

THE CHURCH OF SALVATION

Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 1977

Isaiah 35, 1-6a, 10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

My sisters and brothers, the homily of this Sunday could be called the Church of Salvation because the mission of the Church is to save as Christ saved. This is her historical function. As God continues to save in the history of people so too the Church cannot leave aside the concrete history in which she has to develop herself. Therefore before commenting on the Divine Word in order to illuminate our history and our reality, it is good first of all to call to mind the reality in which we live.

Events of the week

I want to thank you for the many greetings and expressions of solidarity that have arrived supporting my theological comments concerning the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order. I simply highlighted some ideas of our classical theology, ideas based on Saint Thomas Aquinas and from this theological perspective I invited the experts in law to address this transcendental instrument in the life of our people. The written summary of my thoughts (many have asked for this) can be read in our newspaper *Orientación*¹ which is being distributed this morning. Also in this same edition of *Orientación* you will find the call that some Catholic men made to our lawyers and legislators in regard to this matter.²

I am also filled with great satisfaction at the coincidence of the gospel message and the reflections that were made by a diplomat. During this week you have read in *La Prensa Gráfica* the statements of a distinguished diplomat concerning our situation.³ These statements were occasioned by the twenty-ninth anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Proclamation of Human Rights. On this subject the diplomat in our country stated, among other things, that since this statement on human rights was accepted by many of the member states, no state that has accepted this declaration can say that the question of the mistreatment and abuse of its citizens is strictly an internal question. These nations have made an international commitment and form part of a group of nations that are against the violation of human rights.

The same diplomat said that a state that is committed to this declaration of the United Nations cannot avoid the responsibility of fulfilling and examining and becoming aware of those cases where torture or the unjust deprivation of freedom occur. It is sad that almost thirty years after this proclamation, this declaration remains a dream despite the fact that the majority of the constitutions of the nations have accepted this protection of human rights.

The same diplomat stated that the United Nations has made it known that during the past year they have received more than 20,000 cases which deal with the violation of human

rights. These cases have been analyzed and many of these cases were defended under the pretext of terrorism. The use of illegal methods in order to fulfill the law is to condemn governments to failure in their struggle against violent opposition. Quoting the Secretary of State of the United States who said that if it is certain that terrorism and violence in the name of dissent cannot be pardoned, then it is also certain that violence that is officially sanctioned cannot be justified. Such sanctions pervert the legal system that is the only means to assure the survival of our traditions. This statement coincides with the thinking of the Church. The surest way to defeat terrorism consists in the promotion of justice in our societies: legal, economic and social justice. Summary justice suffocates the very future that it intends to promote and ultimately produces more violence and terrorism. Respect for the rule of law promotes justice and eliminates the seeds of subversion. To abandon this respect means that governments have descended to the depths of the terrorist world and thus have invalidated their most powerful defense, their moral authority. The diplomat said that the best way to make people fulfill the law and respect human rights is to win the trust and the loyalty of the citizens so that they act with justice and according to the law, thus cutting the roots of violent opposition.

My sisters and brothers, excuse me for this long citation, but it seems to me to be a very opportune statement. Even though the Church proclaims her word from the perspective of the gospel and not from the perspective of diplomacy yet she rejoices when she see that diplomats speak with reason and human terminology, speak with the Church and the gospel and therefore besides human reason they are mindful of the divine illumination. Even when diplomatic conveniences cause a change in their way of thinking, the Church maintains her position because she rises above convenient situations and her truth will always be based on the gospel. In this way the Church coincides with the revelation of God that the Church defends even when she must pay the price with her life.

In this sense of service to the world, with joy I want to inform you about the labor conflict in INCA⁴ in Santa Ana. Through the intervention of Bishop Revelo, Msgr. López Sandoval, Father Walter Guerra and with good will on the part of labor this situation is being resolved. The workers began to operate in the factory on December 9th.

