

GOD SAVES US THROUGH OUR COOPERATION

**Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 1979**

Baruch 5:1-9

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

Luke 3:1-6

My dear sisters and brothers

What comfort to know that God journeys with us in history! This is the meaning of Advent. As we initiate a new Liturgical Year, we celebrate the great event that God is with us, just as Isaiah the prophet proclaimed when he said: *the virgin shall be with child and bear a son and shall call him Emmanuel, God-with-us* (1).

During the season of Advent we celebrate the fact that God draws near to our history. God desired to bring the history of salvation of women and men into their own human history. Thus our human history will become salvation for all people if we reflect God's plan of salvation. At the present time people must understand that history does not terminate in history but rather is inserted into the eternity of God and therefore God is the Lord of history.

The great role of the Church is to carry out in human history the plan of God's history. The Church must reflect God's history in the concrete events of people's lives and thus affirm all those realities which reflect God's salvific plan in history. The Church, with the blessed freedom of God, rejects in our history all those realities that do not correspond to God's plan and design, a plan to save humanity.

For this reason the Church must maintain her authentic position and not identify herself with the historical plans of people. The Church, however, must illuminate these realities. Thus the liberation that the Church proclaims must be viewed from the perspective of the liberation of God, our Lord. Pope Paul VI explained this and here I would hope that all the Christian communities that are reflecting together with us on this first Sunday of Advent would be mindful of this advice which today is more necessary than ever before: *generous Christians who are sensitive to the dramatic questions involved in the problem of liberation, in their wish to commit the Church to the liberation effort, are frequently tempted to reduce her mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project. They would reduce her aims to a man-centered goal; the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material well-being. Her activity, forgetful of all spiritual and religious preoccupation, would become initiatives of the political or social order. But if this were so, the Church would lose her fundamental meaning. Her message of liberation would no longer have any originality and would easily be open to monopolization and manipulation by ideological systems and political parties. She would have no more authority to proclaim freedom in the name of God. This is why we have wished to emphasize, in the same address at the opening of the Synod, "the need to restate clearly the specifically religious finality of evangelization. This latter would lose its reason for existence if it were to diverge from the religious axis that guides it: the kingdom of God, before anything else, in its fully theological meaning."* (2).

The richness of the readings that will be proclaimed during this time of Advent reminds us about God's plan and the history of salvation which should guide our search for liberation and our rightful demands and our efforts at this historical time in our life. Therefore during the next four Sundays the plan of God is going to be made more and more explicit.

Last Sunday, when I was unable to share reflections here in the Cathedral with you¹, Father Fabián Amaya (an authentic voice of the liturgy and the Word) presented a synthesis of salvation history from the beginning to the end. In the beginning we see God's initiative in his promise to raise up a descendant of David in whom the Son of Man would become incarnated. This descendant of David would appear as the redeemer of humankind. Thus salvation history begins with an initiative and a promise of a king who would be the redeemer of all people. The end of this history was presented to us in last Sunday's gospel when Jesus stood before the Temple of Jerusalem and spoke about the end of time and the end of history. He said: *then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and great glory* (3). The second reading placed us before the Son of God as he went out to meet humankind now holy and redeemed (4)... thus the definitive phase of redemption. This is us, women and men who have been redeemed and we have had the joy of living and developing salvation history in ourselves.

On the second and third Sunday of Advent, that is, today and next week, we are presented with the person of John, the one who comes before Jesus. We see how God makes use of the human person and invites us to collaborate in the history of salvation. During the next two weeks we will come to see the demands that are placed upon us in order to become incorporated into the history of salvation.

The fourth Sunday of Advent, which occurs on the eve of the Nativity, will present us with the immediate preparations in which Mary played a predominant role so that the King of glory, the eternal Lord, might become part of our history. Jesus is born in Bethlehem and becomes part of our history. During the Christmas season we will celebrate the coming of God who journeys with men and women in their history. Thus we see the importance of this season, especially for those who experience a profound desire for the liberation of our people. These people, however, should not confuse the plans of this earth with the great plan of God.

My dear sisters and brothers, you who here in the Cathedral and you who are listening to me on your radio have gathered to reflect on the promise of God who wishes to use women and men to save the world, if we truly desire to be the Christian community that Christ wants to establish with faith, love and hope in order to be light to the world and salvation to all people, then let us take notice of the reflections that the Word of God suggest to us so that we might truly make our parish communities, our ecclesial base communities, our family biblical reflections, and our Christian life the community of Christ which is referred to today in Saint Paul's letter.

As usual I give a title of this morning's homily on this second Sunday of Advent: *God comes to save us in history but needs the collaboration of the human person*. God comes to save through human history but he needs our collaboration. I will develop the following points: First, God comes to save in the history of humankind; Second, the Precursor is a symbol of human collaboration; Third, our Church, our archdiocese and history, the history of El Salvador. What the Church has to do today in El Salvador is no different from what John the Baptist did: to point out God's plans which those who wish to be saved must accept.

God comes to save in human history

My first thought is that God comes to save in human history. I find in today's readings two very expressive descriptions. We have just listened to the historical-political framework of John the Baptist's ministry: *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea* (5). This is followed by a description of the political situation of Palestine that was ruled by the Roman Empire and governed by four tetrarchs (tetrarch means that something is divided into four parts). Thus under the Roman Emperor four tetrarchs governed the land in which Jesus lived. Within this historical-political framework we are also made aware of the ecclesiastical situation at that time: *during the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas* (6). This is the framework in which Saint Luke begins to describe the Word of God. In this context *the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the desert* (7). No more solemn and incarnated prologue could introduce us to the fact that God comes and accompanies us on our historical journey. Thus we see that God fulfills the word of salvation by relying on the emperors, kings, governors and priests of a particular era. These are the people who provide the framework for God's time to become operative in the history of the earth.

