

CHRIST, MANIFESTATION OF GOD AND MAN

The Feast of Christmas
December 25, 1977

Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-6
John 1:1-18

.....¹ the news of Christ's birth is announced to us through his Church. The gospel tells us that the shepherds were invited by the angels to go and adore the child Jesus and *Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart* (a). We gather here in imitation of Mary because for the Christian community the Nativity has no meaning unless it is based on a profound reflection. It is for this reason that for many Christians the Nativity is nothing more than an awaited holiday that then passes quickly like fireworks that explode and then leave nothing but rubbish on the streets. For the Christian the Nativity is more than a sky-rocket, it is the great news that ought to be reflected upon. Indeed, women and men should commit themselves to this event in which God becomes man, not in some transitory way but taking on a human form forever. Thus humanity ought to reflect upon this before the Lord.

Today we are able to present this Christ in Bethlehem in this homily with the title: Christ, the manifestation of God; secondly, Christ the manifestation of humanity and thirdly, the Church, the manifestation of Christ.

Events of the week

Since the Church prolongs the incarnation, that is, God made man, she cannot put aside or be unmindful of history. From the moment that God has brought all humanity unto himself and has entrusted the Church with the task of continuing to bring all people to God, the Church, journeying through history, gathers all people together. The Church then lives the circumstances in which the incarnation is prolonged. Therefore I do not share with you this news about some of the most important events of the week because I want to be a reporter. The media does this much better than I do. I simply wish to share with you, my dear sisters and brothers, the news that we have lived the eternal Nativity of Christ during this week, during these hours, during this Christmas of 1977 --- we have lived this eternal Nativity here in El Salvador in concrete circumstances that we cannot be put aside and forgotten.

The Nativity has a profound meaning and in the midst of the Christmas cards and telegrams, I have received some letters that are very sad. For example, some mothers and wives have said: *During the time of the Christmas celebration that the Christian people await with joy, we do not experience the gladness of Christmas but rather the profound sorrow of Calvary because we feel in our hearts this insuperable separation from our children and spouses.* Another similar letter states: *We are anguished and saddened by the cries of our children who wake up during the night and cry out for their parents but the security forces provide us with no information about their whereabouts.* Many letters have arrived with similar painful expressions. We have tried to do everything that we could with

regard to these situations. We have appealed to the judicial authorities and we are always willing to provide our assistance in these painful situations of humanity.

We have also received letters from the rural areas where people are involved in the harvesting of coffee, etc., and people have denounced the anomalies and injustices of management --- bad food, long hours, and discrimination at the hands of those who are supposed to be helping these individuals who are looking for work.

We do not want to forget the workers and the injustices that result from a lack of support. We want to tell them that we are with them in demanding support of their cause. Yet among the workers we must also admit that they too commit injustices when they rob one another or spend their salaries unwisely or do not care for their families. We invite each one of them to listen to the voice of the Church that during the Second Vatican Council stated: (b) *Christ's Church, trusting in the design of the Creator, acknowledges that human progress can serve man's true happiness, yet she cannot help echoing the Apostle's warning: "Be not conformed to this world"* (c). *Here by the world is meant that spirit of vanity and malice which transforms into an instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man.* If in all of our work, whether we are part of management or labor --- if we kept in mind the fact that all people work for the glory of God and peace among people, (d) how beautiful would humanity be. The differences between rich and poor would no longer be barriers that give rise to hatred and resentment but rather would become chains that join them together in love and fraternity.

I want to speak about another group of letters that were written in a different style, an optimistic style. I thank those who have accepted the invitation to celebrate Christmas with a very Christian meaning. For example, yesterday we had the pleasure of receiving a collection from the Christian community of San Antonio Abad --- a collection that was taken up for those households where the persons who provided economic support have disappeared. The community of San Marcos gave us an envelope that contained seventy colones to be distributed among those most in need. This money was gathered from families who decided to have a more frugal Christmas dinner. Donations have also arrived for the widow with nine children in Dulce Nombre de María. Other groups of workers shared with us a part of their salary and bonuses after having reflected on the fact that this is not a time for luxury and other types of spending but rather this is a time to help those in need.

My heart was filled with joy as I spent some time with a group of young people, Protestant and Catholic, who came together in an atmosphere of friendship and fraternity. They said that they wanted to learn a new way of celebrating Christmas, a way that would reflect the great love of Christ and the commitment that young people are asked to make at this time in our history. My sisters and brothers, I say this so that we might be filled with joy because we are able to experience these noble sentiments among our people. All of this has made it possible to establish a fund in our archdiocese for emergency needs.