Also as part of the Church's service to the world I announce with great satisfaction that Bishop Aparicio went to the Estate of El Porvenir where thirty men and women were captured. He demanded that the security forces treat people more humanly and more respectfully. On our part, our Legal Aid office⁵ has intervened on behalf of those prisoners.

Again as part of our service to the world, the Church of the Archdiocese accepted the invitation of the Assembly of Union Federations to constitute the Unitary Confederation of Workers. I express my gratitude for the effusive embrace that the workers gave to the Church. Know that from the perspective of her social doctrine, the Church will always come to the defense of the rights of the workers, of the *campesinos*, and of all people who truly love the legal system as a service of the common good. The Church will also always denounce every pseudo form of legalism that only desires to favor one sector of the population.

With joy I want to tell you that the members of the Ecumenical Committee have continued to meet and are progressing in their reflections. In *Orientación*⁶ you can read the names of the persons from the Adventist Church, the Baptist Church, the Central American Church, as well as the Episcopal, Lutheran and Catholic Churches and persons from various

youth movements. I have also received letters from individuals who are Protestant and they have said: *Christians of whatever denomination, if they are truly Christian, are obliged to share and live the teaching of Jesus Christ despite the reality of persecution. Unfortunately many people prefer to live comfortable and easy lives, lives with no complications or risks that might place in jeopardy their personal security.*

My sisters and brothers, it does not matter if one is not Catholic, what is important is that one is truly Christian and lives the gospel. Here we are not speaking about an easy, spiritualistic proclamation of the gospel that involves no commitment with history but rather a proclamation that leads one to follow Jesus who was not afraid to be nailed to a cross when he had to deal with the defense of holiness in history. Here is where we often fail --- not only Protestants but also many Catholics because as this letter stated people love their comfortable lives and do not want complications. May this serve as a call to my beloved Catholics to have no fear of the gospel and to hand yourselves over to this gospel even when you are asked to make sacrifices that are greater than your present comforts.

As part of her service to the world, the Church, in my person, was present to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the group of Alcoholics Anonymous in the parish of Santa Anita where I had the honor of developing before a multitude of people who are members of AA the theme: Religion and Alcoholics Anonymous. I take advantage of this time to recommend that all those persons who have problems with alcohol should take hold of this source of salvation. I greatly admire this movement and I ask the Lord to allow them to flourish. May those who suffer complications because of alcoholism and those who because of their use of alcohol have become a torment to their families, their wives --- may these people seek there in AA a solution that I am certain you will find! I send my warm greetings to the members of AA and I tell you also that I am at your service.

Life of the Church

This Church that serves the world cannot forget to constitute and strengthen herself internally. Thus at this time when I communicate to you this news and the life of our Church, I feel that this time is like a family hour. Together with all of you who fill this Cathedral, with the Catholic Base Communities, with those parishes and communities and infirm people who are listening to me on their radios, I say to all of you, my sisters and brothers, let us feel that we are family, the children of this Catholic Church. Let us live the events of this Church with the joy and understanding of a true family!

For example, we were filled with joy yesterday here in the Cathedral where we ordained two young men: Héctor Figueroa and Jorge Benavides. Through our radio station they were able to send the greetings of the Archdiocese to their places of origin where today, they are celebrating their first Masses with their families. Jorge Benavides in San Miguel and Héctor Figueroa in Metapán.

On a sad note, we share the afflictions and we pray with our beloved Franciscan Brothers from Italy, self-sacrificing servants of our Church here in El Salvador and also in Guatemala. On December 8th, the feast of the Immaculate Conception (a beautiful sign of predestination), a great friend, Father Engelberto Mallizón, handed over his soul to his Creator. Would he ever have imagined that a small village in El Salvador would gather up his last breath and his body? He left the comforts and his family in his native land of Italy. The Lord will know how to give wonderful rewards for these services. We extend our condolences and our prayers to our beloved Franciscan Brothers from Italy.