We see the four kings of Palestine, the intrigues of their kingdoms, the superficiality of religion that had become so legalistic that one had to ask the question what is the first commandment that must be observed (8) in order to honor women and men who had become victims of the intrigue and subordination of people under the rule of the Roman Empire.

Times change but the plan of God is always the same: to save people in history. Therefore the Church is charged with bringing the plan of God into the present moment but the Church does not identify herself with any historical plan. The Church cannot become an ally of the Roman Empire or Herod or any earthly king or political system or human political strategy. The Church enlightens these realities but always preserves her autonomy as she proclaims the history of salvation: the plan of God.

In today's first reading we discover another wonderful characteristic that confirms my idea that God saves in history. Baruch, the prophet, brings together the religious experiences that the prophets had left the people as an inheritance and refers to the time after the Babylonian captivity when another empire, the Persian Empire, had imprisoned the children of Israel who now mourned their captivity. The prophet announced the end of their exile and a return to Jerusalem. We are presented once again with the history of people, humiliated and in exile, but people who are encouraged by the history of salvation. Their exile will be a sign of people's need to be saved. They cannot save themselves by their own efforts but God will come. This is the proclamation of the prophets. During this time of Advent when the salvation of Christ is proclaimed, these events remind us of the fact that God saves humankind in history.

We see the beautiful comparison that is made concerning the city of Jerusalem: plundered, destroyed and ruined, yet these realities led people to dream of a new Jerusalem. The prophets spoke of a new Jerusalem that would be established by the people who were in exile when they returned to their homeland. During the return journey through the desert a voice, the voice of the heralds who proclaim the arrival of the king, will announce: *Prepare the way of the Lord because God is coming to lead the people. Make straight his paths ...* and like an architectural or engineering plan that outlines the construction of a beautiful highway or avenue, so too we see the wonderful description of the historical return of the people. *For God has decreed the flattening of each high mountain, of the everlasting hills, the filling of the valleys to make the ground level so that Israel can walk in safety under the glory of God.* (9)

Jerusalem, the earthly city, is used in God's sacred revelation to describe the wonders of God's kingdom and redemption. Jerusalem will be called: *Peace of justice. The glory of God's worship* (10). We are presented with an invitation to go up to the capital of the Kingdom of God, the capital that is symbolized by Jerusalem: *Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that they are remembered by God. Led away on foot by their enemies they left you; but God will bring them back to you borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones* (11).

See how salvation history utilizes the events of people in order to plant in women and men hope, repentance, the return of God, joy in knowing that God accompanies people in their history. My dear sisters and brothers, at the beginning of this Advent season I have just presented the teaching contained in my first idea. We have great reason to hope because God accompanies us in our history. God does not abandon us. God is on our side as we confront injustice and as we await our return so that here in El Salvador salvation can be referred to by the wonderful name that was spoken in today's first reading: *Peace of justice. The glory of God's worship* (12). Let us do all we can so that the history of El Salvador might also be a history of salvation.

The Precursor, symbol of human collaboration in the history of salvation

And this is my second point: the Precursor, symbol of human collaboration in the history of salvation. During this season of Advent, especially today and next Sunday, the Church wants to present to us the providential, wonderful person of John the Baptist.

The prophets announced a herald, an angel who before the coming of Christ would proclaim the fact that the time was near at hand. Some confused this herald with Elijah who had been taken up into heaven and who was believed to be the one who would return and announce the coming of God into the world. Jesus interprets this tradition and says: *Elijah has come* and here he is referring to John the Baptist. (13) Today's reading unveils this mysterious person of the Jewish tradition and we see him incarnated in the person of John the Baptist. John is the central figure of Advent because he is the angel, the Precursor, the one who announces that Jesus has come. In today's gospel taken from the book of Saint Luke (this gospel will guide our reflections during the coming year) the voice that Isaiah announced is identified: *He (John) went through the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "a voice of one crying out in the desert: 'prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God'"*(14).

The voice was the voice of hope but conditions were placed on the encounter with God and we will explain this further next Sunday, but these conditions are hinted at in the preaching and the actions of John: *Repent and be baptized*. Baptism was a rite of repentance. All those who recognized their sins sought purification and spiritual cleanliness: no more sin, no more moral impurity in the heart. Thus people were converted and only those who are converted will see the Lord return to his people. We are now concerned about making the mission of John the Baptist present here in El Salvador. His mission becomes present because what is beautiful about this morning's liturgy is that we, the Christian community, carry on the prophetic mission of God proclaiming the salvation of all people.

My dear sisters and brothers, I continue to insist on a distinction that is important to clarify at this time: there is a difference when we speak about the people and the People of God. What is the

difference? The people are composed of all those individuals who live in a particular country. Thus all the persons living in this country, including those who do not believe and those who are indifferent, are the people of El Salvador. When we speak about the People of God we are talking about the Christian community, those people in El Salvador who have received the message of Jesus Christ, repented and as a sign of their repentance have been baptized and, as John the Baptist said, are preparing *a perfect people for the coming of the Lord*. Thus, the People of God is composed of a select group of people. We do not speak these words with pride or arrogance because perhaps we are not the People of God especially when we are not truly converted. The People of God also exists beyond the limits of the Church and includes all those who have not known Christ but have placed their trust and hope in God. Thus we can say that not everyone who is a member of the people of a particular nation and not everyone who professes to be a member of the People is in actuality a member of the People of God.

