

THE BIRTH OF THE LORD

Christmas Eve
December 24, 1979

Isaias 62, 1, 1-5
Titus 2, 11-14
Luke 2, 1-14

My dear sisters and brothers.

I congratulate you, not only because it is Christmas, but because you are courageous. At a time when so many people are fearful and lock their doors, when so many places of worship have been overcome by psychosis, the open doors of the cathedral are an image of confidence and hope in the Redeemer who is born to us. This evening in this cathedral, you are giving life to the meaning of Christmas. For in the midst of this world, with all its dangers, changes, psychosis, and fears, there is hope and happiness. This is not some attempt to put up an unfounded or unreasoned front of courage, but is the profound reality that flows from the heart of the Church and ought to be the powerful engine of the life of all Christians.

Reflecting on this wonderful event as it is presented in the sacred readings, I believe the Gospel presents three ideas that ought to be the message we proclaim during this year, here, in El Salvador. First, the angel speaks to the shepherds: *I come to proclaim good news to you, a Savior has been born to you* (1). These words communicate the message that today is the beginning of something new and renewing, the beginning of an ever-eternal news that is introduced into history. Secondly, the angels speak to the shepherds: *Let this be a sign to you: in a manger you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes* (2). Here we find the image of a God who wraps himself in human misery and gives meaning to suffering and pain. And thirdly, the multitude of angels sing: *Glory to God in highest heaven* (3). This is the invitation Christ extends to us: the human person is destined to rejoice in the glory of God and therefore we should live with optimism and never weaken.

“I come to proclaim good news to you, a Savior has been born to you”.

First of all I want to say: the birth of Christ proclaims that a new seed has been planted in life and history. With the birth of Christ, ancient history is renewed. It is like the moment when the farmer places a shoot or a graft on a dying tree trunk. Tonight we heard the prophet Isaiah speak about the flourishing desert: *No more shall men call you “Forsaken,” or your land “Desolate,” but you shall be called “My Delight,” and your land “Espoused”* (4)

If we are looking for a profound explanation of the Christmas joy that many live and that the majority do not understand, here it is: something new has entered the world. Christmas is always new and always news. Every Christmas Eve, even though twenty centuries have passed, the angel continues to announce the great news: *I come to announce good news*. The world is renewed with this shoot that has been grafted onto history.

How I wish, my dear Christians, that we would take this news and make it our experience, proclamation, confidence and security. Instead of contaminating our environment with pessimism,

sadness, psychosis and fear, let us inspire it with the confidence of the angel: *I come to announce good news*. Though catastrophes assault us, there is renewal. God has come and the Spirit of God makes all things new. (5)

How many changes have occurred in history since the birth of Christ. Yet this Kingdom of God that Christ established in the world enlightens these new times. There is not enough time tonight to list all the profound changes in history that have been inspired by that most pure and holy Kingdom of God that is preserved in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Today in El Salvador we are experiencing a time of renovation. Many compare this time to the experience of childbirth. The nation is giving birth to a new age and therefore there is pain and anxiety, there is blood and suffering. But as Christ tell us: at the moment of childbirth the mother experiences pain and suffering, but when the new child is born she forgets all these pains. (6) These sufferings will also pass! The joy that will remain flows from the fact that at this time we are Christian, with faith in Christ who did not allow us to succumb to pessimism.

Tonight I would like to shout over all the fields of El Salvador the wonderful news of the angels: *Do not fear, a Savior has been born* (7). What tonight seems unsolvable, what appears to be a dead-end street, God is filling this space with hope. Tonight is a night for optimism, for though we do not know how, yet it is certain that God will enable our nation to survive. For in this new time the wonderful news of Christ is shining bright *that makes all things new*. (8) When the cycles of history, however, have grown old, the great news and the wonderful renewal of the Spirit of Christ will spring up again and renew history, a renewal that began on that first Christmas Eve that we commemorate tonight.

“This will be the sign: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes”.

The gospel tells us that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and sleeping in a manger. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask the Redeemer: *Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another* (9), Jesus sent them back with this message: *The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, --- and the best of all -- - the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.*

This is Jesus' message: wrapped in swaddling clothes, resting in a manger, poor like the most poor. I believe that not even the poorest person was born in a cave or on a pile of hay because there was no bed where his poor mother could give birth. Christ, the most poor, wrapped in swaddling clothes is the image of a God who humbled himself. We refer to what theology calls *kenosis*: a God who empties himself of all glory to appear as a slave and allows himself to be crucified and buried like a common criminal.

This descent of God has great significance. Tonight we do not look for God among the opulence of the world, or among the idolatries of wealth or among those eager for power or among the intrigues of the powerful. God is not there. Let us look for God with the sign announced by the angels: resting in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes made by the humble peasant woman of Nazareth --- poor swaddling clothes and a little hay on which this God-made-man rested, on which this King of the ages becomes accessible to humankind as a poor child.

Today is the time to look for this child Jesus, but do not look for him in the beautiful images of nativity sets but look for him among the children lacking proper nutrition who have gone to sleep

this evening with nothing to eat. Let us look for him among the poor newspaper boys who sleep in the doorways wrapped in today's paper. Let us look for him in the shoeshine boy who perhaps has earned enough to buy a small gift for his mother. Let us look for him in the newspaper boy who, because he did not sell enough papers, is severely reprimanded by his stepfather or stepmother. How sad is the history of these children. Yet Jesus takes on all of this tonight. Or let us find Jesus in the young peasant or worker or those unemployed or those who are ill tonight. Everything is not joyful. There is much suffering, many broken homes. There is much suffering and poverty.