Finally, this week we have had the pleasure of receiving the whole text of the Pope's discourse that was spoken to our Ambassador to the Holy See. The Pope's message was directed to all the people of El Salvador.² Our radio station was surprised that only part of this text was published and therefore does not reflect the exact thinking of the Pope. In our next edition of *Orientación* we are going to publish the entire discourse and you will then see why I have classified this discourse as a true Christmas gift to our Church. As the Pope speaks to our government and the people of El Salvador he places himself in the same line

that we tried to place our own preaching, namely, Vatican II, the encyclical *Populorum Progression*, and all the other documents of Church's current teaching.

Life of the Church

During the week the Church has also had consolations and joy. For example, the edifying example of Christian unity among the Catholics who were a little divided in San Antonio Abad. We received with joy the news that they are going to celebrate Christmas together in the parish Church.

The celebration of the patronal feast of Saint Joseph in Quezaltepeque was a great testimony of solidarity. There the people of the town and many pilgrims from various parts repudiated the schism that unfortunately is supported by the local authorities. But the Church that has no need of material buildings or official recognition but that lives the reality of the mystical body of Christ in unity with her true pastors --- this Church demonstrated in Quezaltepeque that this unity with the true pastor, Father Roberto, is very strong.

In Cojutepeque we had a meeting with the laity and were able to see how this very populated and important sector of the Church is being promoted by the laity, by people like yourselves.

On the same day, Tuesday, we had the pleasure of greeting in their office the workers of our radio station YSAX. This was the day dedicated to radio announcers and we wanted to express our gratitude and good feelings to them in the same way that they have expressed their solidarity and willingness to collaborate with us.

On December 21st we celebrated the patronal feast of the parish Santo Tomás and we shared with them the very appropriate gospel message, the words that Saint Thomas speaks to the other disciples who are afraid to go with Jesus to Jerusalem, *let us also go to die with him* (e).

The members of the Ecumenical Movement met this week to study a document of solidarity with the Catholic Church. I thank them for this time together and also for their work in preparing the eight days of prayer that we traditionally celebrate from January 18th to January 25th --- days during which we pray for the unity of all Christians throughout the world.

During this past week we also experienced a wonderful expression of the solidarity of the religious and the Archdiocese. A group of the Bethlehemite Sisters is now preparing to begin ministry in a parish that is without a resident priest, the parish of El Paraíso in Chalatenango. They will begin their ministry on January 6th. I also rejoice with the communities of Zacamil and Cantón San Roque in Ayutuxtepeque where for two nights last week we celebrated the Christmas joy and the message of Jesus, God and man.

Finally, my dear sisters and brothers, I want to remind you that on January 4, 5 and 6 we are going to celebrate the World day of Peace as the Pope desires. We will analyze his message to the world and thus celebrate here in the Archdiocese and throughout the country the beautiful theme of *No to violence and Yes to peace*. We also want to say no to violence during this week when we have received news of another abduction --- the abduction of Mr. Safie³ and we ask the Lord to put an end to this violence so that we might have peace and trust and justice --- realities that the Church prays for. Indeed, my beloved sisters and

brothers, our Church is precisely the prolongation of Christ who became incarnated in Bethlehem.

Christ who is born in Bethlehem is the revelation of God before humanity

In his beautiful prologue Saint John has told us: *In the beginning was the Word ... and all things came to be through him* (f). The whole of creation began to exist and its existence came from the word of God. So this word of God, which is the all-powerful God speaking, already existed and gave things their being. God reveals himself in created things, as I reveal myself in talking and when you talk you pronounce the word which reflects your own being. Christ said: *A man's words flow out of what fills his heart.* (g) The good man speaks good things; the man with much evil in his heart speaks bad things.

God, who is infinite goodness and a hidden mystery that no one can see or hear, speaks and says: let things be made. (h) So the sun is made, and nature; and in the beauty of things, in their order, their greatness, the beauty of all creation, we feel God's footprint, his word, his echo. So St Paul said: the Romans who didn't want to believe in God are without excuse because God shows himself in creation. (i)

Creation was therefore made by the Word, this eternal word of God. Remember when we pray the Angelus and say: *The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* Thus the Word of God is not a word that reflects the natural world but rather reflects the most intimate life of God. This Word tells us that in God there is a Son and this Son, the Eternal Word of God, takes on a human form. When we saw this Word pass through this world, Saint John says: *we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son* (j). Christ is the epiphany of God. At the time of the Last Supper one of the disciples said: *Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us* (k). Jesus then says: *Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father* (John 14:9). How wonderful to think that in Christ we have a revelation of the infinite Truth because God has told us everything when he has given us his Word.