This morning we see that if we are truly convinced that God wants to create the history of salvation with women and men who believe in him and who form with him the community of love, that which Saint Paul refers to today, (15) then we must take on the identification of the Precursor, John the Baptist, because AS Saint Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians: *this is the community that saves people, the community that has collaborated in the process of evangelization* (16).

For God is my witness and Saint Paul's prayer is the following: *that your community of love may grow more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception* (17).

I am glad to be able to make this distinction and tell you, who want to experience the great honor of referring to yourselves as Church or as a Christian community that uttering a title is not enough nor is it enough to come together to reflect on the Scriptures. God demands something more profound: the attitudes of the precursor, the conversion of John the Baptist, the identity of those who in the midst of empires and kingdoms and political systems maintain themselves as authentic missionaries of Christ.

And yes, during the time of John the Baptist there was great political entanglement! There were political groups like today. Some people were in favor of the Empire and others were against it. There were different political parties opposed to the Empire, groups that today would be called popular political organizations. There were also armed branches of these groups. The history of Jesus' time is incredibly similar to our own history. John the Baptist did not identify himself with any one faction but became the herald of the King. As we will see next Sunday, John spoke words of salvation to everyone. In his heart there was no element of exclusivity because the Lord calls everyone to become part of his people. At the same time John was courageous in calling attention to Herod (18) who was committing sin and in fact, because he confronted the king for his sinful action he paid the price for it with his life. Again we see that John did not identify himself with any particular faction. The Christian community has to grow in love and faith and the Word of God. In their communities the People of God have to be an expression of love that saves. Today the Christian community is saving the nation to the degree that it is an authentic Christian community.

My dear sisters and brothers, priests, pastoral ministers, women religious involved in pastoral activity, ministers of the Word ... so many people ministering in our pastoral activity ... Blessed be God! We must remember to truly create Church among us. We must remember to be the precursor of the Lord. May the Church's work be so intimately identified with Christ that his love and enlightenment become the love and enlightenment of the community! May we think like Christ thinks and may we seek the liberation of our people from the perspective of salvation history which should illuminate every salvation in history!

There is only one history of salvation and from the perspective of that history we illuminate the salvation, liberation and just demands of all people. Thus our salvation, liberation and just demands will be authentic to the degree that they are identified with or aspire to and are oriented toward salvation in Christ. At the same time these realities will be spurious and false to the degree that they become separated from Jesus' experience, that is, if they become separated from Jesus because of hatred, vengeance, radical positions or partiality. We can only speak of salvation as that which comes from the Lord's strength, that which seeks the common good and not just the good of some individual popular faction. The Church, situated within a political-historical framework, has to be the voice of the Lord, the voice that always cries out in the desert: *Prepare the way of the Lord* (19) ... a call that goes out to all hearts so that they seek an encounter that will make them happy on this earth.

My dear sisters and brothers, I also want to highlight the following: the degree to which we incarnate salvation history is the degree to which we are becoming incarnated in the history of our people. Many times people think that the religious meaning of the Christian community distances or alienates people from the realities of the world. We frequently hear such words. But this morning we are saying that God wants to save people in history and therefore the more we take ownership of the history of El Salvador the more Christ is in our midst. We do not have to import any form of imperialism. Here in our people is God's salvation! Here is Christ! He is a Salvadorian! He is the history of our people! Those who understand our history best also understand that God desires to free and save the people of El Salvador. We do not have to learn from other parts of the world that which we already possess here, that which we possess as a result of our faith in our people.

Our Church and our history²

And so, as part of my sermon and at the same time a practical reflection on our community, the third point: our Church and our history.

As you analyze the Word of God that was so providentially presented to us today you are able to see that there are realities in our Church and our history that reflect here in El Salvador the history of God's salvation. At the same time, you are able to see that in our history and even within our Church there are realities that do not reflect the history of salvation and therefore we have to root out these realities just as we must root out sin. We must do this because sin is all that which is opposed to the saving plan of God in history.

How has the past week been in the Church? Yesterday we celebrated the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Several communities and all the People of God celebrated the dawning of people's liberation that is manifested in this mystery of the Virgin Mary. After having passed through the history of the world Mary, without sin, pure, was taken up to heaven and is the perfect image of the Church that wishes to be present in the world as one who collaborates with God's gift of salvation. No one collaborated like Mary in saving the world and no one except Mary maintained herself so united with God. For this reason her saving power and she herself have become the image of human liberation.

In Puebla the Pope stated: *In Latin America devotion to the Virgin forms part of its very identity.*³ The history of Latin America cannot be understood without including devotion to the Virgin. We experienced this yesterday on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Perhaps not in the same way as in Nicaragua where this was celebrated as a national feast but in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception Mary is very loved in our communities. I want to call to mind the image

of the most pure Conception in Cojutepeque. That place was the capital of the Republic when Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. A crown was placed on the statue of the Virgin in Cojutepeque as a sign of the faith of the people of El Salvador in the dogma Mary's Immaculate Conception. Many other places celebrate this feast with great devotion.

I had the privilege of celebrating the feast of the Immaculate Conception in a town in Guatemala, beside the scenic lake of Amatitlán where the Congregation of the Carmelite Missionaries of Saint Theresa have a retreat center and where eight young women made their religious profession by entrusting themselves to God's service on this wonderful feast of the Virgin. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that there, on the heights of Carmel Jujú, our radio station YSAX can be heard most clearly and I am sure that they are listening to me now. Therefore receive our greeting and gratitude for the hospitality that you offered me and for the joy that I experienced as I celebrated the feast of the Virgin in the midst of such generous offerings made to her.⁴

Speaking about the religious women, Mother Marta Alicia Reyes celebrated two years of religious consecration to God. Also yesterday Sister Nelly Rodríguez at the Colegio Sagrado Corazón celebrated her silver jubilee.

