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CHRIST REVEALING GOD, CHRIST REVEALING HUMANITY, THE CHURCH REVEALING CHRIST

**Christmas Day
25 December 1977**

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

... the news of Christ's birth is announced to us through his church¹. The gospel tells us after the shepherds invited by the angels to adore the child Jesus had left: «Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart» (Luke 2:19). For a Christian community Christmas has no meaning unless it is based on profound reflection. That is why for many Christians Christmas is nothing more than an eagerly awaited holiday that then passes quickly, much like the firecrackers that explode and leave nothing but rubbish in the streets. For Christians Christmas is more than a sky-rocket; it is great news that needs to be reflected on. It should make people feel involved in this event by which God becomes man, not just for a time but forever. We ought to reflect seriously upon this before the Lord.

Today we can present this Christ in Bethlehem in this homily under three titles: «Christ Revealing God», «Christ Revealing Humanity», and «The Church Revealing Christ».

Events of the week

Since the church prolongs the incarnation, that is, God's becoming human, she cannot prescind from human history. God assumed human form from that moment on, and he entrusted to the church the task of bringing all people to God. Accordingly, the pilgrim church, as she continues in this task in history, cannot avoid the circumstances in which the incarnation is prolonged. That is why, sisters and brothers, I share with you news about the important events of the week. I do not do so with any desire to be a reporter; the media do this much better than I do. I simply wish to share with my beloved faithful what we have experienced during this week, during these hours, during this Christmas of 1977. This is the eternal Nativity of Christ, and it has a profound meaning, but we are celebrating it here in El Salvador in concrete circumstances that we cannot ignore.

Among the Christmas cards and telegrams I've received are some letters that are profoundly sad. For example, some mothers and wives have written, «During this Christmas celebration which Christians await with joy, we do not experience the delight of Christmas but rather the profound sorrow of Calvary because we feel in our hearts this insuperable

¹ The greeting and opening words of the homily were not recorded on the tape.

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 fathers, but the security forces give us no information about them». Many letters have arrived with similar painful expressions. In this regard we have tried to do everything we can by appealing to the judicial authorities, and we are always willing to help out in these painful human situations.

We have also received letters from the rural areas where people are involved in harvesting coffee and other crops. They denounce the anomalies and injustices of management—bad food, long hours, discrimination against those who have the new title of «helpers», and mistreatment of those who are seeking work.

We do not want to forget these injustices, sisters and brothers, and the lack of support for some workers; we demand support of their cause. The workers also commit injustices when they rob one another or squander their salaries without caring for their families. In this unjust situation both sides should pay heed to the voice of the church as expressed in the Second Vatican Council: «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" (Rom 12:2). 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» (GS 37). If in all of our work, whether as employers or employed, we keep in mind that all of us labor for the glory of God and for peace among people, as the angels sang in Bethlehem (Luke 2:14), then how magnificent human labor can be! The differences between rich and poor would no longer be barriers that give rise to hatred and resentment, but would rather become links that join them together in love and fraternity.

I want to speak also about a series of letters that were written in a different, more optimistic tone. I want to thank those who have accepted the invitation to celebrate Christmas with a more Christian sense of charity. Yesterday, for example, we were delighted to receive from the Christian community of San Antonio Abad a collection that was taken up to help the households where the breadwinners have disappeared. From the community of San Marcos came an envelope containing seventy *colones* to be distributed among those most in need; this money was gathered from people who decided to eat more frugally. Donations also arrived for the widow with nine children in Dulce Nombre de María. Other groups of workers gave a part of their salary and year-end bonus after reflecting that Christmas is not a time for luxury and splurging, but rather a time to help those in need.

My heart was filled with joy as I spent some time with a group of young people, both Protestant and Catholic, who came together as a fraternity in Christ. They said they wanted to learn a new way of celebrating Christmas, a way that would reflect the immense love of Christ and the commitment that love is asking of young people at this time in history. This effort should fill us with joy, sisters and brothers, for these noble sentiments have made it possible to establish a fund in our archdiocese for emergency needs.

