

47

THE CHURCH OF HOPE

**First Sunday of Advent
27 November 1977**

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:37-44

... in the second reading¹ the apostle invites us to become aware of the moment in which we are living. What a beautiful way of telling us, sisters and brothers, that this Sunday the church marks the beginning of her new liturgical year: it is the First Sunday of Advent! The priest puts on purple vestments as a sign of the call to penance in preparation for the coming of the Lord. In the East purple is also a sign of wealth, thus representing the richness of the grace God offers at this time to those who await with hunger the coming of the Lord.

This is a Sunday of hope, a time in which we begin our preparation for Christmas. The liturgical year is a complete spiritual pilgrimage that we begin today and continue through Christmas and the Epiphany, when we celebrate the great truth that God became man to save us. Throughout the whole liturgical year we hear the proclamation of the teachings of his Gospel and his message. After the Lenten preparations the church pauses in astonishment as she contemplates Christ dead on the cross on Good Friday and then raised up on the third day. There follows the great Easter season, fifty days of singing alleluias to engrave in the minds of Christians the fact that Christ is alive. After those fifty days we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit that Christ promised, the Spirit that Jesus bought with his divine blood, the Spirit who is poured out on this church as she begins her pilgrimage, her twenty centuries of history.

Year after year the church returns to this source. As the church presents this unfolding of the redemptive mysteries of Christ during each liturgical year, she is not simply recalling past events. My sisters and brothers, I want to be very clear in this idea. The liturgical celebration is not simply remembrance of some past event, such as when we celebrate September 15 and recall that date in 1821, a date that remains in the past. Rather, the liturgy is presence, as the Second Vatican Council states. I have copied out this passage from the Council for you: «Within the cycle of a year, [the church] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ. . . . Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present for all time, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold upon them and become filled with saving grace» (SC 102). This is how the Israelites celebrated Passover, their deliverance from Egypt (Exod 12:25-27). Even though years and centuries had passed, when the Jewish families gathered together, they recited, «This night we are leaving Egypt». It is a present reality; it is liturgy. That is the

¹ The greeting and opening words are not recorded on the tape.

meaning of liturgy in the church: it makes present today, November 27, 1977, all the expectation of the Old Testament, the Christ who comes to fulfill God's promises.

We are present this Sunday before this mystery so that every Christian of good will can enter into personal contact with the Christ who came twenty centuries ago but who continues to come through the mystery of the church's liturgy. Thus the Masses of each Sunday—indeed, the liturgical feasts of the year, such as the feast of our cathedral on August 6—are all ways of making present the mystery of Christ.

How wonderful it would be if we all came to church in this way! Then the news with which I begin my homilies would make sense. I start my homilies with news not to satisfy people's curiosity but to tell you that at this time, this Sunday, at this liturgical celebration, Christ is present in our cathedral and in the chapels where people have gathered together to join in reflection with us. Christ is present to shed light on the realities of El Salvador, the realities of our families, and the intimate realities of each one of us. We cannot separate God's word from the historical reality in which it is proclaimed because then it would not be the word of God. It would be mere history, a pious book, a Bible that is just another book in our libraries. It becomes God's word because it vivifies, enlightens, contrasts, repudiates, and praises what is going on today in this society. I offer just a few items of news, but each one of you has a thousand more things that could be listed here, and it is good for you to illuminate these realities with the word that is proclaimed today.

Recent news

We want to express a greeting of hospitality to all the young athletes of Central America who have gathered here for the Second Central American Olympic Games. Hopefully during these unsettled times we will listen to the voices of these young people who call us to unity and peace. Sports send a message, and I am happy for this sporting event as an opportunity for God to be truly proclaimed in our city and our republic. Welcome, young men and women from Central America. May El Salvador be true to its tradition of hospitality.

During recent days the publication of the Law of Public Order has received numerous commentaries from all kinds of people². I am not an expert in law and I am not a lawyer, but I invite the lawyers to make use of their legal knowledge and express their judgment about this law. As pastor I want to share some classical theological doctrine concerning what a law should be. I am not meddling in the technical aspects of jurisprudence even though I have heard a number of lawyers speak about the legal failings of this law. It is really the lawyers who must do honor to their profession and determine whether we have been given a technically valid law or not. From the perspective of theology and as a priest trying to explain the word of God, I have the right and the duty to throw light on what is happening in our nation. To that end I refer to a passage of our great theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas. In question ninety of the second part of his *Summa Theologica*, Saint Thomas studies law and defines it as follows: «Law is an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by the one who has care of the community, and officially promulgated»³. We find briefly stated here the four elements of a true law.

