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THE CHURCH OF SALVATION

Third Sunday of Advent
11 December 1977

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

We could call the homily of this Sunday «The Church of Salvation» because the mission of the church is to save as Christ saved. This is her function in history. As God continues to save in the history of nations, so too the church cannot leave aside the concrete history and context in which she has to develop. Therefore, before commenting on the divine word to shed light on our history and our reality, it is good to take into account the reality in which we live.

Events of the week

I want to express my thanks above all for the many greetings and expressions of solidarity that have arrived in support of my theological comments on the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order. I simply highlighted some ideas from our classical theology, ideas based on Saint Thomas Aquinas, and from that theological perspective I invited the experts in law to express their views on this instrument which is so crucial for the life of the nation. The written summary of my thoughts which many requested can be read in our newspaper, *Orientación*¹, which is being distributed this morning. There also in *Orientación* you will find the call that some Catholic men made to our lawyers and legislators in regard to this matter².

I am also filled with satisfaction at how much the Gospel message coincides with the reflections that were made this week by a diplomat. You may have read in *La Prensa Gráfica* the statements of a distinguished diplomat concerning our situation³. These statements were occasioned by the twenty-ninth anniversary—which was yesterday—of the adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration 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 all of the member states, no state that has approved this declaration can say that the mistreatment and abuse of its citizens is strictly an internal question. These nations have made an international commitment, and they form part of a group of nations, all of which are against the violation of human rights.

¹ «Theology of Law» in *Orientación* (11 December 1977).

² Reference to a communication from the archdiocesan movement, *Cursillos de Cristiandad*: «Concerning the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order» in *Orientación* (11 December 1977).

³ The diplomat was Frank J. Devine, United States ambassador in El Salvador. See *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 December 1977).

The same diplomat said that no state belonging to the United Nations can evade the responsibility of examining the situation and reporting on it whenever torture or unjust privation of freedom occurs in some part of the world. He found it sad that, almost thirty years after its proclamation, this declaration remains a dream even though most nations have written protection of human rights into their constitutions. He denounced the terrible fact that the United Nations has received during the past year reports of more than 20,000 cases of violation of human rights. He considered that the attempts to justify these violations as defense against terrorism are hypocritical. «Using illegal methods to enforce the law is to condemn governments to failure in their struggle against violent opposition». Quoting the Secretary of State of the United States, he said that even if it is true that terrorism and violence done in the name of dissent cannot be excused, it is just as true that officially sanctioned violence cannot be justified. Such actions pervert the legal system that is the only means to insure the survival of our traditions. He then made this statement which coincides completely 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. Justice of a summary type undermines the very future it intends to promote and produces only more violence and terrorism. Respect for the rule of law promotes justice and eliminates the seeds of subversion. When governments abandon this respect, they descend to the depths of the terrorist world and render invalid their most powerful weapon, which is their moral authority». The best way to make people obey laws and respect human rights, said our diplomat, is «to win the trust and the loyalty of the citizens by acting with justice and according to the law, thus undercutting the roots of violent opposition».

Excuse this long citation, sisters and brothers, but it seems to me opportune. Even though the church proclaims her word from the perspective of the Gospel rather than diplomacy, she rejoices when she sees diplomats speaking with simple human reason and in accord with the Gospel, which draws on divine illumination as well as human reason. And even if diplomatic convenience sometimes causes a change in their way of thinking, the church will maintain her position because she rises above situations of convenience. These truths will always be those of the Gospel, not because a diplomat speaks them, but because they coincide with God's revelation which the church defends even at the price of her life.

Speaking of service to the world, I rejoice to inform you about the labor conflict in the INCA⁴ factory in Santa Ana. Through the intervention of Bishop Revelo, Monsignor López Sandoval, and Father Walter Guerra, and with good will on the part of labor, this situation is being resolved. Work began again in the factory on December 9.

Also as part of the church's service to the world, I announce with satisfaction that Bishop Aparicio went to the estate of El Porvenir, where thirty men and women had been captured. He demanded that the security forces treat people more humanely and more respectfully. For its part, our Legal Aid Office⁵ has intervened on behalf of those prisoners.

Again in service to the world, the church of the archdiocese accepted the invitation of the Assembly of Union Federations to constitute the Unitary Confederation of Salvadoran

⁴ Central American Nylon Industry (INCA).

⁵ The Legal Aid Office (*Socorro Jurídico*) was set up in 1975 to represent legally persons with limited resources; its offices were located in the Externado San José. Later Archbishop Romero incorporated it into the Archdiocese of San Salvador, where it became one of the principal agencies for defending human rights.

