

I BRING YOU GREAT JOY: A SAVIOUR IS BORN

Christmas Eve
December 24, 1978

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

My brother priests and dear sisters and brothers.

It is a great honor for the Church to be able to continue to cry out to the world every year the words that were heard for the first time in Bethlehem, words that were pronounced by the angels: *I proclaim to you good news of great joy ... for today a Savior has been born for you* (1). The Church has no other reason to exist except to continue to proclaim this great news, this good news that is expressed by the word *gospel*. To evangelize means to announce the good news of salvation to the world. Therefore, on Christmas Eve, the heart of the Church is filled with joy as we see the Cathedral church as it is now, filled with faithful followers of Jesus Christ who honor his holy birth. At the same time this provides the Church, together with you, an opportunity to fulfill her mission.

My beloved sisters and brothers, tonight I have to gather together the good news and then as pastor I must proclaim it. But as a pastor I am one of those shepherds and therefore I have to receive from the angels --- hopefully with the same simplicity and humility as the shepherds --- the news that moves hearts. The more simple and humble, the more poor and detached we are from ourselves, the more anguish and problems we might experience, the more impossible to resolve the problems of life, then all the more must we look toward the heavens and hear the good news: *for today a savior has been born for you* (2). Then we will hear the choirs of angels proclaiming this great news and a new hymn will be sung throughout the universe: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests* (3).

God so loved us that he gave us his only Son who redeemed the world. In today's readings from the prophet Isaiah, Saint Paul, and Saint Luke's gospel we discover very rich elements of the Christmas message that should be guarded in the same way that Mary guarded them. The Bible tells us that Mary kept in her heart all the things that the shepherds had told her that they had seen and heard.(4) She reflected on these things in her heart because even though she was the chosen mother of Jesus, nevertheless, as a Christian she knew how to ponder in her heart the great message of that holy night. She also needed this message. Who does not need Christ? Mary was most holy, but all the privileges of her holiness, the depths of her holiness and her closeness to God were due to Christ who came to save us.

In the middle of night, a great light shone

The prophet Isaiah presents us with a light that illuminates the night. We celebrate the feast of the Nativity on December 25th, just a few days after the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. The ancient Romans thought that the winter solstice marked the beginning

of the sun's birth. The nights became shorter and shorter until the time of the summer solstice at which time the shortest night of the year is then seen as the triumph of the sun over the darkness. Christianity and the Church took up this pagan feast of the sun which was called the *feast of the invincible sun*. The sun does not allow itself to be conquered by the darkness because even when the longest night of the year appears to oppress the sun, it is at that precise moment that the sun begins its victory march. The Church baptized this pagan feast and established December 25th as the feast of the Nativity. The object of this feast was not the adoration of the sun which will at some time come to an end and but rather the adoration of the eternal sun of justice, Christ, our Lord who is proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah tonight: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone* (5).

My sisters and brothers, is this not a beautiful message for our hearts? Who at some time has not felt as though their lives had become enclosed in the darkness of night because of doubts of faith or the uncertainties of life? Who has not felt unsure of where one has come from and where one is going? How much darkness is in the hearts of men and women, in the heart of society and so many people! The more that life and history appear confused the more we need the brightness of the sun. Today, when we experience the longest night of the year, how consoling to think that precisely at this time when the darkness encloses us, the light of the Nativity changes night into day. Isaiah tells us: *the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light* (6). Let us walk in the splendor of that light!

This is an invitation to faith because on this Christmas Eve we are all told to believe in Christ because he has said: *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness* (7). I assure all of you, my dear sisters and brothers, and I say to myself: let us never turn our lives into the darkness of night but rather let our lives be illuminated by the light of Christmas and by the joy of the great news of this night. As we journey through life we rely on the light and on a Redeemer.

The goodness of our God has appeared

In the second reading Saint Paul presents the birth of Christ from another aspect. The goodness and mercy of our God has appeared (8) and invites us to approach the coming of God by responding temperately and justly in order to prepare ourselves for the second coming. We prayed today the beautiful prayer of Christmas: *God our Father, every year we rejoice as we look forward to this feast of our salvation. May we welcome Christ as our Redeemer and meet him with confidence when he comes to be our judge.*

My sisters and brothers, the coming of Jesus on this Christmas Eve is a coming in humility, humble to the point that theology refers to this as *kenosis*, that is, humiliation, emptying oneself. Saint Paul tells us that even though Jesus had the dignity of God he did not cling to this dignity, but emptied himself, humbled himself, and became human (9). After living a humble and poor life he handed himself over to be judged and sentenced to the most humiliating death in history, crucified as a common criminal. Jesus was born for humiliation, for *kenosis*. Thus in the life of Jesus everything is humiliation. The gospel has told us that there was no room in the inn (10), not even a small room for the birth of the greatest to be born. His parents had to seek refuge with animals, in a stable where Joseph cleaned out the rubbish and garbage so that Mary could give birth in the most dignified way that the situation of poverty allowed. Thus the Redeemer is born: in a situation of humiliation and poverty.