Father Alejandro Pineda Rodriguez celebrated his first Mass yesterday in Ahuachapán and this was another way for our people to offer homage to the Virgin.

The people in San Nicolás Obispo, Tonacatepeque, celebrated their patronal feast yesterday. The people there are also preparing for the celebration of Confirmation on December 30th and many young people will receive the sacrament of the Holy Spirit.

Another ecclesial event was held in the Diocese of Santiago de María, an event that can be seen as a sign of the redeeming presence of Christ among us. We celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the diocese that is now under the leadership of Bishop Rivera y Damas. That which was envisioned on December 2, 1954 has now become a reality, namely, the presence of the Church which on the 25th anniversary of its existence reflected on the theology of the local Church and the bishop. Wherever there is an Episcopal seat and a bishop who is the successor of the apostles, there we have a special presence of God's salvation in history, the Church. Thanks to God the Church has worked intensely. We were saddened during this celebration by the disrespectful and ridiculous attitude of members BPR who occupied one of the booths in the park and began to make all kinds of noise. We have learned that the young people who did this were not from Santiago de María and we state here that such attitudes are foolish and also offend the simple and humble feelings of people. Our celebration, however, was successful because of the organization and planning of so many people.

Bishop Rivera and Msgr. Urioste have left for Holland. They were invited by the Ecumenical Institute for Solidarity to represent our Diocese and be the voice of Latin America. They will participate in the promotion of a collection that will be taken up in Holland to assist our people. Thus during the coming week our brothers will be involved in this effort. I ask you to keep them in your prayers so that their voices, which will speak about the situation of our country here in Latin America, might produce in the generous hearts of the Christian community in Holland a sense of unity and lead them to assist our people.

During the past week representatives from two institutions (ADVENIAT and MISEREOR) in Germany were visiting us. They were able to see how we have utilized the generous contributions that the people of Germany have given us. One of these works is the ministry of the religious

women in different towns and villages. The representative from ADVENIAT was able to greet all of these religious women because they were making their retreat together. He was made aware of the great work that is being done among us thanks to the assistance of Germany. As you can see the missionary sense of the Church is a reality.

In Chalatenango several young men participated in an educational course to bring them up to par with their peers. I was pleased to be able to visit them and experience their optimism as they see themselves with the possibility of moving on to the priesthood. We pray to the Lord for these young men, for these delayed vocations ... we pray that they might be generous priests because they now realize that their vocation is doubly merited.

In our Archdiocese there are catechumenate communities that during these days are continuing with their programs. These communities are nourished by the Word of God and by Christian living out of their faith.

This evening there will be the closing of a Cursillo. This is a pastoral approach that is very much alive in our midst and that attempts to deepen the laity in their spiritual commitment and encourages people to become converted and to become involved in some form of ministry.

Another activity of our community of love and faith is found in the schools of Fe y Alegria. Last week the work in five academies came to a close. In these places young men and women are able to prepare themselves for a career. This is the tenth anniversary of these schools and their work of promoting young women and men is worthy of much praise.

The parish community of Quezaltepeque that is in schism and that has been greatly disturbed by this situation is nearing a solution. I want to remind you that thanks to God Father Roberto has been faithful to his parish ministry despite the difficulties he has encountered. I hope for the assistance of this community so that this problem can be quickly resolved so that once again there can be one flock with one Shepherd.

In the parish of San Martín there was a false alarm ... Father Rutilio Sánchez was denounced for having a storeroom filled with arms. This could have produced an operation by the National Police but first the police came to the Chancery in which case we intervened and with the agreement of the pastor the parish house was searched. Father Tilo with two witnesses from the Chancery searched the house and concluded that the denunciation was a slander against the pastor. Thus, the reputation of this parish remains intact. Someone who misinterpreted these events wanted to implicate me as being responsible for turning Father Tilo over to the police. I protest such statements because I am also aware of the fact that there is a desire to disparage the Chancery. Yet I have witnesses here in the person of Father Tilo and members of the Chancery that my intervention was one of defending Father Tilo and not betraying him.*

Our Christian community has organized confirmations like that which was celebrated in the Church of Corazón de María and organized by the Vicariate of Asunción Flor Blanca.

With devotion we celebrated the anniversary of two priests who were assassinated on November 28th : nine years ago Father Nicolás Rodríguez and one year ago Father Ernesto Barrera. This double crime ought to make us reflect on a society that kills its priests.

Father Mariano Brito, Chancellor of the Diocese and the pastor of Colonia Luz, has returned from his trip to recover his health. Besides feeling very well he also brings us many expressions of

solidarity and was able to share in pastoral experiences in the Christian communities of South America.

With sadness I tell you that the Good Shepherd Sisters who have served as true angels in the Women's Prison have to cease this ministry to the Church because of reasons that they find insurmountable. They have promised to collaborate in the prison ministry of the Archdiocese and hopefully the Minister of Justice, who supervises the prisons, will work a miracle so that the Sisters do not have to leave.

Sister Rosa Beatriz Vazuerano, who has ministered with great zeal in Plan del Pino, will be leaving our Diocese. She will be going to Spain but we hope that she will return.

Two of the Sisters from Belgium were seriously injured in an accident and I ask you to pray for their speedy recovery.