A notice of a priest's jubilee: next Saturday, Father Agustín Grisen, a Somascan from Italy is going to celebrate fifty years of priestly ministry. We want Father Grisen and the Somascan Community to know that the whole Diocese with their bishop is intimately united with them in solidarity and in prayer. This week we will have some very important meetings of the priests and I recommend these meetings to your prayers. Thursday there will be a meeting of the Bishops and then another meeting of the clergy of the Archdiocese to evaluate the work of the past year and plan the pastoral ministry for the coming year.

We bring here to this home, the Cathedral, the life of the different communities that are spread throughout the whole Archdiocese. In the first place we communicate to you the gratitude of the people of community of Aguilares who have received the assistance of so many Christian communities. In one of their letters of gratitude we find the following words: *Your efforts have enabled us to clothe ourselves and to have something to eat during these difficult moments. At the same time we have been able to pay debts that were incurred when we obtained the release of our loved ones from prison and also able to procure medicine to cure the illnesses that were acquired during the time we were living outdoors. This assistance has given us a clear demonstration of how day by day the people are understanding and living together with those who are in need and proving in a practical way their love as they collaborate with this people who suffer so much.* My sisters and brothers, these words have more value than all the praise that we could give and so I greet all the communities that experienced the situation of the poor and martyred people of Aguilares and who have helped to ease their terrible burden during this time of trial. Hopefully your example will be imitated whenever there are people who are suffering --- and there are always people who are suffering in our Archdiocese.

In San Antonio Los Ranchos, the Catholic Garden Club invited me to an exposition which will be held from December 18-24. This exposition revolves around their work with corn. In the parish of La Palma a Holy Hour was celebrated by the Archbishop. I greet this community and I want to tell Father Vito to continue his apostolate of prayer and his distribution of Biblical and catechetical literature. This can appear to be a lie but in that humble community they are doing things that are not done in places where people have more comforts and resources. Catechetical literature and Biblical commentaries are distributed to the homes of this community.

We had the privilege of visiting this week the community of Citalá and the Oblate Sisters of Divine Love. We visited Toncatepeque on their patronal feast of Saint Nicholas and were at Domus Marie for the gathering of women religious who are involved in direct pastoral ministry and finally we went to El Colegio Belén to participate in a meeting and a day of study for the Carmelite Sisters. We also congratulate here the women religious, priests and seminarians who have been developing a theology course that will be offered by the Universidad Centroamericana. We visited La Libertad to celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception and went to San Antonio Abad to encourage their efforts at unifying the different sectors that are a little divided. We visited Ayutuxetepeque in order to encourage the community in the construction of a parish house. Last night we were in Santa Lucía where we confirmed a group of young people. I want to congratulate Father Astor for promoting this sacramental ministry in accord with the guidelines of the Archdiocese. These young men and women had been prepared and made a spiritual retreat and understood what they were going to receive through the imposition of the hands of the bishop: the fullness of

grace of the Holy Spirit which confirms them in their faith and enables them to live with the dignity of young men and women.

Today in Santa Tecla the meetings in El Colegio de Fátima will continue so that the lay people can continue to develop themselves in the same way that is being done in the Base Communities of Faith. Today at 10:00am in San Antonio, Colonia América we will celebrate First Communions there and on Tuesday we celebrate the feast of Saint Lucy in Suchitoto where we will have the honor of being with our beloved predecessor, Bishop Chávez y González. On the 14th of December we will celebrate with the community of Tacachico. On Saturday, the Passionist Sisters will go to San José Villanueva where they will begin their pastoral ministry to the people of this community. In the morning we will have the honor of bringing the Sisters to this community. Next Sunday in La Vega we will celebrate the feast of the Virgin of the Redeemed. In San Rafael Cedros there will be a graduation ceremony at the Academia de Corte y Confección.

The initiative that we began here with the approach of Christmas, an initiative to give a greater sense of Christian charity to our celebration has been embraced by many people. A seller of Christmas cards sent us a message that the poor often obtain a salary by selling these cards. I told him that he had every reason to state this but I also said that if instead of cards we gifted poor people with clothing and shoes and other necessary items that he would always have business. The question is to change the merchandise and thus give a more useful sense to our charity. I was very pleased to listen to one of our Protestant sisters who said she had heard our call and that this year, instead of giving Christmas cards, she was going to give shoes to a child who needed them.