Workers. I want to express my gratitude for the effusive welcome the workers extended to the church. Know that the church, faithful to her social doctrine, will always come to the defense of the rights of the workers, *campesinos*, and all those who truly love the rule of law that serves the common good. The church will always denounce all pseudo-legality that seeks to favor only one sector of the population.

I'm happy also to tell you that the ecumenical committee has continued to meet and is progressing in its reflections. In *Orientación*⁶ you can read about the members from the different churches—Adventist, Baptist, Central American, Episcopal, Lutheran, Catholic—and from various youth movements. I have also received letters from individual Protestants, one of whom wrote as follows: «We Christians of all denominations, if we are truly Christian, are obliged to share and live the teachings of Jesus Christ despite all persecutions. Unfortunately, many of us prefer to live comfortable and easy lives, lives with no complications or risks that might jeopardize our personal security».

My sisters and brothers, it does not matter if one is not Catholic. What is important is being truly Christian and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That does not mean a facile, spiritualistic proclamation of the Gospel without commitment to history. What is central to the Gospel is following the Christ who was not afraid to be nailed to a cross in order to defend holiness in history. And this is where we often fail, not only Protestants but also many Catholics who, as this letter from a Protestant states, love their comfortable lives and do not want complications. May this serve as a call to my beloved Catholics not to fear the Gospel but to hand ourselves over to it completely even when this Gospel asks of us sacrifices that are greater than our comforts.

Also in service to the world, the church was present (in my person) at the fifteenth anniversary of the group of Alcoholics Anonymous in the parish of Santa Anita, where I had the honor of talking before a large crowd of AA members on the theme, «Religion and Alcoholics Anonymous». I use this opportunity to recommend to all those who have problems with alcohol that they take hold of this raft of salvation. I greatly admire this movement, and I pray to the Lord that it flourish. May those who suffer complications or become a torment for their wives and their families seek there in AA a solution which I'm certain they will find. I send my warmest greetings to Alcoholics Anonymous, and I tell you also that I am completely at your service.

Life of the church

This church that serves the world does not neglect to constitute herself and strengthen herself internally, and so I communicate to you this news about the life of our church. Sisters and brothers, this time for me on Sundays is like a family hour. I feel joined together with all of you who fill this cathedral, with the Catholic base communities, with the parishes and communities who are listening to me on their radios, and with those who are at the bedside of the sick. I tell all of you, sisters and brothers: let us feel that we are one family, children of this Catholic Church, and let us live the events of this church with the joy and understanding of a true family.

For example, we should be filled with joy because yesterday, here in the cathedral, we ordained two young men, Héctor Figueroa and Jorge Benavides. By means of the radio we sent

⁶ «Catholics and Protestants Work Together for Peace» in *Orientación* (11 December 1977).

the greetings of the archdiocese to their places of origin, where today they are celebrating their first Masses to the joy of their families—Jorge Benavides in San Miguel and Héctor Figueroa in Metapán.

On a sad note, let us share the afflictions and the prayers of our beloved Franciscan fathers from Italy; they are self-sacrificing servants of our church here in El Salvador and Guatemala. On December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception (a beautiful sign of predestination), a great friend, Father Engelberto Mallizori, handed over his soul to the Creator. Who would ever have told him that a small Salvadoran village, Santiago Nonualco, would receive his last breath and his body? He left behind family and the comforts of 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 Griseri, a Somascan priest from Italy, will celebrate fifty years of priestly life. We want Father Agustín and the Somascan community to know that the whole diocese, along with its bishop, is intimately united with them in prayerful solidarity. This week we will have some very important meetings of the priests, and I recommend them to your prayers. On Thursday there will be a meeting of the bishops and also a meeting of the clergy of the archdiocese to evaluate the work of the past year and plan the pastoral ministry for the coming year.

To this home of the diocese, the cathedral, we bring the life of the different communities that are spread around the whole archdiocese. First of all, I convey to you the gratitude of the communities of Aguilares, who have received assistance from so many Christian communities. I read the following words from their letter of gratitude: «Your efforts have enabled our families to have clothes to wear and something to eat during the most difficult moments. Also, we have been able to pay the debts we incurred to obtain the release of our imprisoned relatives and to buy the medicines needed to cure the illnesses we acquired during the time we were living outdoors. Your assistance shows clearly how the people are day by day understanding our reality better; they are accompanying those who are in need and are proving their love in practice by supporting and collaborating with those who suffer». My sisters and brothers, these words have more value than any amount of praise, and I congratulate all the communities that have sympathized with the poor, martyred people of Aguilares and have helped them to bear with their terrible time of trial. Hopefully this gesture will be imitated whenever there are people who are suffering. And there always are.

