their vocation to find Christ who became flesh to save all human flesh. Yes, to save all, dear sisters and brothers. I know that some people come to the Cathedral who have even lost the faith and are non-Christians. Let them be welcome. If this message is saying something to them, I ask them to reflect in their inner consciousness, for like Jesus, I can tell them, the Kingdom of God is not far from you! God's kingdom is within your heart! Seek it, and you will find it! (42)

Life of the Church

God became man and assumed this concrete flesh of crime and violence and darkness. All of this is flesh, a mixture of justice and abuse, of innocence and sin. Christ has taken on all of this in order to redeem us from sin and thus enables us to obtain the life of God so that we might change our ways and participate in his divine life. Christ continues to become incarnate in our daily life and so we speak about the following events. From this church I look toward the center of Catholicism, toward the Pope and with joy I find characteristics that confirm our pastoral ministry.

On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Declaration of Human Rights, the Pope sadly wrote: *Even though we cannot ignore the fact that progress has been made yet we are obliged to note that there is an apparent gap between the significant declarations of the United Nations and the often wide-spread violations of human rights in all parts of society and the world.*³ It is an important letter which John Paul II

addressed to the Secretary General of the United Nations in which he shows that there are governments and many states where human rights are being trampled upon and power abused. Pope John Paul II continues to be concerned about the situation in Nicaragua and with firm but respectful words he spoke to the ambassador of Nicaragua about the freedom that the Church ought to have and the respect for human rights that government officials ought to demonstrate to their people.⁴ He also encouraged Chile and Argentina to overcome their differences. Their chancellors met on 12 December and the Pope wrote to them⁵. It is sad to think how a nation like Argentina spends 2,500 million dollars on armaments. Is there no poverty in that country? What madness for armaments! The Pope says these things should be overcome. Even the guerrillas asked him to intervene and stop the war⁶.

On November 25th a symposium concluded in Santiago, Chile. I had received a graceful invitation from the Cardinal of Santiago to participate in this event but because of the current situation in our country I preferred to remain with my people which is the best witness that one can give. But from this sister nation people were kind enough to notify me that Cardinal Silva Henríquez and Cardinal Arnz from Brazil and many other persons from the diplomatic world as well as members of the Protestant Church were present. Among the statements issued by this gathering was the following: *many governments have imposed on people systems that make relative the value of the human person and the policy of national security is often used as a pretext to have recourse to various forms of institutional violence and torture.* They exhorted people of faith throughout the world to unite together in common efforts of action and creation so that, guided by faith, they might courageously seek truth and justice. Thus with renewed efforts they might be able to recreate a true solidarity among groups, people and nations. With great detail they refer to the abuses of freedom and justice that occur in many nations, especially the nations of our continent.

Also the Pope announced that he had chosen a theme for the Synod of Bishops that will be held in 1980: *The Tasks of the Christian Family.*⁷ We will take up the instructions that come from it that cannot be other than to build better families.

Also in Chile relations between Church and State are seriously strained because of the conflicts between the government and the people. Concretely, the Church asks for information about the 650 persons who have disappeared. As always, when the Church touches upon government and moneyed interests, the Church is labeled communist.

In our Archdiocese we rejoice because of some of the events that have occurred in our own house. The Franciscan Sisters celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their arrival in our country and are working in San Salvador, Zacatoluca, Cojutepeque, Usulután and Berlín.

The Sisters from the Somascan Community in La Ceiba have left for Brazil where they will initiate their pastoral ministry. This is the missionary Church for whom fronti

Concerning the life of our communities, this has been a very busy week. Last Sunday in San Rafael Cedros there was a meeting of the laity from the Department of Cuscatlán. I am very happy to see this promotion of lay people, living out their baptisms. The same Sunday I was in Portero Grande, Aguilares, celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe..