Finally, this week we were pleased to receive the complete text of the pope's discourse to our ambassador to the Holy See, including the greeting and the message to all Salvadorans². Our radio station had expressed surprise that only tendentious parts of this speech were

² PAUL VI, « Address before the El Salvador Ambassador» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 December 1977).

published in the press so that the pope's precise thinking was misrepresented. The next edition of *Orientación* will publish the entire discourse, and you will then see why I have called this discourse a true Christmas gift to our church. In speaking to our government and the Salvadoran people, the pope places himself in the same line that we have tried to follow in our own preaching, namely, the Second Vatican Council, the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, and all the other documents of the church's current teaching.

Life of the church

During the week the church has also had consolations and joy, such as the edifying example of Christian unity among the Catholics in San Antonio Abad who were a little divided among themselves. We received with joy the news that they all celebrated Christmas together in the parish church.

The celebration of the patronal feast of Saint Joseph in Quezaltepeque was also a testimony of solidarity. There the whole town and many pilgrims from various districts repudiated the schism that the local authorities have unfortunately supported. But the church has no need of material buildings or official recognition, for she lives the reality of the Mystical Body of Christ in unity with her true pastors. In Quezaltepeque the people demonstrated that their 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 important sector of the church is being developed. Lay people like yourselves are the most numerous and important part of the church.

On the same day, Tuesday, we had the pleasure of greeting in their offices the announcers and workers of this radio station, YSAX. That 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 21 we celebrated the patronal feast of Saint Thomas parish, where we shared with them the very opportune gospel message contained in the words Saint Thomas spoke to the other disciples who were afraid to go with Christ to Jerusalem: «Let us go with him, and if it is necessary, let us die with him» (John 11:16).

The ecumenical movement met this week to study a document of solidarity with the Catholic Church. I thank them for this and also for their work in preparing the eight days of prayer that we traditionally celebrate from January 18 to 25, when we pray for the unity of all Christians throughout the world.

This week we also saw a wonderful expression of the commitment of religious to the archdiocese. A community of Bethlehem Sisters is preparing to begin ministry on January 6 in a parish that is without a resident priest, El Paraíso in Chalatenango. I also rejoice with the communities of Zacamil and San Roque in Ayutuxtepeque, where for two nights this week we celebrated the joys of Christmas and the message of Christ, God and man.

Finally, 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 so celebrate here in the archdiocese and throughout the country the beautiful theme of «No to violence! Yes to peace!» We especially want to proclaim this «No to violence!» at this time when we have received news of another abduction, that of Mr. Safie³. We ask the Lord that all violence cease and that the rule of peace, trust, and justice hold sway. Our church advocates this.

Indeed, dear sisters and brothers, our church is precisely the prolongation of Christ who became incarnate in Bethlehem. Let us reflect this morning on the three points. The first is that Christ born in Bethlehem is the revelation of God before humanity.

Christ born in Bethlehem reveals God to humanity

In his beautiful prologue Saint John has told us today, «In the beginning was the Word, and all things came to be through him» (John 1:1-3). The whole of creation began to exist, and it was the Word of God that gave it existence. Thus, this Word of God already existed, and by speaking the all-powerful God gave things their being. In created things God reveals himself, just as I reveal myself by talking and expressing my thoughts, and just as you reflect your own being when you talk. Christ said, «From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks» (Matt 12:34). The good person speaks good things; the person with much evil in his heart speaks only bad things.

God is infinite goodness and hidden mystery that no one can see or hear, but he utters the words, «Let things be made» (Gen 1:3ff.), and the sun is made; nature is created. In the magnificence of things, in the order and greatness and beauty of all creation, we feel God's footprint, his Word, his echo. That is why Saint Paul said that the Romans who refused to believe in God were without excuse, because God reveals himself to them in creation (Rom 1:20-22).