² The «Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order» was approved by the Legislative Assembly on 24 November 1977. See *Diario Oficial* (25 November 1977), vol. 257, 2-5.

³ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2, q. 90 art. 4.

Law is «an ordinance of reason», *ordinatio rationis*, which means that it is not the result of arbitrariness or whim. Even the pagans distinguished this rational element of law from the capriciousness of the dictator who spoke the famous phrase: *Sic volo, sic jubeo, sic pro ratione voluntas*, that is, «I will it, I order it, therefore my will is the reason». This is not rational. The human person is guided by reason, not by arbitrariness or whim. Therefore the first characteristic of law is that it must be rational and ordered by reason.

Second, the law must be authentically ordered to the «common good». Laws should not arise for the benefit of government officials or privileged groups that seek to oppress or repress others. Rather, it is the common good that must be sought so that everyone can see that the law makes provision for the happiness, welfare, freedom, and dignity of all people, rich and poor.

Third, law must be «made by the one who has care of the community». In other words, the one who makes the law ought to feel that he or she is mandated to do so by the community. Since the whole community cannot create laws, it nominates representatives or a legislative assembly. Those legislators and those officials must reflect the views of the community because law will have force only when the community's views are respected.

The fourth and final element is that the law must be «promulgated». The law is a measure, and a measure is effective only when it is applied to the object that is measured. Therefore, if the law is for the good of a society, it has to be promulgated; it has to be communicated so that the community can know it, analyze it, and accept it. Only then is it law. Only then can it be said that a human law is a reflection of the natural law, which is the only source of all true law. That is why Saint Augustine says that «a law that is not just should not be called a law»⁴. Saint Thomas explains this further: «The binding force of the law depends on its justice, and in dealing with human matters its justice is in proportion to its conformity to the norms of reason. Thus, the first norm of reason is natural law; as a consequence all human law will have the character of law to the degree that it is derived from natural law. If it departs from natural law, it will not be law but a corruption of law»⁵.

The natural law, the law that is written in our hearts, dictates many rights, such as the right to assembly, the right to freedom, the right to defend ourselves in court, the right not to be tortured in order to seek (quote) «the truth». If all these natural laws are trampled upon by a pseudo-law, then, as Saint Thomas states clearly, «this is not law but a corruption of law».

Saint Thomas also analyzes the four functions of law⁶. He says that law regulates the human acts of a society by 1) prescribing virtuous acts, 2) prohibiting sinful acts, 3) allowing indifferent acts, and 4) punishing people to induce them to obey just laws. We agree that law should promote virtue and prohibit the unjust actions of everyone. We have said many times that in Latin America there exists a type of injustice that has become institutionalized (M 2,16). If a law does not take into account this kind of injustice as something that must be corrected, then such a law is unjust. Law should not reflect only the interests of the class that is instituting oppression; it should also reflect the views of the class that is being oppressed and repressed.

⁴ AUGUSTINE, *On Free Will*, Book One, ch. 5; PL 32, 1227.

⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2, q. 95, art. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, q. 92, art. 2.

Laws will be just only when the good done both by those above and by those below is rewarded; laws will be just only when the evil done both by those below and by those above is punished.

At the end of the synod of bishops the pope himself condemned the abusive action of certain governments who do not give the church freedom to proclaim her integral message. You can read the words of the pope and the bishops in my column in the recent issue of *Orientación*⁷. The church may be silenced by force. May God grant that they not take away from us these microphones that are doing so much good! But if some day this voice of the church should be silenced by force, sisters and brothers, there is something that cannot be silenced: the consciousness of a people that acts as God's microphone even when there are no radio stations. The people will feel compelled to proclaim everywhere the freedom of Christ's message and will encourage one and all to become true children of God. If one day we are unable to communicate as we do now, sisters and brothers, especially in the remote areas of our diocese, it won't matter. From this moment I am calling on all Catholics to try to give faithful echo to this message by the way they live and act and speak. We just celebrated in Apopa the feast of their patroness, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, and I told the people there that every Catholic has to be a martyr, that is, a witness to the message that God wants proclaimed freely to all the world.