The Passionist Fathers have consecrated in their Congregation the first candidate from El Salvador. We hope that many other young men will follow him and become members of the Passionist Congregation.

I want to confirm the news that Abbot Roger from Taizé is with us and is preparing to celebrate in our seminary a two day prayer vigil with the young people of our Diocese. More details will be given but I want to share this information with all the young people and invite you to participate in this prayer vigil. You will be able to contact Abbot Roger who has attracted so many young people throughout the world to this ministry. He has been visiting South America and had to change his plans in order to be with us on December 22-23. During the vigil some of the seminarians will be installed in the minor ministries, that is, they will take another step forward toward priestly ordination.

As the Holy Father desires we are going to celebrate the day of peace on January 1st. The Pope who has labored so much for unity has given us an example and encourages us to work for the gift of unity among the Christian Churches. Therefore at this time I want to announce to all Catholics and Protestants of good will that we are preparing to celebrate the week of prayer for Christian unity on January 18-25.

During these days the Pope has made some statements that seem very applicable to our situation. I want to remind you of his words because they enlighten in a wonderful way our history here in El Salvador. The Pope, the pastor of the Church who maintains the history of salvation in the world, enlightens the history of all people because he is the pastor of the whole world. Thus from his discourses we can receive much light for the history of El Salvador, for example, when he spoke about the true meaning of progress. The Pope said: *In the gospel there is an invitation to progress. Today the world is filled with invitations to progress. No one wants to be non-progressive. Nevertheless, we attempt to discover in what way we can and ought to be progressive. What does true progress consist of?*⁵ The Pope responded by referring to the liturgical texts of Advent: *True progress is that which bears within itself a profound sense of the truth of Christ. There can be no progress without Christ.*⁶ For this reason Advent, at this particular time in our history, places us in a wonderful situation because we hear the proclamation that God saves people in history and people will be saved and progress to the degree that they adhere to and unite themselves to Christ who is the Savior-God.

The Pope also spoke about the difference between the concepts of the public and private spheres of life. The Pope call upon all lawyers and, in general, all people when he said: *In certain countries there are judicial systems in which that which is public is given a position of priority that reduces that which is private to almost nothing. There are also other places where judicial systems submit the collective demands and interests of people, including their fundamental rights, to the private sphere and to individual interests. In both cases human persons are the victims in their private and social dimensions because legislative power is used as an instrument to dominate the individual or the collectivity instead of being used as an instrument of justice.*⁷ Therefore the Pope affirmed the urgent need to courageously put an end to this phenomenon of exploitation of that which is private and then used for public interests and the manipulation of that which is public and then used for private objectives.^{8*} Can't you see the importance of this concept especially here where a few people want legislation to be enacted on their behalf and give no importance to the dreams of the majority of people? It is good to keep in mind the words of the Pope: *The criterion that ought to guide us in this complex matter is respect for the human person.*⁹ Regardless of the fact that one might be rich or poor, the human person ought to be primary in the social system of any country.

The Pope also referred to the role of women in the world and the mission of teachers. With regard to women he said: *Your essential contribution in society is a commitment and a witness to all that which is fundamental to the true dignity of the human person, the success of the human person on a personal and community level.*¹⁰ The Pope also called attention to the fact that the meaning of women should not be manipulated, that is, subordinating her to causes that at times are often selfish in nature.¹¹

With regard to teachers, he told them: *you have an obligation to be current in your knowledge and pedagogy and to be those persons who make real the ideals of the human person so that these ideals can be passed on to the children and young people who have been entrusted to you.*¹²

A meeting of bishops and cardinals from forty-four countries was held in Manila to examine how the Church might reach a common understanding with regard to the concerns of the Asian continent. I am happy when I consider the fact that our Latin American meetings in Medellin and Puebla anticipated that which is just beginning in other parts of the world. I simply ask you, the Christians of Latin America, to give honor to the Church that has desired to harmonize the message of the history of salvation with the salvation of our people. Let us know how to be that which the bishops in Asia seek: a Church in the midst of people of the present era.

The World Council of Churches, as reported in our newspapers, has manifested their interest in making human rights a matter of pastoral concern among Protestants. Marta Benavides, together with Mr. Pineda, who came here on a special mission as representatives of the National Council of Churches made the following statement: *During these days we have seen popular demonstrations take place without incident. Popular groups have been able to express themselves through the means of communication. Labor conflicts have been resolved. We have seen in the press positions stated by different sectors of society, positions that were opposed to certain changes. It is certain that much work must still be done. There is fascism and some remains of administrative corruption.*

I want to comment on these appraisals of our Protestant sisters and brothers. It is good to see this concern for human rights among our sisters and brothers but it is also sad that at the same time there are many Christian groups, non-Catholics, who view Christianity in such a spiritual manner that they believe any concern for the things of this earth is a betrayal of the gospel. Unfortunately this belief of Protestants is that which has been most widely spread about in El Salvador. Thus

there are many who believe that the Catholic Church has become communist and thus separated herself from the gospel. We are saddened that people who have adhered to this way of thinking, people who are not concerned about or disturbed by the injustices that occur on this earth, have found support in the official regime, a support that is denied to the Catholic Church. The Church is persecuted because it preaches justice in the public order while many Protestant groups have received many advantages because they have made people passive, almost put people to sleep.*

Hopefully the mission that the National Council of Churches in the United States has given to the Church in Central American and El Salvador awaken our brothers and sisters from their sleep and moves them forward from this false sense of spirituality. I also direct these words toward our Catholic sisters and brothers who might still believe that the gospel can put aside the call to justice. I say here that a gospel that is not concerned about the reality in which people are living is not the gospel of Jesus.