Creation was therefore made by the Word, this eternal Word of God who became human. Remember how we pray the *Angelus*: «The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us». Thus, the Word of God is no longer reflected only in the natural world; it is a Word that reflects for us the most intimate life of God. This Word tells us that in God there is a Son and that this Son, the eternal Word of God, takes on human form. When we saw this Word pass through this world, as Saint John says, «we saw the glory of God in him» (John 1:14). Christ is the epiphany of God. When at the Last Supper one of the disciples said, «Lord, show us the Father», Jesus replied, «Philip, have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father» (John 14:8-9). How wonderful to think that in Christ we have a revelation of God, a revelation of the infinite truth. When he has given us his Word, God has told us everything.

Thus in today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews we heard these eloquent words: «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» (Heb 1:1-2). Now there is no need for third-party 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. We Christians who accept Christ possess the truth in its entirety, even if we don't fully understand it. It is like when we receive words from a wise person that we don't understand: still we say, «That wise

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

person has spoken, and that is enough». The same occurs when children are told something by their parents, who are the supreme authority; they say, «My father said so», or «My mother said so». The parents are the highest authority, and they do not want to disappoint the love their parents show them. When Christ appears in Bethlehem, humanity can say, «Our Father has told us everything in Christ who is his eternal Word». After Christ had taught his disciples for three years and was bidding them farewell, he told them, «I have taught you much, but there are many other things that you cannot understand. I will send the Spirit of truth who will tell you all these things» (John 16:12-13). In this way the church moves through the world. She possesses Christ and so 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 regarding modern inventions, regarding human progress, regarding violations of human dignity, regarding the difficult historical circumstances of our times. There in the church we have the Word contained, and the Spirit of God reveals it to us. What must be done, what must be said in this particular circumstance?

That is why I thank you, sisters and brothers, when you say in solidarity with the church, «We are asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate our bishop so that he will say what must be said». When we feel that there is a consensus among the people, when there is joy and love and unity, then 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 Word, who is the life of God, and who has come to bring us his truth and his life, as the Council states, «The mystery of the Father and his love is revealed in Christ» (DV 4).

Yes, in Christ is revealed the mystery of love, how God has loved us, as the apostle writes: «God so loved the world that he gave his only Son» (John 3:16). What father hands over his son so that a prisoner or a slave might be saved? That is what the eternal Father has done; he gave us his Son, his Word, his life, and in Christ we can recover God's life. Sins are forgiven because Christ became the price for our debt, and now we can all die with the hope of heaven because Christ has offered to open for us the gates of heaven even though we are sinners. We need only repent and be converted and return to him who says, «I am the way and the truth and the life» (John 14:6).

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. We need the great virtue of faith. Mary needed faith to see in the child she nourished at her breasts not just any child but the incarnation of God. In her child Jesus, Mary adored truth, eternal life, God become human. That is why the Virgin Mary should be the model for all Christians who celebrate Christmas if they really want to go deeply into the great mystery of God the Father and of the Love and Life and Truth who became flesh. Becoming flesh is a strange antithesis, a union of opposites—God-flesh, infinite God and limited flesh. The infinite God is enclosed in a man who belongs to a people and a history, and as we are going to see later, God desires to continue this mystery in each one of us.

Christ revealing true humanity

But first I want to speak to you about my second point: just as Christ is the revelation of God, so too he is the revelation of humanity. When we were beginning Mass, I heard a seminarian reading section 22 of the document *Gaudium et Spes*, the document of the Second Vatican

Council on the church's dialogue with the modern world. In that part of the document it is stated that the mystery of humanity cannot be understood except through Christ (GS 22). Without Christ human life is absurd. 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 all these material goods that God has placed at my feet?

When people forget about Christ, all of these human abilities—intelligence, freedom, love, the ability to dominate and organize the earth—become a system of oppression, slavery, hatred, and vengeance. When sin stains that portrait of God which is humanity, there is nothing more horrible. But when in Christ we discover again the meaning of humanity, then we understand what Saint Paul has told us today in the letter to the Hebrews about the «exact imprint» (Heb 1:3). The exact imprint is an impression placed on a piece of paper by a seal. It leaves the same image that is on the seal. The image of the seal is Christ, and the seal is God.