Let us not look on all of these situations like demagogues. The God of the poor has taken on all of this and he teaches us that human suffering has a redemptive value, a value that redeems the world of poverty, suffering and the cross. There is no redemption, however, without the cross. When I say this I do not mean that the poor should be passive. So often we are accustomed to repeat the phrase: "It is God's will that you should be poor, on the margins of society, hopeless." No! This is not true! God does not desire social injustice; once injustice exists, however, God speaks of it as the great sin of the oppressor. The greatest violence resides in those who deprive so many others of happiness and in those who kill by starvation so many children deprived of proper nutrition. God demands justice and yet he is also saying the same thing to the poor that Jesus said to the oppressed: carry your cross. You will save the world if you give to your suffering a restlessness for salvation and are not conformist with your situation. You will save the world if you die in your poverty, yet longing for better times. You will save the world if you make your whole life a prayer and clothe yourself in those elements that attempt to liberate the people from this situation.

The Pope reminded us about this when he spoke about Mary during his recent trip to Mexico. He said Marian Devotion is not for the weak,¹ for Mary knew how to endure the flight into Egypt, the desert, marginalization, poverty, and oppression. Mary, the daughter of a people dominated by the Roman Empire, saw her son taken prisoner, tortured and unjustly crucified. Mary raises her voice in holy rebelliousness and says to God: *Disperse the arrogant of mind and heart; throw down the rulers from their thrones and lift up the lowly and help those who trust in your mercy* (10).

This is the Christ who is born and who teaches the poor nations, the innkeepers, those harvesting coffee on these cold nights, and those working in the cotton mills on hot days that all of this has a meaning. Let us not lose this sense of suffering. My dear brothers and sisters, if there is one thing that causes me great sadness at this time when El Salvador is being redeemed, it is this: there are many false redeemers who are ruining the power of redemption that resides in our people, namely, their suffering, and these false redeemers are converting this hunger and marginalization into demagogy. There is no reason to become desperate or resentful for we are invited to wait for the justice of God and know that all of this must change. Yet if it is necessary we must be willing to die as so many others have, but die with hope that arises from our Christian faith.

Oh how I want to speak to you on this Christmas Eve about this Child in swaddling clothes and resting in the hay and about the sublime value of poverty. Oh I want all of us to reflect on these mysteries and give a divine value to our own small and great sufferings. Let us this night intensify our intention to offer all our sufferings to God. May the sacrifice of our sufferings be changed on the sacrificial altar into the host that redeems and sanctifies our life, our home and our society.

If there were less demagogy and more sanctity in the poor then very quickly our land of El Salvador would see salvation. If we knew how to embrace today the message of the poor child, of the humble child, of the one who emptied himself to save the world. Tonight we that the people of

El Salvador are very much like Jesus in Bethlehem, for we are a poor people and we present ourselves to God in the same way that Mary and Joseph and Jesus presented their poverty to God.

“Glory to God in high heaven”

Finally, the song of the angels is the call to the goal of our life. We give the things of the earth their relative value. We don't absolutize wealth nor the party struggle nor the organization. Nothing has an absolute value in this world. All is relative in the face of the one Absolute, which should take glory from men and direct it to God. Let pride be far from us, the pride which makes a god out of anything in this world.

The child in Bethlehem, as interpreted by the angels, tells us that there is only one God and that we cannot serve both this God and the idols of the world. Let us walk this earth and live like Jesus lived and work like Jesus worked. On the day of his ascension, when Jesus bids farewell to the world, he tells the apostles: *I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father* (12). This is the road that must be traveled: I come from God and I work on this earth, in this era, in this country and, in this situation --- I work according to the vocation that God gave me at the time that I was born. After I have done this, then, at the moment of my death, I can say: Now I am going back to the Father.

Let us always be mindful of our origin in God and never lose sight of our destiny: glory in high heaven.

Let us animate our life in the same way as Jesus did: “My bread is to do the will of my Father who taught us to pray in all the different situations of our life (13). Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (14) Blessed are they who know how to harmonize all the different situations of their lives with the will of God. These are the heroes, the saints, the immortal ones, the blessed, those who know how to embrace the message of Christmas singing to the one God and ordering their life to the glory of the one God: *glory to God in high heaven* (15). My life rises up to those heights when I give this meaning to my actions, no matter how insignificant they may appear to be.

My dear brother and sisters, these are the three things that I want to call to your attention so that we might live these mysteries not only on this Christmas Eve, but every day and thus discover the secret of happiness: the Child who brought something new to our history, to our life, to nature, to El Salvador, and to everything that is alive. The child, wrapped in swaddling clothes and born in a manger is the one who gives meaning to poverty, pain, and suffering. This child in the manger reminds us all of our destiny: glory with God in high heaven. May this Eucharist enable us to find in Jesus the great message of Christmas and may we live this message every day of our life. Amen.*

¹ See Homily in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Zapopán, Guadalajara (30 January 1979), *Osservatore Romano*, 11 February 1979.

Marginal References (1) Lk 2,10-11; (2) Lk 2,12; (3) Lk 2,13-14; (4) Is 62,4; (5) Rv 21,5; (6) Jn 16,21; (7) Lk 2,10a.11; (8) Rv 21,5; (9) Lk 7,20.22-23; (10) Lk 1,52-53; (11) Lk 2,14a; (12) Jn 16,28; (13) Jn 4,34; (14) Lk 11,2; (15) Lk 2,14a.