Thus in the reading from the letter of the Hebrews we heard these eloquent words that told us: *In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a Son* (l). Now there is no need for messengers like the prophets who came to speak about God's revelations using words like: *thus says the Lord.* Now the Lord himself has come, the very Word of God. Those Christians who accept Christ possess the truth in all its integrity even though they might not understand it, as when we receive words from a wise person but do not understand the words that were spoken: *that wise person has spoken and that is enough.* The same occurs when a child receives a message from his/her parents and says: *my father said so and that is enough or my mother has said so and she is the highest authority.* The love with which these words are spoken assures one that one has not been deceived. When Christ appeared in Bethlehem humanity was able to say: *our Father has spoken in Christ who is his eternal Word. He has told us everything.* After teaching his disciples for three years and before bidding farewell to them Jesus says: *I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth* (m). The Church moves through the world in this way. She possesses Christ and with that she has everything, but she does not use everything because she does not need everything at once. As circumstances arise the Word communicates to the Church the appropriate word that she must speak. Thus as we confront modern inventions and the progress of the human race, as we confront the abuse of human dignity and other difficult circumstances, we have the Spirit of God and the Word

incarnated in the Church which reveals to us what must be done and what must be said in the particular circumstance.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I am grateful to you for your solidarity with the Church when you say: *we are asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate you so that you say what must be said.* When we feel that there is a consensus among people, when we feel that there is a joy and a love and a unity we say: *this must be the Word of God that is speaking because Christ lives in his people.* This is the great mystery of Christ who is the life of God and has come to share with us his truth and his life. The Council states: *The mystery of the Father and his love is revealed in Christ.*(n)

Thus in Christ the mystery of love is revealed in the same way that God has loved us. Thus the apostle writes: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son* (o). What father hands over his son so that a prisoner or a slave might be saved? This is precisely what the eternal Father has done; he gave us his only Son, his Word, his life and in Christ we are able to recover this life of God. Sins are forgiven because Christ became the price for our debt and now we can all die with the hope of a heaven because Christ has offered to open for us the doors of heaven even though we are sinners. We must, however, repent and be converted and return to him who proclaims: *I am the way and the truth and the life* (p).

Christ then is the epiphany of God, the manifestation of God, the revelation of God. When we behold the child Jesus in the arms of Mary, let us elevate our minds because we need the great virtue of faith. Mary needed that same faith to see in the child that she nourished with her breasts not another child but rather the incarnation of God. In her child Jesus, she adored the truth and eternal life and the God-man. For this reason Mary is the model for all those Christians who celebrate the Nativity and who want to deepen themselves in the great mystery of God, of the Father, of love and life and truth who became flesh. The fact the God becomes flesh is like a strange antithesis, an opposing reality --- God-flesh, the infinite God and limited flesh, the infinite God wrapped in the flesh of a man who belongs to a people and a history and who desires to communicate this mystery --- and we are going to see later that this mystery is a part of each one of us.

Christ, the revelation of humanity

But before doing so I want to speak to you about my second point, namely that just as Christ is the revelation of God so too Christ is the revelation of humanity. When we were entering the Mass I heard a seminarian reading #22 of the document *Gaudium et Spes*, that is, the document that is the Church's dialogue with the real world, a document that was redacted during the Second Vatican Council. In that part of the document it is stated that the mystery of man can only be understood in the light of Christ. (q) What meaning does my life have? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of my intelligence, my ability to love and to be free? What is the meaning of these material goods that God has placed beneath my feet?

When people forget about Christ, all of these human abilities of intelligence, freedom, love, and the ability to dominate and organize the earth become a system of oppression, slavery, hatred and vengeance. When man created in God's image is stained by sin we then see a most horrible reality. But when in Christ we return to discover the meaning of man and woman then we understand what Saint Paul has told us today in the letter to the Hebrews.(r)

A mark, an impression is placed on a piece of paper by a seal. It leaves on the paper the same image as is on the seal. This image of the seal is Christ and the seal is God.

God has sealed men and women with the image of God. Thus when God says: *Let us make man in our image, after our likeness* (s), he is saying that humankind is like our seal on creation. This seal is only discovered when the impression, the authentic seal, the original image of God, the Word in which is reflected the divine essence that becomes flesh --- when this seal becomes visible in the world. This Word is the perfect man, a man of human and Christian and heavenly virtue, a man whom every person must reflect in themselves if they want to be worthy of their dignity as children of God. Men and women can find no meaning in their vocation apart from Christ --- this Christ who said: *I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me* (t). Men and women will find no other reason for their joy and for their existence unless they reflect on the song of the angels: *Glory to God*. (u). Our life exists for the glory of God and we do not have to look for political, social or economic advantages --- all of this is secondary. In this environment in which we are placed and in which we must develop our lives with all of these political, economical and social relationships we must seek the glory of God. In the midst of our poverty and misery and oppression and imprisonment we must never forget that we are sealed by God, that we are the image of God.