The word of God illuminates another aspect of the news today and gives us hope. The mothers of those persons who have been arrested and disappeared have formed an association⁸. I spoke to you before about the way in which the ten lepers grouped together in their suffering (Luke 17:12). So too, these mothers who suffer an unspeakable, indefinable anguish have the right to come together to comfort and help one another and to ask what has been done with their children. I congratulate them, and I am saddened that the press has refused to publish this news. Why is our press so fearful? Why does it not give voice to the immense pain in the hearts of these mothers? At noon on Thursday, December 1, the feast of Divine Providence, this association of mothers of the disappeared is going to celebrate here in the cathedral a votive Mass for their children and for the consolation of all those grieving. I am very pleased to be able to celebrate this Mass and to join in solidarity once again with this worthy association of people in pain.

I also have other denunciations. We are greatly dismayed by the capture of attorney César Valle while he was working in the name of Vivienda Mínima. He was helping twenty-six families from Colima move as a result of the flooding of Cerrón Grande; they were in urgent need of other housing. Vivienda Mínima offered them lodging in the district of Usulután, and César Valle was working on this matter. The National Guard captured him, and as of last night we have no information except that he is being held by them. Hopefully they will understand that he is working for the good of people, and there is no reason to hinder this work. There is also a denunciation from Iris Idalia Portilla de Arévalo, a teacher of San Miguel. She found her son in the Hospital Rosales after he had been tortured, and she is also grieved by the disappearance of her husband, Efraín Arévalo.

⁷ «A Word from the Archbishop. Freedom for Catechesis» in *Orientación* (27 November 1977).

⁸ Reference to the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of the Prisoners, Disappeared, and Politically Assassinated of El Salvador (Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados Políticos de El Salvador [COMADRES]).

These are some of the things, sisters and brothers, that the church is experiencing in this season of Advent, a season that should fill us with hope. Sisters and brothers, I want us to feel every day happier in being together as church. Despite the difficulties that surround us, the church is becoming more solid and more aware of her own greatness and dignity.

During this past week the church of the archdiocese has received some very great consolations. For example, I was invited to observe and participate in the Seventh Latin American Congress of Workers that was celebrated in Costa Rica from November 21 to 26. Unable to go myself, I asked Father Jesús Delgado to go as my representative. With deep emotion he told me about the ovation that those workers from every part of Latin America gave to the church of El Salvador. One of them said, «If the church in the past had been the authentic church of the Gospel, a church that had no fear of the powers of this earth, then we wouldn't have to lament today the alienation of the working class from the church, and atheism would not exist». It is sad, sisters and brothers, to think that we are culpable of having in times past sought to support the church with the powers of this earth. If our church does not rely on her own weakness and on Christ's omnipotent strength, she will lose everything.

I also received a visit from the bishop of Cleveland, Bishop Heaky, who is here visiting his priests. The diocese of Cleveland has been helping us with the parish of La Libertad and the parishes of Chirilagua and La Unión in San Miguel. In the name of the archdiocese I thanked the bishop for the wonderful collaboration of his priests. I was also visited by two prominent North American Jesuits, Father Carter and Father Simon Smith, who offered words of praise and encouragement for the positions our church has taken.

Yesterday I also had the honor of greeting the superior general of the Passionists, Father Paul Boyle. He went to visit the tremendous work the Passionists are doing in Jiquilisco. I thanked him for the ministry the Passionists here in the archdiocese. I enjoyed talking with him; he has been visiting all the countries of Latin America. He said that the church everywhere in Latin America, and especially in places like El Salvador, is a church that is alive and heartening, a church that truly feels like a people's church. Let us hold onto this character, sisters and brothers, for it is the true character of the church.

The vicar general of the Maryknoll community, Father Breen, came to visit us, and I thanked him also for the collaboration of his priests. They are going to continue their ministry here. We asked for their assistance especially in Chalatenango, and we supported the request of Bishop Rivera to have them work also in Santiago de María.

We have some very good news from our separated sisters and brothers. This week we had a meeting with members of the Baptist, Episcopal, and other Central American churches. Like the Catholic Church, they put their faith in a Gospel that is in no way to be mutilated, accommodating, and disembodied. They, like us, are saddened by the way in which the Protestant church is being manipulated these days. Certain pastors are warmly welcomed by the government; they are given prominent places in the Cuscatlán stadium, and they are made to feel as though they represent the only church that is faithful to the message of Christ, while the Catholic Church is seen as meddling in politics and communism. It is as if the Protestant church were excommunicating the Catholic Church! How wonderful it is, then, to hear that there are Protestant sisters and brothers who are not in agreement with this manipulation. Inspired by the same Spirit as the Catholic Church, they realize that a Gospel that does not take

account of human rights and a Christianity that does not contribute to the history of earth cannot be the authentic doctrine of Christ; it can only be an instrument of power! We lament the times in the past that our own church has fallen into this sin, but we want to correct our attitude and live in accord with this truly evangelical spirituality. Neither we Catholics nor the true believers in the Gospel who are outside our church want to be playthings of earthly powers. Rather, we want to be the church that announces the authentic, courageous Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, even if it is necessary to die like him on the cross.