On Monday the 11th, I had an interview with some people who knew Father Neto Barrera very well. With profound gratitude (to the point of tears) they expressed their love for this priest who taught them to love. They told me: *Before we were selfish and only thought*

about ourselves but he began to teach us to understand ourselves and he helped us to change our lives. I believe that a tree is known by its fruits and this fruit is now speaking to us about the priestly work of Father Neto. At this time I renew the position that I took in my Pastoral Letter in which I state that we support everything that is just wherever it is found and at the same time we reject everything that is unjust and abusive wherever it is found.

December 12, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, once again our people showed the strength of Mary's spirit in their lives. I wish to congratulate them publicly. The parish priest of La Ceiba says that at least 60,000 participated in the procession before the Virgin of Tepeyac. I celebrated this feast in Dulce Nombre de María. I greeted the new pastors, the Maryknoll Fathers and the Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart who minister there. Three of the Oblate sisters were celebrating 25 years of religious life. I would like to congratulate Sister Angela Cáceres, Sister Elena de Jesús Cáceres and Sister Josefina Nuñez. May the Lord give them many more years of life and religious zeal. In the evening I celebrated the Eucharist in Colonia de las Decicias, Santa Tecla, and I met with a group of young people and Father Aguilar. I lament the fact that I was unable to accept the invitation of Father Eldodoro Orellana to participate in the celebrations in Colonia Guadalupe, Soyapango.

December 13, feast of Saint Lucy, the Patroness of Suchitoto, it was a great joy to share in that large church full of people their devotion to their holy patroness and speak to them of the true faith which, when lost, makes a person blind even though their eyes still function. I was in this village where Father Jorge Benavides has been named pastor. I greeted the Jesus of Nazareth Society and had the pleasure of being with all the priests of the Vicariate of Cuscatlán. Father Moreno was ill but I hope that he is better. A group of women from Colonia Santa Lucía shared with me the results of their reflections on the Pastoral Letter. It filled me with joy to see when people are sincere how well they accept the initiatives of their pastors. I regret that I was unable to accept the invitation of the people from Apastepque. It is in another diocese but I hope they had a good celebration for Our Lady Of Guadalupe.

I participated in the patronal celebration of the Immaculate Mary in San Pablo Tacachico which had been prepared by the parish and Father Jorge Salinas and other priests from the Vicariate. After the celebration there was a meeting of the pastoral ministers.

Yesterday, Saturday, in La Colonia Santa Lucía we celebrated First Communion and Confirmation for a group of young people who had been prepared for the reception of these sacraments by Father Astor during a whole year. Their parents decided to dress their children in simple clothing and ensure a good catechetical formation for those going to make it. First Communion and Confirmation were also celebrated in the church of El Calvario.

Today a meeting is being held in El Colegio Guadalupano for the Base Communities of Faith and other lay movements. More than one thousand people are expected to participate in a dialogue on the theme: *Community*. We are saying, as St Paul emphasized so much, that Christianity should be lived in community and not in isolation. This afternoon we will gather in Rosario de Mora where the Oblate Sisters of Divine Love have a group of young people prepared for the reception of Confirmation and First Communion. At 8:00pm we will be in the parish of San Sebastián (orphaned by the assassination of Father Neto) where the new pastor, Father Juan Antonio Gutiérrez, will be received.

More conscious celebrations of Confirmation. I want to invite all of you to affirm and accept this initiative. The norm is that children be at least eight years old but the parishes

will prepare groups of young men and women who are older and more aware of the sacraments that they are receiving. Here in the Cathedral we will continue to confirm children according to the norm that has been established by the Holy See. After Holy Week, we will no longer celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation here in the Cathedral. The celebrations for the reception of Confirmation will be organized in the vicariates and parishes because this is a sacrament that ought to have great significance for the community and the parish. The dialogues that we have had in the different communities have made it clear to me that we are all enriched by the celebration of the sacrament of Confirmation that is well prepared by the pastor and the community. I therefore invite all of you who have children and/or young women and men who wish to be confirmed --- I invite you to organize the preparation for this sacrament in your parishes and your vicariates.