Now you can understand, my sisters and brothers, why the Church is so zealous in defending human rights and human dignity and human freedom. Now you can understand why the Church cries out like a mother who experiences the abuse of her child when she sees the image of God abused, an image that she must restore to its original beauty. The Church acts in this way because she is the prolongation of this seal of God, the seal of the Lord. Let us understand and be aware of our own dignity! We read today from the wonderful document of the Council that God became man, worked with the hands of a man, thought with the thoughts of a man, loved with the heart of a man (v) and from that point on we are able to say that our human heart is the heart of God, our human mind can be elevated to God because God came to bring us the life of God when he became man. The God-man taught me how to use my hands and feet.

How wonderful is the passage that was proclaimed in the first reading: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings of freedom to those who are oppressed* (w). Christ is this mysterious messenger who places his feet on the earth and announces to the people and all humankind that Jerusalem will be rebuilt upon the ruins of the people. When the voice of the messenger is heard people will be filled with joy and hope and optimism.

This is the hymn of Christmas --- the messenger comes with human feet to dwell on this earth and with the hands of a child to teach us the way, with hands that will be the hands of the divine Teacher, hands that will one day be nailed to the cross. With the heart of a man this Jesus learned how to love through the example of the virginal love of Mary and the human experiences of his home here on earth. He learned how to love through the example of Saint Joseph and he learned the meaning of honesty in work. The Bible clearly tells us (x) that he was a man who learned among men and lived among men and wanted to be like men in every aspect except sin. Jesus experienced everything that we experience: weariness, sadness, discouragement, loneliness, happiness, illusions, friendship. Everything that the human heart feels was felt by God in Christ. For this reason Christ is the revelation of man to man himself. My sisters and brothers, let us give thanks to our heavenly Father and to the

virgin Mary who collaborated in this great undertaking of making flesh, making human, and giving a human dimension to the infinite love of God.

The Church, the manifestation of God

Finally, I want to share with you my third thought because we would not have learned these beautiful things twenty centuries removed from the birth of Jesus if there did not exist another institution that was established by Christ, an institution that is called the Church. The Church is the revelation of Christ just as Christ is the revelation of God. The Church reveals Christ to men and women and to all people.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you (y). There is a direct connection between the secular, historical sending forth of the Church until the end of time. Thanks to the Church this sealing of God in Christ is presented to people of every age so that men and women can discover and live their true greatness, their true vocation. If it were not for the Church, this flash of the glory of God in Bethlehem would have died there on that night. In subsequent years this event would have been remembered as something that occurred and nothing more. What is beautiful is the fact that in this Christmas liturgy of 1977 the glory of God is being made present as though this were that Christmas night when Christ was born in Bethlehem. And now Christ is not only being born in Bethlehem but also in El Salvador and in all those towns and villages that are in union with our radio station, in all the communities, villages and homes of those who are ill and listening to this message of the Church.

I have the great honor this morning of being the voice of the Church that announces the birth of Christ to the women and men of 1977. I have the honor of telling you that in the midst of all your joy, or better to say I have the honor of telling you the reason for all this Christmas joy. Many people do not understand why there is so much joy for even non-believers celebrate Christmas. Indeed, even the enemies of the Church and those who have slandered and defamed the Church during this past year value the Church because of this Christmas joy. For this reason I said during my Christmas greeting⁴ that in my heart as Pastor I have no resentment, not even for personal offenses. Indeed, no one can take away from me the joy of being able to say to my enemies: *Merry Christmas!* For you see this is not my message but the message of the Church who is bringing from Christ this happiness and joy even though people do not understand this.