I also want to share with you some news about our priests. Our beloved brother, Bishop Revelo, has returned from Rome. There is no schism between Bishop Revelo and the archbishop of San Salvador. There is a longstanding friendship, even now as we both try to fulfill our very difficult missions. I've already told you, beloved faithful, that I am happy with the sensible way in which Catholics are dealing with these events that our enemies are using in order to divide us. From the start I asked you, and I do so now again, to listen to Bishop Revelo⁹. Let us not judge him in advance. Let us be aware that he is a bishop in communion with the pope and with the hierarchy of the archdiocese. Therefore, nothing can break this bond and this friendship that arises from God's true message. Even if there are minor differences, we are able to speak openly about them because in all the most important matters we are servants of this church that does not want to betray either the people or the Gospel.

On December 15 we priests are going to meet together to evaluate our ministry of the past year and plan for the new year.

At 5:00 o'clock tomorrow afternoon, in the church of San Juan in Cojutepeque, there will be a commemoration of the tragic death of Father Nicolás Rodríguez, who was killed there in 1970. That crime has remained a mystery; he suffered an anonymous death. It is only right that now, as we recall the heroism of our priests, we should also remember him. At the time, I went to claim his body, which was already decaying. He was killed while coming from hearing a confession; he was carrying his kit for sending a soul off to eternity. He died as a minister in the service of his priesthood. We will honor him with special prayers at 5:00 o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Let us all join in solidarity with the church of Cojutepeque.

As regards the communities, you all know about Quezaltepeque already. The very declarations of Father Quinteros show what sort of people we are dealing with. The sad thing is that the enemies of the church don't care about the human value of the instrument they're using as long as they can do harm to the church. But the result is painful. Father Quinteros has excommunicated himself; I have not excommunicated him. I have simply told him that there is a law which automatically punishes with excommunication anyone who commits the crime that he committed¹⁰. So there is no hatred or bad will. If there were bad will, he would not have been given treatment for his tuberculosis, but we had him go to the sanatorium of Los Planes. If

⁹ From 30 September to 29 October 1977 the auxiliary bishop of Santa Ana, Marco René Revelo, took part in the synod of bishops in the Vatican on the theme «Catechesis in Our Time». While in Rome, he caused controversy by questioning the actions of some priests and catechists in El Salvador, whom he accused of following the positions of «extremist groups». These declarations were presented in incomplete and tendentious form by the national press. See «Revelations of the Bishop of Santa Ana» in *El Mundo* (4 October 1977).

¹⁰ Father Antonio Pineda Quinteros was removed from the parish of Quezaltepeque but refused to hand it over to the new pastor. Instead, he allowed extreme rightwing groups to manipulate his refusal for the sake of further protest. See «Archbishop Romero Excommunicated. Pastor of Quezaltepeque Accuses Archbishop of Preaching Hatred» in *La Opinión* (November 1977).

there were bad will, I would not have received him in Santiago de María, nor would I have dialogued with him with all the good will of a pastor. It's a shame that politicians from that town are using these circumstances to damage the church.

More sad news from Quezaltepeque concerns the Fraternity of the Holy Burial, which has ceased to be recognized as Catholic. Because of their rebellious attitude toward church authority and their disrespectful usurpation of church property, the church refuses to recognize them as Catholic even though they have been officially recognized by civil authorities. The civil matters and the church building in Quezaltepeque are not important; what is important is the living church, those who live in communion with the true pastors. The true pastor there is Father Roberto Van Den Henden. Both he and the Belgian sisters have been victims of abuse, but thanks be to God they have been faithful and remained in communion with the church.

In Cojutepeque we celebrated the anniversary of the enthronement of the Virgin. What satisfaction it gave me to see 7,000 devotees of the Virgin, motivated by the words of Father Amado Molina and their pastor Father Ricardo Ayala. They prayed for the church and expressed their confidence that this church, protected by a mother as good and powerful as Mary, cannot perish.