Events of the week

I invite you to read on the solidarity page of *Orientación* the statement of Francisco Baltazar Campos Mendoza⁸, who was granted asylum in the Mexican Embassy. His statements have been made in front of a lawyer and he describes the horrible tortures that were inflicted on him and the terror that he endured with three other persons who were tortured with him. By some miracle he was able to save himself by awakening from a mysterious injection that had been given to him --- the others, however, were torn to pieces like sticks of dynamite. In his statement he says that while he was in prison he was able to speak with Pedro Arístedes Pineda, José Victoriano Arévalo Romero, Domingo Chávez Martínez, and Jorge Vitelio Martínez Ramírez who told him that he had spoken some time ago with Dr. Carlos Madriz who was also in prison and who in turn had seen Jorge Luis Zelayandía.

A Commission has studied the statement of Campos Mendoza and came to the following conclusions:

- 1) Despite their systematic denials, this is one more proof that there are political prisoners in the jails of the security forces.
- 2) This demonstrates that in our country recourse to make the identity of these persons known and bring them to trial (if they have committed some crime) is ineffective.
- 3) This confirms the illegal use of cruel torture during the interrogations that were carried on by the security forces.
- 4) It reveals the illegal use of drugs during these interrogations.
- 5) It places in question the statements made by these prisoners, statements that presented to the courts by the security forces.
- 6) It shows the unjust and arbitrary application of Article 496 of the Penal Code that recognizes confessions made outside the courtroom to members of the security forces and witnesses named by the same security forces as sufficient proof to decree provisional detention.
- 7) It unmasks the various manipulations of the security forces to make definitive the disappearance of people who have been arrested by them

- 8) This statement becomes the cry of an oppressed and tortured people that invites all people of good will to collaborate and bring about in El Salvador a cessation to the tortures, the repeal of the Law of Defense and the Guarantee of Public Order, the freedom of those who have disappeared and all political prisoners. It invites people to collaborate so that true social justice might become a reality for this is the foundation of a lasting peace.

The abduction of four people is sad news that should be reflected upon when talking about these matters. Fritz Schuitman, Ian Massie, Michael Chatterton and Takakasu Susuki continue to be held captive. I have spoken with their family members and the companies where they worked. I have done so with a sincere desire to help them pastorally. I want to say to everyone and in every place where my voice is heard that the two political conditions that have been demanded in order to release those held captive are: 1) the release of five prisoners: Lil Milagro Ramírez Huezo, Manuel Rivera, Juan Gonzalo Parada, Jorge Luis Zelayandia and Sonia Estela Ramírez, 2) the publication of a statement by the FARN in the newspapers. These two conditions do not depend on any action of the family members of those who are being held captive or on the companies that they work for. The commission that was established to help and intervene in these cases asked to see the President but has not been granted this request. They are willing to collaborate in every way that is possible and the same can be said about their family members and their places of business --- they are willing to negotiate the release of these four men.

Therefore, in the name of the Church, I want to remind you about the words that the Pope spoke when he was concluding his weekly audience: *... abduction is a plague that provokes much suffering and is unworthy of civilized nations. In the name of God ---* and here I am reading from the text of the Pope --- *I appeal to those who are responsible for these actions to free those persons who are being held captive for ransom. I also want to remind you that God will avenge the actions of humanity.*⁹

I am happy that this way of thinking of the Pope supports what I have said in *Orientación: a Christmas with no political prisoners or abductions. If these words are heard by those who are holding these brothers, these victims of disappearances and abductions, know that together with my solidarity for those victims and their family members who suffer and are in pain I also want to manifest to you my earnest supplication that is inspired by Christian love and justice and I ask you to respect the life and the human dignity of your captives and do not extinguish the human rights that they, like you, have with regard to freedom. Remember that the same struggle for the well-being and the just demands of the people that you claim to profess can lose its efficacy and sympathy when you become involved in and cause other injustices and violence. We can celebrate a joyful Christmas because of the efforts of everyone --- a Christmas with no more persons disappearing, with no political prisoners, with no abductions --- a Christmas free of fear and pain where we are able to gather together whole families in our homes.*¹⁰

God became man so that all men might become God

We end with a thought that takes us to the altar: that God who became man assumed this real flesh of crimes, violence, inhuman things, unheard of sufferings, of hopes and anxieties; all this is flesh, a mixture of justice and abuse, of innocence and sin; all this Christ as assumed, and this morning we have made concrete here in our community and in our country

the realities of the flesh that we live. All this flesh has been assumed by Christ. Jerusalem, filled with joy, is set free and sees justice and love spring forth from the earth. (43) Saint Paul exhorts us: *May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* (44).