It is necessary to understand that Jesus is born to redeem the world and that the redemption of the world could not be achieved except by the opposite path by which women and men had offended God. We offended God by our pride and vanity and selfish wealth, by our power and all those other realities that are called sin. We disobeyed God. Therefore redemption must be a return to the paths of humility, obedience, austerity and self-denial because it is on these paths that we discover the goodness and the mercy of God who forgives us our sins. People do not so fear the forgiveness of the Lord that they would not undertake a return along the paths that Jesus teaches us, paths where we will find redemption. This Christmas Eve is an invitation to the simple hearted to live a life of humility. It is an invitation that is extended to us by Saint Paul to lead a life of temperance and a life of sacrifice (11).

My dear sisters and brothers, the goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ appeared and with this goodness comes the grace of redemption, all the richness of the life of God. It is for this reason that when Christ becomes incarnated in the womb of Mary and is then born, this moment is called the fullness of time. The fullness of time means that this child has fulfilled the promises of God. The fullness of time also means that in this child who is born of the Virgin we find the richness of redemption that everyone needs. In Jesus we discover our glory, our hope and our joy. Let us open ourselves to our Lord, Jesus Christ, even though he appears as a poor child, even though his death is one of humiliation on a cross and even though his paths are the ones that he spoke about when he said to his followers: *Foxes have dens and the birds of the sky have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head* (12), *for whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me* (13).

Therefore the Church preaches from the perspective of the poor and we are never ashamed to say *the Church of the poor* because it was among the poor that Jesus desired to establish his seat of redemption. This is not because money is evil but because so often money makes people idolaters of the things of the earth and they forget God. But when people are detached and have the courage to make their path and their joy the path of the beatitudes, for example, *blessed are the poor, blessed those who weep* (14) *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* (15), then they will understand that redemption has come and that redemption only walks along these paths that women and men do not want to travel. Tonight let us accept the message of the Lord's goodness and mercy because when he comes a second time as Judge, his coming will not be one of humiliation but one of justice in which he will claim as his own the honor of God before all those who despised him. At the same time he will gather up all the blessed of the Father who followed him. Then at that time we, my sisters and brothers, will experience the Christmas joy as we are now experiencing it this evening.

At this time I believe that the joy of Christmas, especially here in El Salvador, is a calm joy, a joy of Christian hope. I have heard many voices at this time that have told me: *How sad is Christmas! There are many who are suffering and so many homes do not have their loved ones with them. In El Salvador there is sadness at this time of Christmas, 1978.* But those who are Christian know that in their deepest being, there is a joy, a joy of hope and faith, a joy of austerity and a joy because the mercy of God does not repent for having handed himself over and allowed us to find his mercy. I invite everyone to live this calm joy during this Christmas season. Glory to God that we do not have a Christmas with so many commercial realities because those joys pass so quickly, like the ashes that are thrown out. I want everyone who is participating in this reflection to experience profound joy: joy in the midst of our history of sadness, terror, anguish, because beneath all of this there is great hope.

The Lord has come and we go out to meet him. We trust in him who comes to save us and the more joy that we give to this night then it is impossible for the night to overcome us. The Lord is our Redeemer. Tonight is a night of prayer and together on the altar of Jesus who is born and who has come to save us we place all our prayers and our hopes with the calm joy that alone can give us true hope in the words of Jesus: *Peace I give you* (16) but not as the world gives peace but rather a peace that is the fruit of sincere conversion that awaits everything from God.

Jesus was born for us

My dear sisters and brothers, lastly, the gospel tells us that Christ is born in history, in concrete circumstances. For example, there is mention of the emperors of Rome, the governors of Palestine, concrete people in history and all of this tells us that Jesus is born into the concrete history of humankind. No, we are not simply talking about the time of twenty centuries ago that is described by Luke in the passage that we have just read, but today in 1978, if the birth of Jesus and the celebration of Christmas were written about today, other names would be mentioned. The Lord has been born for us, and so we are not remembering a birth that took place at some other time, as if Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the Magi (all of whom have died) have simply left us a remembrance of something past. No, the liturgy, the celebration of the Church has the privilege of making present the mystery that we are celebrating. Today is Christmas in the Cathedral. Today Jesus is born here for us. The prophet Isaiah has told us: *a child is born to us; a son is given to us* (17).

May we truly experience this reality because I know that each one of you, like me, has a need of embracing Jesus as our own, Jesus who is born for everyone and who remains with everyone and is given eternally to each one of us in such a way that each one can say as Saint Paul said: *he loved me and handed himself over for me.*(18) Let us then experience the Lord as the redeemer of our family, the companion of our life, the confidant in our time of anguish, the redeemer who is the redeemer of you and me and all people.

Let us celebrate this Christmas Eucharist with profound faith and hope regardless of the fact that this is the longest night of the year. What is important is the light of faith that illuminates our hearts because in the midst of our present sadness and anguish there is a hope that enables us to trust fully in the child who is born for us. So be it.

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Marginal References (1) Lk 2,10-11; (2) Lk 2,11; (3) Lk 2,14; (4) Lk 2,19; (5) Is 9,1; (6) Is 9,1; (7) Jn 8,12; (8) Tt 2,11; (9) Ph 2,6-8; (10) Lk 2,7; (11) Tt 2,12; (12) Mt 8,20; (13) Mt 16,24; (14) Lk 6,20-23; (15) Mt 5,6; (16) Jn 14,27; (17) Is 9,5; (18) Ga 2,20.