We humans have been sealed with the image of God. When God said, «Let us make man in our image, after our likeness» (Gen 1:26), he meant that humankind is like God's seal on creation. This seal is discovered only in the exact imprint, the authentic seal, the original image of God, the Word who reflects the divine essence in human form. He is the perfect man, the man of human and Christian and heavenly virtues, the man whom we must all reflect in ourselves if we want to be worthy of our dignity as children of God. We can no longer find meaning in our vocation apart from Christ, who said, «I came not to do my own will but the will of my Father who sent me» (John 6:38). Now we can find no other reason for our joy and our existence except by repeating last night's song of the angels: «Glory to God!» (Luke 2:14). My life must be for the glory of God. I do not have to look for political, social, or economic advantages—all that is secondary. In this environment in which I live my life, in all these political, economic and social relationships, what I must seek is God's glory. In the midst of my poverty and misery, in the midst of my oppression and captivity, I must never forget that I am the exact imprint, the image of God.

Now you can understand, 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 feels that they are assaulting her children, images of God which she must return to their original beauty because God has entrusted to the church this exact imprint, this seal of the Lord. Let us understand, then, sisters and brothers, our own dignity! We read today from the superb document of the Council that God become Christ worked with human hands, thought with human thoughts, loved with a human heart (GS 22). Because of that I can tell you: my human heart is God's heart; my human mind can now be elevated to divine status because the God who brings me divine life by becoming human wants to teach me how to use my hands and feet.

The passage proclaimed in the first reading is marvelous: «How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings of freedom to those who are oppressed» (Isa 52:7). Christ is that mysterious messenger who places his feet on the earth and announces to the people and all humankind that Jerusalem will be rebuilt. Over the ruins of the people carried into exile, a song of hope for all the earth is already being heard. The voice of the messenger, with his blessed steps of peace, fills people with joy and hope and optimism.

This is the song of Christmas: the messenger comes with human feet to dwell on this earth and to teach us how to walk; he comes with the hands of a child that will become the hands of the Divine Teacher and will one day be nailed to the cross; he comes with a human heart that learned how to love through the virginal love of Mary; he comes with human experiences of an earthly home and honest work alongside his adoptive father, Saint Joseph. As the Bible clearly tells us, he was a man who learned among others and lived among others and sought to become like others in every aspect except sin (Heb 4:15). Everything we experience Jesus experienced: weariness, sadness, discouragement, loneliness, happiness, enthusiasm, friendship. Everything the human heart feels has been felt by God in Christ. That is why Christ is the revelation of humanity to human beings. Let us give thanks to our heavenly Father, sisters and brothers, and also to the Virgin Mary who collaborated in this great undertaking of putting flesh on God's infinite love and providing a human instrument.

The church revealing Christ

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 an institution founded by Christ himself which is called the church. The church is the revelation of Christ just as Christ is the revelation of God. The church reveals Christ to the people of every nation.

«As the Father has sent me, so I send you» (John 20:21). There is a direct connection in this ongoing historical sending forth of the church until the end of time. Thanks to the church, this imprint of God in Christ is presented to people of every age so that they can discover and live their true greatness, their true vocation. If it were not for the church, this bright flash of God's glory in the darkness of Bethlehem would have died there on that same night or at most a few years later. It would have been talked about as something in the past. But what is marvelous is that this Christmas liturgy of 1977 is making the mystery present right now. The birth of Christ in Bethlehem is today not only in Bethlehem but also in San Salvador, in all those towns that are tuned to our radio station, in all the communities, all the villages, all the homes of the sick people who are 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 tell you that in the midst of all your joy, or better still, I'll give you the reason for all this Christmas joy which many do not understand. Even unbelievers celebrate Christmas; even the church's enemies and those who have maligned and defamed the church this year appreciate the church for the sake of this Christmas joy. That is why I told you in my Christmas greeting⁴ that in my heart as pastor I have no resentment, not even for personal offenses. No one can take away from me the joy of being able to say «Merry Christmas!» even to my enemies because this is not my message but the message of the church that brings happiness and joy from Christ even for those who do not understand it.