I also want to say there are some words that have greatly encouraged me and relate to the incarnation we have meditated on today. They are from the Cardinals of Paris, England and Belgium who wrote me an unexpected letter which has given me much support. Among other things they say: *We are mindful of the struggle for human rights that is based on the fact that each person is a visible image of the invisible God. In reality in each woman and man we encounter God and his call on behalf of justice and love. The systematic violations of human rights are in themselves a negation of Christian faith in the Incarnation. We are pained that your prophetic witness is responded to by public attacks on the Church. We have read with great sadness about the ways in which the press and the other means of communication have begun a campaign of contempt and vilification that attempts to disparage your leadership. We want to take this opportunity to assure you of our fraternal solidarity.*¹¹

I rejoice not because of this expression of personal solidarity but because this is an expression of solidarity with the incarnation of God and with our human dignity. I rejoice because all of the things that we are doing, even though they might not be appreciated by some people, yet in the eyes of God and in light of the Word that we have been reflecting upon today --- all these things are a reflection of the Incarnation. We see the greatness of God's love when he takes on our flesh, flesh that is worthy of contempt, yet God continues to love us even to the point of becoming a child in the manger of Bethlehem and to accept his crucifixion on the cross and continue giving us the sacrifice of the altar each Sunday and every day. So be it.

¹ See St Augustine, *Sermons*, 288,3; PL 38, 1304.

² See Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Comedia*, III, 33.

³ Message of John Paul II to the United Nations (2 December 1978), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 December 1978.

⁴ Discourse of John Paul II to the Ambassador of Nicaragua in the Vatican (7 December 1978), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17 December 1978.

⁵ Message of the Pope to the Presidents of Argentina and Chile encouraging brotherly relations between the two countries (12 December 1978), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17 December 1978.

⁶ See *Diario de Hoy*, 13 December 1978.

⁷ Discourse of John Paul II to the Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops (16 December 1978), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 December 1978.

⁸ See *Orientación*, 17 December 1978.

⁹ Allocution of John Paul II during a general audience (13 December 1978), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17 December 1978.

¹⁰ *Orientación*, 17 December 1978.

¹¹ Letter from the Cardinals François Marty, archbishop of Paris; Basil Hume, archbishop of Westminster; and Leo Josef Suenens, archbishop of Brussels, to Mons. Oscar A. Romero, *Orientación*, 17 December 1978.

Marginal References (1) Mt 5,6; (2) Lk 1,46-50; (3) Jn 1,14; (4) Jn 1,6-8; (5) Jn 3,19; (6) Jn 1,21-23; (7) Jn 4,26; 4,10; (8) Jn 14,6; 4,10; (9) Ex 3,13-14; (10) Jn 1,27; (11) Jn 1,23; (12) Col 1,16; (13) Jn 1,26-27; (14) Jn 1,15; (15) Jn 8,57-58; (16) Jn 1,15; (17) Jn 1,1; (18) Jn 1,14; (19) Jn 1,14; (20) Heb 4,15; (21) GS 22; (22) Lk 1,34-35; (23) Jn 11,25; (24) Lk 1,46; (25) Lk 1,49; (26) GS 22; (27) LG 8; (28) Jn 8,7; (29) 1Th 5,16-18; (30) 1Th 5,24; (31) Is 61,10; (32) Is 61,11; (33) Is 61,1; (34) 1Th 5,19-21; (35) Gn 1,2; (36)

1Th 5,19-21; (37) Mk 2,16; (38) Rv 21,5; (39) GS 22; (40) GS 22; (41) Mt 8,5-10; (42) Lk 17,21; (43) Is 61,11; (44) 1Th 5,23.