In San Antonio Los Ranchos, the Catholic gardening club invites the public to an exposition of corn-based craftsmanship which will be held from December 18 to 24 in Chalatenango. In the parish of La Palma Holy Hours are being celebrated for the archdiocese and for its bishop. I congratulate them, and I want to tell Father Vito to continue his apostolate of prayer and his distribution of biblical and catechetical literature. It's hard to believe, but in that humble community they are doing things that are not done in places that have many more comforts and resources. A great deal of catechetical literature and many biblical commentaries are distributed to the homes of this community.

We had the privilege this week of visiting the community of Citalá and the Oblate Sisters of Divine Love. We were in Tonacatepeque for the patronal feast of Saint Nicholas, and at Domus Marie we attended the gathering of women religious dedicated to direct pastoral

ministry. At the Colegio Belén we participated 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 taking a theology course offered by the Universidad Centroamericana. We visited La Libertad to celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception and also went to San Antonio Abad to encourage their efforts at unifying the different sectors that are still a bit divided. We visited Ayutuxtepeque to encourage the community in the construction of their 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 the pastoral ministry of confirmation as the church wishes. The young people were well prepared. After making a spiritual retreat, they understood well what they were going to receive through the imposition of the hands of the bishop, namely, the fullness of grace of the Holy Spirit which confirms them in their faith and enables them to live their youthfulness with dignity.

Today in Santa Tecla the meetings will continue in the Colegio de Fátima so that the laity can continue to develop the basic church communities, as they are already doing. Today also at 10:00 o'clock in San Antonio church in Colonia América, there will be a fervent First Communion service. The day after tomorrow is the feast of Saint Lucy in Suchitoto; we will have the honor of being there with our beloved predecessor, Bishop Chávez y González. Just as in Tacachico, they celebrate on the fourteenth the Immaculate Conception and Saint Paul. On Saturday in San José Villanueva a community of Passionist Sisters will begin their pastoral ministry in that town; in the morning we'll have the great joy of driving them there. Next Sunday in La Vega is the feast of Our Lady of Los Remedios. In San Rafael Cedros there will be a graduation ceremony at the sewing academy.

The initiative that we began here to give Christmas a greater sense of Christian charity has been embraced by many people, for which we are thankful. A seller of Christmas cards sent us a message saying that the poor often earn a little money by selling those cards, and she is quite right. But if instead of cards we give poor people gifts of clothing, shoes, and other things, then people will still have some way to earn money. It's a question of changing the merchandise and making our charity more useful. I was very pleased when one of our Protestant sisters told me that she had heard our call and that this year, instead of giving gifts this Christmas, she was going to give shoes to barefoot children.

Finally, sisters and brothers, I mention a theme that is a beautiful entrée for the homily: the Virgin of Guadalupe. Tomorrow all of Latin America remembers this dark-skinned immaculate woman who desired to become ours, part of our race. Tomorrow the Virgin Mother of God will receive the filial love of so many people who hear the words the Virgin of Tepeyac spoke to Juan Diego and understand them as addressed to themselves. Let each of us listen to these words in our hearts: «Is it not I who am here your mother?» We are going to feel her close this evening at 7:30 in the church of San José de la Montaña as we process from there to the Basilica of Guadalupe. There at 9:00 o'clock, when the procession arrives, I will celebrate the holy Mass, which will be transmitted by this station. I want to congratulate all of those who, even if they're not named Guadalupe, nevertheless are beloved children of this dark-skinned Latin American Virgin.

Dear sisters and brothers, all this tells us that the church is getting stronger. She is hard at work in so many places, precisely in the service of salvation. In today's readings I find three thoughts that sum up my message: first, only God can save us; second, God saves in the history

of every people; and third, the mission of the church is to make the history of God's people become salvation history.

Only God can save us

This truth that only God can save follows from today's readings. The object of these homilies, sisters and brothers, is to repeat the Second Vatican Council's response to those who expect that the solution to the world's problems will come through human effort and that one day here on earth there will be a paradise created by human beings. As the church has always maintained, that is false. We human beings cannot bring about the salvation that humanity needs. Rather, we agree with what the Second Vatican Council says, «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» (GS 10). By the light of Christ, the church continues to preach to the world that salvation cannot come from human beings, but only from God.