With regard to events...My dear sisters and brothers, what I have stated is like nourishment for our Christian community. But the Christian community that projects the history of salvation to people has to look at the events of the past week with the saving perspective of God. During these days the question of human rights has become so complicated that instead of narrating a chronicle of events I am going to speak about some principles that should enlighten the reality of El Salvador.

I am also happy that the Church does not necessarily have to be the voice of the voiceless. Many people can and are speaking. Many for whom in the past we were a voice are now authentic voices that are commenting about the events that are taking place. Many people who before did not dare to speak are now crying out. Hopefully this courage will take hold of all people and lead them to organize themselves and put pressure on others in an intelligent way so that people can walk toward progress.

Hopefully, as the Pope said at the Organization of American States, the Church will not have to be concerned about the human rights of people because society has enabled people to live with these rights and countries have organized themselves in such a way that there is great respect for human rights¹³. Thus the Church can direct her attention to her specific task of evangelization. This is what I attempt to do here because from the perspective of salvation history I will always have to enlighten people in their concrete history so that they may be saved. This is what I attempt to do now as I present principles that are illuminated by the events of the past week, events that are not isolated from one another.

The most visible conflict that has arisen during the past week is the conflict between the interests of the majority and the interests of the minority. This past week this conflict has been manifested in the economic order as well as the political order.

In the economic arena, members of the oligarchy, like some popular organizations, have ordered a work stoppage in production in order to defend their interests. The producers of cotton ordered a work stoppage and called upon the Security Forces to clear the factory Entre Rios. In parenthesis I want to say that the Church's intervention in the occupation of Entre Rios was done in order to find a peaceful solution in this matter and avoid bloody violence. Thanks to God the Church was able to do something in this regard. But an in depth study of this matter has to be illuminated with principles.

Next week thirty-five agricultural, industrial, commercial and service associations (those which form ANEP) have decided to organize a half day work stoppage in the metropolitan area¹⁴ in order to express their solidarity with those who are seeking ways to defend the interests of the majority of

people. At the same time the *campesinos* and workers have ordered work stoppages on the plantations and in some industrial plants and in some cases have detained hostages until they can achieve their demands.

The first group, members of the oligarchy, have asked for the intervention of the Security Forces to protect their interests and private property. The second group, the workers and *campesinos*, on some occasions have defended themselves by organizing armed popular groups in order to achieve their demands. Hopefully I am mistaken, but it is probable that the forces of the right, as they see that the armed forces are no longer under their control, attempt to create other armed groups in order to defend their interests. Certain leaflets and campaigns in upper-class neighborhoods indicate the possible danger of groups being armed by the right. Where is justice? Each specific case has to be studied and here that is impossible to do since we would never finish.

I only want to remind you of the principles that the Pope spoke about, namely, what is the objective of progress? Progress does not mean that a few people have everything while others have nothing. Rather progress means that everyone is able to achieve the truth of Christ, the salvation of Christ. The Pope also said that the criteria that should guide all these relationships is the human person. The criteria of justice should prevail in such a way that what has been obtained is not simply preserved but rather must insure that the wealth of society and private property fulfill their social mission and thus the distribution of property must satisfy the fundamental needs of all the people of El Salvador.

With regard to the differences that the Minimum Wage Law has established and which have been the cause of various disturbances we must remember that the criterion that has been used in establishing the minimum wage of those who harvest coffee is that the producers of this crop are able to pay this wage while the same cannot be done by the producers of cotton and sugar cane. But we must ask: does this reason justify such a great difference of 6.25 colones that is paid to these workers since the needs of all the workers are the same?¹⁵ I am not saying that the cost of leveling these salaries at 14.25 colones should be placed solely upon those who produce these crops. I have witnessed the suffering of the small producers of these crops, suffering that they experience as a result of the pressure to meet certain demands that they find impossible to satisfy. Here, then, is where the intervention of the government is necessary because the government should look for a way to redistribute the income that God has provided for the benefit of all the people of El Salvador.

A similar case is seen in the letter that was written by the Association of Salvadorian Bus Companies in which they state that they have presented a series of petitions and have been given promises but have not received what they have asked for. Remember how the government committed themselves to the Bloque when they agreed to lower the fare on five primary routes. The bus owners state: *We are in accord with lowering the present fares, but give us what we ask.*

This is a situation where the common good demands the intervention of the government and the granting of subsidies so that there might be justice among people. In countries of greater economic resources we know that there are tourist hotels that are subsidized by the State. How much more important are these subsidies when here we are not dealing with something that is a luxury but dealing with the subsistence of our *campesinos* whose only income during the year depends upon their work in harvesting coffee, cotton and sugarcane. In all these situations the common good must be kept in mind so that the disturbances that exist at the present time might be quickly resolved.

There always arises the need for structures of justice in regard to the distribution of our resources, better structures than the ones that have previously been established. In all of this it is urgent that government officials be strong in carrying out these changes. They cannot allow the threats of the rich to impede this process. They also must not detain this process as previous regimes have done, regimes that saw the need for structural change but did not dare to carry out these changes because the power of money was stronger than the will of the government*. I would like to see the primary concern of ANEP and all those who defend their interests become one of seeing how the nation's economy can sustain all the people of El Salvador, how the people of El Salvador can worthily sustain their families with the fruit of their work. This is the ideal that we must seek. Our own interests should not be our primary concern.*

I also call upon the *campesinos* and the workers to avoid violence in defending their interests, especially when they have people who speak on their behalf and also speak about the great difficulties that these workers find almost impossible to surmount. Do everything possible to enter into dialogue and exhaust all peaceful means first.