Finally, my sisters and brothers, and may this be the context for a most beautiful homily: the Virgin of Guadalupe. Tomorrow in all of Latin America this brown skinned Immaculate Virgin who wished to become one with our race, the Virgin Mother of God receives the filial love of so many people who hear the words that the Virgin of Tepeyac spoke to Juan Diego. Let us listen to these words in our hearts: *Is not the one who is here your mother?* We are going to experience this tomorrow at 7:30 in the evening at the Church of San José de la Montaña where we will gather to process to the Basilica of Guadalupe and there at 9:00pm we will celebrate the holy Mass that will be transmitted by radio. I want to congratulate all of those who, even though they are not named Guadalupe, nevertheless are beloved children of this brown skinned Latin American Virgin.

My dear sisters and brothers, all of this tells us that the Church is robust. Indeed, the Church is working in so many places on behalf of salvation. In today's readings I find the following three thoughts that are a summary of my message: 1) only God can save; 2) God saves in the history of every people; 3) the mission of the Church is to make the history of his people a history of salvation.

Only God can save us

This is what can be deduced from today's readings. In the first place, only God can save. My sisters and brothers, the object of these homilies is to repeat what the Second Vatican Council says to those who look for the solution to their problems on this earth and believe that they can be resolved through human effort alone, thus one day there will be a Paradise here on earth, a Paradise created by men and women. The Church has always said: *this is a lie --- humanity cannot give the salvation that humanity needs.* With the Second Vatican

Council we say: *The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to man by which it is fitting for him to be saved. She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history. The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever* (a).

If we look for a summary of today's readings we see that the three readings are saying the same thing. In the first reading the prophet Isaiah tells us: *God will come and save us* (b). In the second reading the Apostle James says: *Be patient until the coming of the Lord* (c). In the gospel John the Baptist had been imprisoned and sent messengers to Jesus who asked: *Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another? Are you the God whom humanity has waited for without whom there can be no salvation* (d). My sisters and brothers, the salvation that the Church preaches is not a salvation that is found on this earth. For this reason we are disturbed when we are told that the Church is meddling in politics or the Church is communist and subversive.

The Church looks with sadness on those liberators who do not have the courage to raise their hopes to the same heights as the Church. The Church disarms all those liberations that are offered by different movements that are not mindful of Christian faith and hope. The liberation that the Church hopes for and proclaims has its starting point in the true liberation of the hearts of men and women, a liberation from sin. For this reason the Church must wait for a God who can forgive sin --- the root of liberation. The liberation that the Church waits for is a cosmic liberation. The Church experiences that all of nature is groaning beneath the weight of sin. What beautiful coffee groves, what fine wheat, sugar cane and cotton fields, what farms, what lands God has given us! Nature is so beautiful! But we see it groan under oppression, under wickedness, under injustice, under abuse, and the Church experiences its pain. Nature looks for a liberation that will not be mere material well-being but God's act of power. God will free nature from sinful human hands, and along with the redeemed it will sing a hymn of joy to God the Liberator.

How beautiful is the song of freedom that we have listened to today in the first reading. The prophet Isaiah becomes a poet as he sings a song of liberation. *The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon* (e). Here Isaiah refers to two beautiful scenes in Palestine that had become a desert but that God is capable of planting once again and thus enabling nature to flourish in beauty. These are images that according to the prophet are translated to the human environment and change that environment. *Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak ... the eyes of the blind are opened and the ears of the deaf are cleared. The lame will leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing ... those whom the Lord has ransomed will return* (f). This is complete liberation and is exactly what Jesus himself says to the messengers of John the Baptist: *the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them* (g). Are these not the signs of the coming of the Messiah? Why has the prisoner of Herod asked about this? Has he become pessimistic? No, John the Baptist wants to confirm the faith of his disciples in the Messiah. They returned and were convinced that Jesus was the God who was to come and save the world --- but save the world with a liberation that John the Baptist could never have imagined.