On November 21 in Tamanique wonderful homage was paid to our Lady of Peace. There, with the North American priests and Sister Juanita, I could witness the intense work of pastoral ministry that is being done in that area.

I also remember with delight my trip to Panchimalco on Sunday afternoon. Tourism has created a beautiful environment there, and I congratulate them, but what made me happiest in this traditional setting was the ceremony in which a group of Catholics received copies of the Bible in order to study the word of God under the zealous direction of Father Pocasangre. In Santa Tecla during the past three days a number of lay people are being prepared in a course on base communities, under the direction of Father Palacios. In Ciudad Arce today we will bless the church in anticipation of the feast of the Immaculate Conception. In Apopa we were pleased to see the people faithfully celebrating the feast of their patroness, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, on the twenty-fifth. Congratulations to Father Martell. Today in Amatepec we will celebrate the confirmation of young men and women—this is how I would like all confirmation groups to be. The Cursillo Movement is holding a new cursillo, and next Sunday there will be a national gathering in Santiago de María in the Colegio Santa Gema. All are invited.

I conclude with a personal note. The woman who signed her letter «Magdalene Martyr» can feel satisfied with her humble confession, her repentance, and her resolution. Be at peace! I thank you for your courage in denouncing a clinic and a doctor here in San Salvador—they are what we might call a clinic and doctors of abortion. Abortions are done there. I do not say this to give them publicity but as condemnation. This is a crime, and no doctor or clinic has a right to be doing this.

These events I have mentioned—of the nation, of sin, of God's kingdom, of the church—are events that we want to try to understand in light of the three readings we have just heard. We could synthesize our main points of commentary with the title, «The Church of Hope». Yes, let us be strong in our hope! In the first reading I behold a luminous goal; in the second reading

Saint Paul presents us with a way toward that goal; in the gospel Christ surprises us with what he says about the way to reach the goal.

A luminous goal

The first reading from Isaiah describes the difficult political and social situation of Israel, similar to our present situation. The nation was calling into question its covenant with God and wanted to form an alliance with Egypt in order to defend itself from the might of Assyria. Invoking the power of God, Isaiah urges the people to trust in God and not betray the covenant. He speaks to them these words of hope: «This Jerusalem besieged and fearful is the city that God has chosen. There the light of God will shine brightly; there the temple of the Lord will stand firm, and toward it will stream numerous people from among the nations. They will say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of God”. And God will shed light on their paths. From there a law will be proclaimed that will rule the people with justice. A true doctrine will change the instrument of war into tools for work. The disorder will be changed into peace and justice and love» (Isa 2:1-5).

Isaiah must have seem deluded to many, and I imagine that as he spoke these words of love there were many violent groups who wanted to resolve the situation by the sword and by force. Yet Isaiah never tired of proclaiming his words of peace.

This is the goal, sisters and brothers; this is the goal that the prophets proclaimed and that the church continues to announce. The enemies of the church do not want her to speak out, and so they try to discredit her by saying that the church preaches violence and politics and communism. These are sinful distortions. Whoever truly resists the powers of evil and listens to voice of the authentic church will always hear the echo of Isaiah, the echo of Christ, and the echo of the prophets.

We have never preached violence, except the violence of the love that led Christ to be nailed to a cross. We preach only the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome selfishness and to eliminate the cruel inequalities among us. This is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love and fraternity, the violence that chooses to beat weapons into sickles for work (Isa 2:4). What a beautiful call we would make to you here, sisters and brothers, when work abounds in our fields! Do not change this work into hatred or struggles or bloodshed. Since last Sunday I have been crying out that the harvests of coffee, cotton, and sugar cane should be a hymn of praise to the Lord. Do not wait for laws, but be inspired in the fraternal love that should unite owners and workers. Let us raise from our fields a hymn that is in tune with the generosity with which God grants us these harvests. This is our goal; this is the peace toward which we walk.

A path toward the luminous goal

The second reading offers us the path to this goal. Saint Paul exhorts us to clothe ourselves in Christ and put aside the works of darkness: «No more orgies and drunkenness, no more promiscuity and licentiousness, no more rivalry and jealousy» (Rom 13:13). See how the Bible is unwilling to put up with vice and sin? Paul speaks of people who have spent the night carousing and see the day approaching. Addressing such persons, Paul says, «Wake from sleep, and be alert. Rise from your bed of sin, and do not allow death to surprise you in your sin. Do

not allow the paths of light to surprise you when you are walking on the path of darkness. Clothe yourselves in Christ. Christ is the way» (Rom 13:11-14). For «I am the way», said the Lord (John 14:6).