We have seen some positive measures enacted this past week, such as the freezing of the sale of land. It is forbidden to transfer parcels of land that exceed 100 hectares¹⁶. This measure guarantees the possibility of a future land reform.

We have also seen this conflict between the majority and the minority arising in the political arena. This conflict has been revealed through the statements of different organizations and political parties which have been supported by demonstrations. In distinct ways these groups are attempting to pressure the government to opt for economic-political measures that favor the interest of one or another group. In order to resolve these political conflicts the criteria that we spoke about before should prevail, namely, the primary importance of the human person and the search for the truth as the summit of true progress.

With regard to the demonstrations I want to say that I have seen distinct popular organizations, groups that include the upper-class¹⁷, promoting the mobilization of women. Do not forget what the Pope said in this regard when he stated that the participation of women in the political sphere is valid but this participation must be a critical participation. Women should not be used as instruments of some group in order to defend their own interests, their own selfish interests. Women should be critical in their analysis of their participation in these events.* The women of El Salvador have always been very worthy women and we should continue to honor this tradition and not manipulate them, especially in matters where they are not in agreement with us.

Another problem on which I wish to focus is that of those persons who have disappeared and those who are political prisoners. Some steps have been taken. The first report of the Commission¹⁸ has made some very valuable recommendations, such as when they speak about bringing to trial those responsible for these actions. They also state that steps should be taken so that in the future we do not have these secret prisons*¹⁹.

In my opinion two of their recommendations have much value. In their first recommendation we notice that the voice that has cried out on behalf of the sacristan of Soyapango is echoed by the Investigating Commission. They state in their third recommendation: *A process should be immediately begun against the person responsible for the detention and disappearance of the sacristan, Tomás Flores García, who on the 16th of October was arrested by the Treasury Police in the city of Soyapango and has not been seen since. In accordance with the proof that we have gathered we are able to state that he died in the headquarters of the Treasury Police. This proof*

*will be made available to the court which carries out the respective process.*²⁰ We thus have a clear light concerning this case about which we raised our voice. As a result of the proof of the Investigating Commission we know the place from which the sacristan of Soyapango disappeared.

We are also happy with the Commission's fifth recommendation: *Compensation should be given to the parents of those who have disappeared and whose death is presumed or verified. The amount should be determined as a result of a socio-economic study in this regard.*²¹ I believe that the government has decided to act in this matter and is going to carry out this recommendation. I hope that this is done with great efficiency.

I want to thank the Investigating Commission for the response that they sent me with regard to my demand and suggestion which I offered in my homily fifteen days ago. In their letter they explained the objective of the Commission and the fact that what I asked for in my homily was in fact a part of the recommendations that they sent to the government. Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your clarification.

There is a fear in all of this and that fear revolves around the fact that the steps that have been taken are very small steps and the process seems to be moving very slowly. It is urgent that the process be speeded up so that in a relatively brief period of time we can see concrete fruits that result from the resolution of these problems that are profoundly felt by so many people. I believe that this process is being shackled by legalism and legalities. Why before did we not hear people speak about respect for the Constitution? The Constitution was trampled upon in every possible way and now that we are attempting to reestablish respect for human rights, laws should not impede forward progress in the process of honoring the dignity of the human person. I want to remind people of the words of Jesus who spoke about the Sabbath and said: *The law was made for man, not man for the law* (20). Hopefully the government will take some real steps forward and not allow themselves to become entangled in so many legalisms*. In this way peace can promptly be restored to our country.

Another focus of the history of salvation with regard to the history of our people involves the matter of abductions. This week Adolfo McEntee²² was abducted for a second time. The ambassador of South Africa has not been freed²³ and I have offered to intervene in this case. Also Jaime Batle and Jaime Hill²⁴ are still being held as captives. Once again I earnestly plead to the individuals who have abducted these gentlemen to respect the dignity and the freedom of these persons, our brothers.

In this matter of abductions I also lament the abuse of the child Fidel Angel Argueta Morales, 13 years old. His family has been asked to provide 250,000 colones for his release and we know that the economic situation of this family does not allow them to pay such a high ransom.²⁵ Thanks to God this case has been resolved in a positive manner! But I want to pause here and first of all congratulate Fidel's family for having been able to rescue him and also let them know that I admire the unity and courage and Christian spirit that they exhibited as they confronted this situation. I also want to congratulate their neighbors and friends, the media, the Boy Scouts, etc., for their spontaneous and generous collaboration with the family that enabled this abducted child to be rescued. Fidel's family has asked me to thank all those who helped them and I invite all Christians to reflect on the meaning of the abduction of a 13 year old child and the suffering that this causes. Let us collaborate so that we avoid the repetition of this action especially since such actions have the appearance of being the acts of common criminals.

For this reason I want to unite myself in Christian solidarity with the family of the child Douglas Vladimir Fuentes who, together with a watchmen, became a victim in Apopa. I have received testimony which clarifies the distortions that appeared in *El Diario de Hoy*²⁶. I have been told that the child was seated on the steps with his mother at 8:30. The watchmen approached them when a car transporting two people arrived. The watchmen placed himself between the child and his mother. The child was shot and the bullet passed through his ribs to his waist. He died before arriving at the hospital. I have been given other details but what is of great interest to me about this letter is the following observation: *Bishop, I do not know if in this process more people are going to die in a similar way. If the security forces are not quickly cleansed we will continue to see our people die of social illnesses since many members of the military are attempting to save a feudal system that only benefits them. I am of the opinion that the Armed Forces ought to become part of the people's revolution so that this institution that is experienced as an arm of the State's repression might disappear.** In this regard there are confidential reports from people who have seen trucks and radio patrol cars that appear to have been acquired from the Armed Forces. What does all of this mean?