If we look for a summary of today's readings, we see that all three readings are saying the same thing. In the first reading the prophet Isaiah tells us, «God will come and save us» (Isa 35:4). In the second reading the apostle James says, «Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near» (Jas 5:8). And in the gospel John the Baptist, now a prisoner at Machaerus near the Dead Sea, sends his disciples to ask Christ, «Are you the one who is to come? Are you the God whom humanity is expecting and without whom there can be no salvation?» (Matt 11:3). My sisters and brothers, the salvation the church preaches is not a salvation based on earth. That is why it is vexing when people say that the church is meddling in politics and becoming communist and subversive.

The church views with sadness those liberators who are not bold enough to raise their hopes to the same heights as the church. The church disarms all the liberation movements that do not take Christian faith and hope into account. The liberation that the church hopes for and proclaims comes through the true liberation of the human heart, the liberation from sin. That is why the basic liberation must come from a God who can forgive sin. The liberation that the church awaits is a cosmic liberation. The church believes that all of nature is groaning beneath the weight of sin. What beautiful coffee groves, what fine cane fields, what magnificent cotton crops, what marvelous farms and lands God has given us! Nature is so beautiful! But when we see nature groan under oppression, under wickedness, under injustice, under assault, then the church feels pain and looks for a liberation that will not be only material well-being. Rather, it will be the power of God freeing nature from sinful human hands so that nature, along with the redeemed, will sing a hymn of joy to God the Liberator.

How beautiful is the song of freedom we heard in today's first reading. The prophet Isaiah becomes a poet as he sings of liberation: «The desert and the parched land will exult; the wilderness will rejoice and bloom». Who can change a desert into a garden? Only God! «Let the desert richly bloom; let it rejoice and shout with delight! It is given the grandeur of Lebanon, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon» (Isa 35:1-2). These are the beautiful terrains of Palestine that were barren but that God was capable of planting once again so that nature could flourish in all its beauty. These are images that change when the prophet applies them to the human

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» (Isa 35:3,5-6,10). This is complete liberation, the liberation that Christ himself announced to the messengers of John the Baptist: «The blind see. Go tell John the Baptist what you are seeing. The dead rise. The Gospel is preached to the poor» (Matt 11:4-6). Are these not the signs of the coming of the Messiah? Why has the prisoner of Machaerus sent his disciples to ask about this? Has he become pessimistic? No, John the Baptist wanted to confirm the faith of his disciples in the Messiah. They returned to John convinced that Christ was the God who was coming to save the world, but with a liberation that not even John the Baptist in all his greatness could have imagined.

According to some commentators, and I agree with them, John the Baptist found here a correction to his own preaching. John the Baptist laid much stress on the eschatological message: the day was close when the Lord would come in wrath to punish sinners. He was a prophet whose heart burned at the injustice he saw all around him. Seeing so many people maltreated and feeling that God could no longer tolerate those unjust situations, he declared, «You brood of vipers! Don't you see that even now the axe is about to fell the tree?» (Matt 3:7,10). But Jesus came with greater gentleness, and he sent word back to tell this impatient prophet John what James says in his letter: «Be patient—the sign of the Messiah is goodness» (Jas 5:7).

Jesus also comes to save what is lost, but by means of conversion. «Be converted! As John the Baptist has preached, so also I preach, but I preach a conversion that does not make the poor arrogant but makes them realize their complete dependence on God in true poverty. I don't preach a conversion that makes the poor feel resentful or hateful toward the rich; I preach conversion that makes the poor understand that they must convert the powerful so that they too become poor in spirit». Poverty must always exist in the world because it is out of poverty that God proclaims his message of conversion to all people. The powerful and the rich must put aside their attitudes of pride and self-sufficiency; they must become poor in spirit even if they might possess wealth. Their wealth matters little as long as they learn how to utilize this wealth as God's beggars and as long as they feel poor before our Lord and realize that they are brothers and sisters with all the poor.

This is the coming of the Messiah that Christ proclaimed and that the church continues to preach. That is why, sisters and brothers, it must be a salvation that only God can bring about. Human beings can sow rancor and put arms in the hands of the weak. Human beings can pass laws that are terribly repressive. Human beings can assault others with arms and power, but these things do not bring true salvation, as the diplomat told us in the message I read to you. I am telling you this now not only from a diplomatic perspective but on the basis of the Gospel: the salvation hoped for by all those who believe in Christ can come only from God.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, during these days of Advent we need to pray, «Come, Lord Jesus!» (Rev 22:20), or as the church cries out in her prayer to the king who is to come: «Come, let us adore him! Rain down, O heavens! Rain upon the parched lands so that a new harvest might spring up!» (Isa 45:8)⁷. That is how we await the coming of the Redeemer.