According to some interpretations, it seems to me that John the Baptist found here a correction to this preaching. John the Baptist had emphasized an eschatological character. The day of the Lord that is coming will be a time when people will experience the wrath of God that will punish sinful humanity. The prophet experienced a burning inside him as he saw the injustices all around him, as he saw the abuses of so many people and he felt that God could not tolerate these unjust situations and therefore he said: *You brood of vipers! Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire* (h). When Jesus comes with such meekness, he speaks to John the Baptist, the impatient prophet, and like the Apostle James, tells him: *be patient, the sign of the Messiah is goodness* (i).

Jesus has come to save that which is lost but brings about this salvation through conversion. *Change your ways! As you (John the Baptist) have preached so I also preach in the same way, but I preach a conversion that does not make the poor feel triumphant, but rather makes the poor place all their trust in God so that they feel no resentment or hatred toward the rich. The poor feel that they must convert the powerful so that they become poor in spirit.* The poor will always exist in the world because it is from the perspective of the poor that God proclaims his message of conversion to all people. The powerful and the rich must put aside their attitude of pride and self-sufficiency and become poor in spirit even though they might possess great wealth. Their material possessions are not important because they must learn how to utilize this wealth as God's beggars and they must feel that they are poor before our Lord and they must also feel that they are brothers and sisters with all those who are poor.

This is the Messianism that Christ proclaims and that the Church continues to preach. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, this must be a salvation that only God can give. People can sow rancor and put arms in the hands of the weak. People can make laws that are terribly repressive. People can abuse others with arms and power but as I said to you before when I referred to the message of the diplomat: these things do not bring true salvation. I am saying this not only from a diplomatic perspective but also from the perspective of gospel --- the salvation that Christianity and the world that believes in Christ --- the salvation that these people await must come from God.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, during these days of Advent there is need for much prayer. *Come, Lord Jesus!*(j) Or as the Church cries out in her prayer to the King who is to come: *Come, let us adore him!* (k) *Rain down, O heavens! Rain upon the parched lands so that a new harvest might spring up!*⁷ It is in this way that we await the coming of the Redeemer. My beloved sisters and brothers, this is my first thought on today's readings. Only God can save us and the hearts of women and men must become aware of this great hope that God is going to save them.

God saves in the history of every people

Second, the salvation of God becomes present in history. The Council says: *As God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity, so also it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness* (l). The Council continues and says that this people was Israel and therefore the history of Israel is different from the history of other people because she had a unique guarantee. We should not be confused here. Israel's history was a theocratic

history. God wrote it with his prophets, with his human beings. Israel's deeds and historical events have a prophetic meaning. What God did to Israel he wants to do for all people. Other people must learn from the Bible, from sacred history. It is the paradigm of all histories. Thus today's first reading we read as Salvadorians and we desire that as Judah was restored and returned from her exile in Babylon, as the steppes and the desert and the parched land will bloom, as Judah returns and is purified from her social sin and flourishes in holiness and justice, so may salvation return to El Salvador --- salvation that awaits the purification of the sins of our history, salvation that waits for the elimination of so many abuses, salvation that waits for the lifting up and the development of so many people who live on the margins of society.

God wants to save in history and as the people of El Salvador we will be saved in our national history. We do not have to copy other histories but rather we must be autonomous and come to an awareness of the true causes of evil. As Salvadorians, all of us without any exception have a right and a duty to participate in designing the common good of our nation. The common good is not the patrimony of one political party nor is it a privilege that belongs to a certain few who have power and arms, rather the common good is a right that belongs to all the people of El Salvador who feel in their hearts the pain of their country and who want to collaborate and find political channels to develop their personal civic contribution to the well-being of the whole country. God wants to save El Salvador by means of the people of El Salvador, by means of the politicians, professionals, the people who live on the farms, by means of all those who call themselves Salvadorians and all those who have come here to work as Salvadorians.