Finally, our Legal Aid group has denounced some more clandestine cemeteries that were found and has placed these details before the Investigating Commissions. They have also handed over a report of other arrests that have been only recently revealed. Because of fear these incidents were not previously reported.

Legal Aid has also helped to resolve some labor conflicts such as that which occurred in the factory LEON and those which took place in HILASAL, ARCO and IMES.

Lastly I want to thank the family of Don Carlos Ayala and Doña Cecilia de Ayala for their gift of an organ for our Cathedral. Their selfless generosity has greatly impressed me and God will reward them for this gift.

I want to conclude by expressing my gratitude for the greetings that I have received as a result of being offered an honorary doctorate at the University of Louvain²⁷ in a ceremony that will take place on February 2nd* As I have said repeatedly: I do not consider all these honors as mine nor do they lead me to any form of vanity but rather I rejoice to be able to share with you, my beloved sisters and brothers, a pastoral approach that involves a gospel defense of human dignity and the rights of the human person. It is on you, my sisters and brothers, that these honors are bestowed and so, God willing, in your name I will go there to receive this honor.

Finally as we conclude our reflections we see how different events weave together our history and we also see that these events cannot entangle the golden thread of God's salvation that is proclaimed to all people. What we have said concerning today's readings becomes most clear because we see that God saves people in history and this is also true for the people of El Salvador. God is saving El Salvador in its history. Let us be filled with hope and live our Christmas not in a way that would seem to deny the fact that in this month of December we will celebrate the Nativity but rather let us live the dark days of December so that in the darkness we can recognize the clear hope of the Savior of history who will come to save our nation. So be it.*

¹ Mons. Romero did not preach in the cathedral on Sunday 2 December because he had been invited to attend the 25th anniversary of the Diocese of Santiago María.

² Mons. Romero groups together in this third section of his homily the usual sections "Life of the Church" and "Events of the week".

- ³ Homily of John Paul II in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Zapopán, Guadalajara (30 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 11 February 1979.
- ⁴ Mons. Romero was in Guatemala from December 4 to 8 at them invitation of the Carmelite Missionaries of Saint Teresa. He wrote in his diary: “I have felt the benefit of a small break from the present commotion of my ministry.”, *Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Su diario*, Arzobispado de San Salvador, San Salvador, 2000, p. 324.
- ⁵ Homily of John Paul II in the parish of San Clemente (2 December 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 16 December 1979.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Allocution of John Paul II to the Union of Italian Catholic Jurists (7 December 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 27 January 1980.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Discourse of John Paul II to the participants in the XII National Congress of the Italian Association of Catholic Teachers (7 December 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 27 January 1980.
- ¹¹ See *Ibid.*
- ¹² Discourse of John Paul II to the Italian Women’s Centre (7 December 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 10 February 1980.
- ¹³ See Discourse of John Paul II to the Organization of American States (6 October 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 November 1979.
- ¹⁴ See “El sector productivo decreta paro temporal de labores”, communication of the Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada (7 December 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 8 December 1979.
- ¹⁵ See “Manifiesto de FECCAS-UTC a todo el pueblo salvadoreño” (6 December 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 8 December 1979.
- ¹⁶ See Government Decree No 43 (7 December 1979), *La Prensa Gráfica*, 9 December 1979.
- ¹⁷ The Bloque Popular Revolucionario organized a mobilization of women during the last days of November. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 29 November 1979. Also during the week 2 to 8 December the main newspapers in the country published many paid adverts of the Cruzada Pro Paz y Trabajo which invited women to take part in a manifestation on December 10. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 6 December 1979.
- ¹⁸ Reference to the Comisión Especial Investigadora de Reos y Desaparecidos Políticos, set up by the Government on 7 November 1979.
- ¹⁹ See Primer informe de la Comisión Especial Investigadora de Reos y Desaparecidos Políticos (23 November 1979), *Orientación*, 9 December 1979.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Coffee grower and businessman of Santa Ana, kidnapped on 3 December 1979. See *El Diario de Hoy*, 4 December 1979.
- ²³ Archibald Gardner Dunn, Ambassador of South Africa in El Salvador, was kidnapped by the FPL on 28 November 1979. Mons. Romero condemned this kidnapping in a message dated 1 December 1979. See “Ante el secuestro del señor embajador de Africa del Sur”, *Orientación*, 9 December 1979.
- ²⁴ Two Salvadoran businessmen kidnapped on 13 September 1979 and 31 October 1979 respectively.
- ²⁵ See *El Diario de Hoy*, 4 December 1979.
- ²⁶ See *El Diario de Hoy*, 7 & 8 December 1979.
- ²⁷ See Letter from the rector of the Catholic University of Louvain (5 November 1979), *Orientación*, 2 December 1979.

Marginal References (1) Is 7,14; (2) EN 32; (3) Lk 21,27; (4) 1Th 3,13; (5) Lk 3,1; (6) Lk 3,2a; (7) Lk 3,2b; (8) Mk 12,28; (9) Ba 5,7; (10) Ba 5,4; (11) Ba 5,5-6; (12) Ba 5,4; (13) Mt 17,12-13; (14) Lk 3,3-6; (15) Ph 1,9; (16) Ph 1,5; (17) Ph 1,8-9; (18) Mk 6,17-29; (19) Lk 3,4; (20) Mk 2,27.