But this morning I am attempting to make it possible for you to understand all of this, namely, that the Church, the prolongation of the incarnation of Christ, has a human and divine dimension. The child Jesus has a human body that was formed within the womb of a woman but he also has a divine dimension that was not given to him by the Virgin but by the eternal Father who sent his Word to become incarnated in these human elements that the Virgin gave to this child Jesus. Thus we have the Church that, like Christ, has a human dimension that is given by her to men and women and a divine dimension that is given to men and women by God. We have this wonderful joining together of the imperfect and the divine. Jesus became tired and suffered and experienced human limitations but as God he did not tire because God is infinite and perfect. The Church, as a human institution, has no reason to be embarrassed by her human defects and therefore when the bitter criticism of our enemies places all these defects before the world, there is in reality little to be said because this criticism is so small in comparison to the great sinfulness that there is in the Church. There is misery and we are as human as you, the enemies of the Church who are capable of so much hatred. The Church is also human and can fall into the sin of not loving. As a human institution she experiences what every human person experiences --- she experiences a

lack a appreciation, she experiences desire and temptation --- the Church is human. Let us not forget that the Church prolongs the humanity, the flesh of Christ in history but as a divine institution the Church is sinless.

The child Jesus as God is able to confront all people and tell them: *who among you is able to throw in my face a single sin?* The Church, as the incarnation of the divine, can also say to all people: *yes, you can hold up before me many human defects and sins but as a divine institution I challenge you to hold up before me one single sin.* Point out to us one single day when we taught hatred and violence and lies. This has never happened because the love of God which the Church incarnates is sinless, is divine, is the incarnation of Christ. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, the Church will continue to proclaim her word that is the revelation of Christ in history. For the same reason the Pope has recently spoken to all the people of El Salvador⁵ in the person of our ambassador, Dr. Prudencio Llach, to advocate on behalf of the Church so that she might have full freedom to proclaim the message of the gospel in El Salvador and so that she might be able to preach her social and moral doctrine without any hindrance. The Church has no reason to be timid for she proclaims the message of Christ who came to Bethlehem on this night twenty centuries ago.

But one thing my sisters and brothers, like Christ the Church grows during the darkness of night. The Gospel of Saint John says: *He came into the world ... but the world did not know him* (z). The clouds of darkness were unable to understand him. How sad it is to think that this light, this life of God, this infinite love that the Father has for Christ and that the Church continues to offer to humanity is not understood by humanity. This is not because God has made some people capable of understanding this mystery and others incapable but rather the secret lies within each person and that secret is the good will with which people embrace and receive, like Mary and the shepherds, the Jesus who is born in Bethlehem. Some people, like Herod who was so proud, are so unaware of the fact that the source of eternal life is passing by so close to them.

When the wise men from the East arrived (a1) and asked where the King of Jerusalem was born, the king's advisers did not know what to say but a star knew how to guide them to where the shepherds and the humble ones found him. When the wise and the rich become humble and simple like the wise men from the East who offered Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh, then they too will find this new born king. Wealth has a place beside the manger of the child Jesus but only when they are placed there by the humble hands of the shepherds and the wise men from the East.

My beloved sisters and brothers, we have reflected and asked the Virgin Mary to enable us to understand the mystery of her child. She has summed all of this up through my humble word: *My child is nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of men to men: their dignity and the greatness of God which they bear as images of God. Know how to be worthy of this seal that each person bears.* And finally Mary says: *this child that is in my arms is the most beautiful image of the Church that will be prolonged for centuries and that will bring the life of God into the midst of human deficiencies, into the midst of the poverty of the manger in Bethlehem.* Jesus said blessed are those who are not scandalized (b1) but who know how to capture the beauty of the light that surrounds all the beautiful realities of the earth. So be it!

¹ Greeting and opening words of the homily not recorded on the tape.

² Address of Pope Paul VI to the new Ambassador of El Salvador to the Holy See. See *Osservatore Romano*, 18 December 1977.

³ The businessman Victor Safie who was kidnapped on 22 December 1977. See *El Diario de Hoy*, 24 December 1977.

⁴ See “La palabra del arzobispo. Mi pensamiento pastoral en Navidad”, *Orientación*, 25 December 1977.

⁵ Address of Paul VI to the new ambassador of El Salvador to the Vatican.

Margin References (a) Lk 2,19: (b) GS 37: (c) Rm 12,2: (d) Lk 2,14: (e) Jn 11,16: (f) Jn 1,1-3: (g) Mt 12,34: (h) Gn 1,3ff: (i) Rm 1,20-22: (j) Jn 1,14: (k) Jn 14,8-9: (l) Heb 1,1-2: (m) Jn 16,12-13: (n) DV 4: (o) Jn 3,16: (p) Jn 14,6: (q) GS 22: (r) Heb 1,3: (s) GN 1,26: (t) Jn 6,38: (u) Lk 2,14: (v) GS 22: (w) Is 52,7: (x) Heb 4,15: (y) Jn 20,21: (z) Jn 1,9-10: (a2) Mt 2,1-2: (b2) Lk 7,23.