The mission of the Church is to make the history of people a history of salvation

My sisters and brothers and this is my third thought, the Church struggles in every nation to make their history the history of salvation. The Church is not a stranger in any country. It is true that pastoral ministers have come to our country, priests like Father Malizon from Italy who died here in El Salvador, religious women who left the warmth of their homes and homelands to come here and minister with us. This is the meaning of the universality of this message that sanctifies all people. The *foreigner* who ministers here in El Salvador is more Salvadorian than those people of El Salvador who do not respect the uniqueness of Salvadorians.

The nation is built upon these plans of God and the true vocation of my country is to be a nation of salvation. The true vocation of Salvadorans is that we should one day become God's Kingdom, not just baptized in name but actually Christians, committed to make our homes, our estates, our farms, our ways and our laws structures of salvation where Salvadorans can experience themselves truly realized as Christians, able to adore their God with freedom, with complete freedom, able to proclaim the integral religion that God bids them to proclaim.

Able to come together to reflect on his word without any fear of surveillance or evil reports, able to love God while meeting in their chapels without being suspected of doing something else. This is the freedom that the Church preaches. For this reason the Hungarian bishop said that when the national anthem of his nation cannot be sung in the streets of the city, it will be sung in the churches of his country. In the Churches we will always sing: *Let us salute the motherland, proud to be called your children,*⁸ because we experience this nation as a place where God is fulfilling his great work of saving those who have had the

honor of being born on this soil. May no one be embarrassed to call themselves Salvadorians and may we all experience the satisfaction and the pride of living in a nation where we serve the common good without any fear, without any suspicion. Finally from the perspective of this common good we are working for the happiness of eternal salvation.

This is the nation of Advent, of Christ, the nation that Christ commanded us to offer up through the intermediary of his Church to those who have in their hands the reins, the destiny and the economic, political and social power so that they might build together with this people of good will. We must build where there is terrorism and evil and yet we as Church are not at fault because people have not understood our mission. My sisters and brothers, this is the task of the Church in the history of every nation, to make the history of every people a history of salvation.

These are the three thoughts that we are going to carry with us as the message of this third Sunday of the Advent Season so that we might live with this hope. My sisters and brothers, let us not be pessimistic! With Saint James, the Apostle, I repeat: *be patient* (m). But not a patience that is some form of conformity or a patience that is asleep. The Apostle says: *be patient and work for your own perfection, develop yourselves and do that which is good, hoping that to the degree that we work together, this history of our nation might become not some copy of the history of Israel, but rather the history of God who worked marvelous deeds in Israel and who wants to do the same thing here in El Salvador --- perform these marvelous deeds with our own proper elements that are so distinct to us as the people of El Salvador.* So be it

¹ See “Teología de la ley”, *Orientación*, 11 December 1977.

² Reference to a communication from the Archdiocesan movement “Cursillos de Cristianidad”. See “En torno a la Ley de Defensa y Garantía del Orden Público”, *Orientación*, 11 December 1977.

³ It is Frank J. Devine, US ambassador in El Salvador. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 9 December 1977.

⁴ Industria Centroamericana de Nylon (INCA).

⁵ The Legal Aid office (Socorro Jurídico) was set up in 1975 to represent legally people of limited resources and was situated in the Externado San José college. Later Archbishop Romero incorporated it into the archdiocese of San Salvador and it became one of the principal agencies to defend human rights.

⁶ See “Católicos y protestantes colaboran en favor de la paz”, *Orientación*, 11 December 1977.

⁷ *Rorate, coeli*, Antiphon in Lauds for the third week in Advent.

⁸ The National Anthem of El Salvador.

Margin References (a) GS 10: (b) Is 35,4: (c) Jm 5,8: (d) Mt 11,3: (e) Is 35,1-2: (f) Is 35,3,5-6,10: (g) Mt 11,4-6: (h) Mt 3,7-10: (i) Jm 5,7: (j) Rv 22,20: (k) Is 45,8: (l) LG 9: (m) Jm 5,7.