But this morning I am doing my best to make it possible for people to understand all this. The church, as the prolongation of Christ's incarnation, has a human dimension and a divine dimension, just as the child Jesus had human members formed within the womb of a woman and also had a divine dimension not received from the Virgin. The eternal Father sent

⁴ «The Word of the Archbishop: My Pastoral Thoughts for Christmas» in *Orientación* (25 December 1977).

his Word to become incarnate and to be given human expression in the child Jesus by the Virgin. In the same way we have the church: she has a human dimension like Christ given to her by humans, and she has another divine dimension given to her by God. The church is therefore this marvelous conjoining together of the imperfect and the divine. The church is like Christ who became tired and suffered and experienced human weakness, but she is also like God who does not tire, being infinite and perfect. As a human institution the church has no reason to be ashamed of her human defects. When the bitter criticism of our enemies airs our dirty laundry, they fall short; what they say is little enough compared to the great sinfulness we have in the church. There is so much misery everywhere, and we in the church are as human as you who are enemies of the church and capable of so much hatred. The church is human and can also fall into the sin of not loving. In her human dimension she experiences what every person experiences. She experiences contempt, she experiences desire, she experiences temptation—she is human. Let us not forget: she prolongs the humanity and the flesh of Christ in history, but as a divine institution the church is flawless.

As God the child Jesus is able to confront all people and ask them, «Who among you is able to throw in my face a single sin?» As an incarnation of the divine, the church can also say to all people, «Even if you throw in my face my many human defects and sins, still I challenge anyone to castigate me for a single sin as a divine institution. Point out to me a single day when I taught hatred and violence and lies. Never!» This has never happened because the love of God which the church incarnates is sinless and divine; it is the incarnation of Christ. That is why the church will continue, sisters and brothers, to proclaim Christ's revelation in history, and that is why the pope has recently told Salvadorans⁵ in the person of our ambassador, Doctor Prudencio Llach, that the church should have full freedom to proclaim the message of the Gospel in El Salvador and to preach her social and moral doctrine without hindrance. The church has no reason to be feared, for her message is that of Christ who was born one night in Bethlehem.

But one thing, sisters and brothers: the church grows like Christ during a night of darkness as the Gospel of Saint John says, «He came into this world, but this world did not know him» (John 1:9-10). The darkness could not comprehend him. How sad it is to think that people do not want to accept this light, this life of God, this infinite love that the Father through Christ and the church continues to offer to humanity. This is not because God has made some people capable and others incapable of understanding this mystery. Rather, the secret is in the freedom of each person; the secret is the good will with which some people, like Mary and the shepherds, accept and receive the Jesus who is born in Bethlehem, while others, like Herod and the proud folk of Jerusalem, remain unaware that the source of eternal life is passing so close to them.

When the wise men came from the East and asked the king in Jerusalem where the child was to be born, the king and his advisers did not know what to say, but a star knew how to guide them to where the shepherds and the humble folk had found the one they were looking for (Matt 2:1-2). So also, the wise and the rich must become humble and simple like the magi who came from the East to offer the child Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh. Wealth also has a place beside the manger of the child Jesus, but only when placed there by the humble hands of the shepherds and the magi.

⁵ PAUL VI, «Address before the El Salvador Ambassador» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 December 1977).

Dear sisters and brothers, we have reflected and asked the Virgin Mary to help us understand the mystery of her child. She has summed all this up in these humble words of mine: «My child is nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of God to humankind. Second, he is the revelation of humanity to human beings themselves; he reveals their dignity, the divine greatness they bear as images of God. Know how to be worthy of this imprint that each person bears. Third, this child in my arms is the precious image of the church that will be prolonged for centuries, bringing God's life amid human deficiencies and the poverty of the manger in Bethlehem». «Blessed are those who are not scandalized», said Jesus Christ (Luke 7:23); rather, blessed are those who know how to capture the beauty of the light that extends over all the magnificent realities of earth. Let it be so.