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

This then, dear sisters and brothers, is my first thought on today's readings. Only God can save, and we must awaken in human hearts a great hope that God is going to save us.

God saves in the history of every people

Second, the salvation of God takes place in history. The Council says, «At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him. 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» (LG 9). The Council goes on to say that this people was Israel and that therefore the history of Israel was different from the history of other peoples. Israel had a special guarantee, and we shouldn't be confused here. Israel had a theocratic history. God wrote the history with his prophets and with the people's deeds. The historical events of Israel have a prophetic meaning. What God did with Israel he wants to do also with other peoples. Other peoples must learn from the sacred history in the Bible, which is the paradigm for all histories. Thus we as Salvadorans become hopeful as we read today's first reading. Just as Judah was restored after returning from exile in Babylon, just as the desert steppes were turned into gardens, just as Judah, purified of her social sins, flourished again in holiness and justice, so also El Salvador will experience the salvation that comes as we are purified from the sins of our history, as we eliminate the awful violence, and as we raise up all those who are marginalized.

God wants to save us within history, and we Salvadorans will be saved in our own national history. We don't have to copy other peoples' histories. We must be original and come to an awareness of the true causes of evil. As Salvadorans, all of us without exception have the right and the duty to participate in the common good of the nation. That is not the patrimony of one political party; that is not the privilege of a chosen few that have power or weapons. It is the right of all Salvadorans whose hearts feel the pain of their country and who want to collaborate in finding political channels for their own personal contribution as citizens to the well-being of the whole country. God wants to save El Salvador with the help of Salvadorans, with the help of our politicians, professionals, and farmers. He wants to do so by means of all who are called Salvadoran and all who have come here to work with our Salvadoran reality.

The mission of the church is to make her people's history salvation history

My third thought, then, sisters and brothers, is that the church strives in every nation to make the people's own history salvation history. The church is not foreign in any country. It is true that pastoral ministers have come to our country, priests like Father Mallizori from Italy who died here in El Salvador, and also the religious women who leave the warmth of their homes and their countries to come here to work with us. This shows the universality of this message that sanctifies all people. The «foreigners» (in quotes) who work here in El Salvador are more Salvadoran than those Salvadorans who don't respect the uniqueness of Salvadorans.

The nation is built upon these plans of God, and the true vocation of my country is to be a homeland of salvation. We will be true to our vocation as Salvadorans when we come one day to constitute God's kingdom. No longer baptized in name only, we will be true Christians committed to making our homes, our estates, our farms, our roads, and our laws into an edifice

of salvation, a solid edifice where Salvadorans feel truly realized as Christians. With complete freedom we'll be able to adore our God and proclaim the integral religion that God wants us to proclaim.

We'll be able to come together to reflect on the word without any fear of surveillance or false reports. We'll show our love of God by meeting in our chapels without being suspected of doing something subversive. This is the freedom that the church preaches. That is why the Hungarian bishop said, «When my nation's hymn could no longer be sung in the streets of the city, it could still be sung in the churches of my country». In our churches we will always sing, «Let us salute the motherland, proud to be called her children»,⁸ because we feel that the history of our nation is where God is carrying out his great work of saving those who have had the honor of being born on this soil. Let no one feel ashamed to be called a Salvadoran. Let us feel the satisfaction and the pride of living in a nation where we serve the common good without fears or suspicions. By our service to the common good we are already fashioning the happiness of eternal salvation.

This is the nation of Advent and of Christmas, the nation which Christ commands us to offer, by means of his church, to those who have in their hands the reins and the destiny of the nation so that those who hold economic, political and social power can join together with all people of such good will and build it up. Even if there is terrorism and malice, the blame will not lie in our not having understood well what must be done. 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.

Those are the three thoughts, then, that come to us as a message for this Third Sunday of Advent. Let us live lives of hope, sisters and brothers, and not be pessimistic! Like the apostle James, I repeat, «Be patient» (Jas 5:7), but not with a patience that is conformist or that lulls people to sleep. «Be patient», says the apostle, and strive for your own perfection. Develop yourselves and do good, hoping that the history of our nation, if we work at it, will not be just a copy of the history of Israel, but rather the history of the God who worked wonders in Israel and wants to do the same here in El Salvador, using the very elements of our incomparable Salvadoran landscapes. Let it be so.

⁸ The national anthem of El Salvador.