My sisters and brothers, when we preach the Lord's word, we decry not only the injustices of the social order; we decry every sin that is night, every evil that is darkness: drunkenness, gluttony, lust, adultery, abortion; we decry everything that is part of the kingdom of iniquity and sin. Let it all disappear from our society. We can walk toward the goal and establish a true peace only by walking on the path of light and honesty and holiness, only by clothing ourselves interiorly with Christ even though we have sinned, only by true conversion to the Lord.

The great surprise of where this road leads us

Finally, my sisters and brothers, the Gospel of Saint Matthew presents Christ exhorting us with a terrible comparison. At the time of the great flood the people laughed at Noah when they saw him building an ark; they thought he was crazy. They continued to enjoy their way of life, the gospel tells us, marrying and giving in marriage. They did not think that the end was near. But then the rains began to fall and flood the earth. Noah, faithful to God, was saved with his family while a whole sinful race was washed away with the purifying waters of the flood. The same will happen, says the gospel, when the Son of Man comes again (Matt 24:37).

The Advent season that begins today and continues until Christmas helps us to understand better what I have explained in previous Sundays, namely, the meaning of eschatology or the last days. Seven centuries before Christ the prophet Isaiah announced that with the coming of Christ, the Son of God made man, the final phase of history would begin. How long will it last? We do not know, but we are already in this final age, Saint Paul tells us. We are closer now than when it was first proclaimed by the prophets. We are living now in the eschatological hour because Christ by his incarnation and resurrection has injected into the earth the final opportunity that God is giving human beings to be saved. Salvation is already beginning on this earth. Salvation means freedom: true freedom from sin, from selfishness, from illiteracy, from hunger. These earthly freedoms prepare us for the great freedom of the kingdom of heaven.

The risen Christ must now be the light for those who are creating history. The inspiration for all the laws that are set down for the people must be Christ, not the whims of the powerful. Rather, what Christ desires is the conversion of the powerful. The law of Christ is eschatology. Only those who live conformed to Christ here in this life will be chosen for eternal life.

The gospel relates this great truth to us by using the image of an abduction. At the end of time, we are told, two men will be working, and two women will also be working. One will be taken, and one left (Matt 24:40-41). In other words, on this earth the difference is not apparent; we are all working side by side. Nevertheless, some will be taken by God for his kingdom, and others will be left behind.

How sad it will be to be left behind, to be marginalized from the kingdom of heaven! That would really be living on the margins! Those who are left will ask, «And what about us,

Lord?» And in one instance the gospel reply is, «Depart from me, you that are accursed, into everlasting fire, because I was hungry and you didn't give me to eat» (Matt 25:41-42). Christ means to say, «You didn't live the eschatology in the Christian sense I wanted when I came to earth to take on flesh, to become human, to die for sinners, to rise and give them new life and a message of liberation». Blessed are those who accepted Christ! They are taken up. Whereas the others—how many will there be? We don't know; it is the mystery of eschatology. But it is a mystery we can resolve in our favor, beginning now in this Advent as we prepare for Christmas. Let us respond to the call to repentance; let us be converted to Christ; let us clothe ourselves in Christ. When joy invades the depths of our conscience, sisters and brothers, human considerations are of little importance because we are trying to be faithful to Christ our Savior.

Hopefully these words of Advent, considered within the very intense history of this past week, will be heard above all the murmurings of earth. The voice of the Lord is clear: «I am coming to you. Be prepared like the watchman who does not know when the thief is coming, but he keeps watch because at the hour least expected the thief can surprise him» (Matt 24:42-43). Vigilance is the spiritual disposition that should be our focus during this time of preparation for Christmas. Christ is coming. We do not await him like children expecting toys. We await him as Christians who know that he has already come, but who announced that he would come a second time to surprise us on the path of life. He will gather us up from wherever we fall dead, and we will enter with him to reign. Even now we should reign with him through our virtue and holiness.

Let us be true Christians, worthy of this eschatological hour that lasts from the first coming of Christ until the second, this final period of history. Let us experience this time as something that is not permanent but passing. Let us not become too attached and established here. We should not let the goods and the power of this earth make us lose the enchantments of the kingdom of God that will soon receive us. Just as a person is abducted and taken away without leaving behind any trace, so also will we be taken away, but by the love of Christ who will take us forever into his heaven. May it be so.