

65

CHRIST SAVES ALL PEOPLE, AS A PEOPLE

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

Baptism of the Lord

15 January 1978

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

John 1:29-34

My brothers and sisters.

It is important that we understand ever more clearly what the church's intention is as she gathers us together each Sunday. The mystery of Christ is gradually unfolded to the eyes of our faith. At the beginning of the liturgical year this mystery was proclaimed in the four Sundays and weeks of Advent. We participated in the divine preparations as God made ready his great plan to send his Son to save the world. We have been present at the moment that the Scriptures call «the fullness of time» when Christ becomes incarnate in the womb of the young virgin of Nazareth and is born in Bethlehem. Even today that holy night brings joy to the world even though many fail to understand that the cause of that great joy for everyone is the great love of God who «so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that the world might be saved» (John 3:16).

Christmas is followed by Epiphany Sunday. The birth of this child in Bethlehem and his arrival into the world would have been useless unless he was revealed. That is what Epiphany means: revelation or manifestation. The first to receive this revelation were the magi from the East, whom we remembered last Sunday. This Sunday we celebrate a new Epiphany, namely, the Baptism of Jesus. At the Jordan River John the Baptist, inspired by God, points out Jesus as already present among us. The messianic era has begun: «Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world» (John 1:29). There is no longer any salvation apart from Christ. This Sunday, then, we come together to celebrate that prolongation of the Epiphany. The heart of each of you attending Mass ought to grow in hope and joy because Christ is God, the Redeemer of humankind.

As we unfold the mystery of Christ in the course of the liturgical year, we celebrate certain feasts which help us do this, such as the feast days of the Virgin and the saints and various aspects of our faith. Today, for example, I want to highlight a popular devotion by which the liturgical year is made accessible to the masses of people. Today we celebrate the feast of the Lord of Esquipulas. This crucified Christ is also a type of Epiphany, revealing that Christ loved so seriously that he ended up nailed to a cross to save humankind. This mystery of the Savior Christ that we call the Lord of Esquipulas has great power of attraction for all Central America; it is a true bond of Central American unity. It shows that the church possesses powers that human beings and politicians are unable to match. The church keeps Central America united in one faith. This Central American Christ of Esquipulas becomes also

Salvadoran. Here in our archdiocese there are at least three places that will celebrate today the patronal feast of the Holy Christ: the parish of San Bartolomé Perulapía will celebrate a solemn Eucharist at 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon; there in Aguilares, under the name of the Lord of Mercies, they will have their solemn celebration at 11:00 o'clock this morning; and in Colón also the people will celebrate today the Christ of Esquipulas.

Christ is so profoundly incarnated in our people that we celebrate him as something that is typically ours. That is what Christ wants to be: the Christ of the Epiphany, the God who became a child. At Christmastime we feel that this child belongs to every family; we all feel that he is ours. Thus this mystery of Christ that unfolds during the liturgical year is felt to be so intimately united to each of you and to me that that we personally experience what Paul felt: «He loved me and offered himself up for me» (Gal 2:20). That is why I attempt each Sunday to present this mystery of Christ in a way that is not vague and abstract. My preaching should not be the same here in El Salvador as it would be there in Africa or at some other time in history. Rather I want to preach Christ who becomes incarnate here in El Salvador in 1978, the Christ who accompanies us through the changes of our actual history, the Christ who sheds light on the events of this week. This is the Epiphany that we must celebrate because Christ has become an incarnate member of our history. He wants to accompany every person, every family, every people. He wants to make the history of every Christian and every people a true salvation history.

Events of the week

Therefore, sisters and brothers, when I speak to you about certain events, I am not discussing things that have nothing to do with the church. My preaching must be framed by these realities.

For example, in our homily today, the feast of the baptism of Christ revealing himself as Savior, how can we ignore the fact that here in San Salvador this week people have been shaken by two contrasting articles in our newspapers? On the one hand, there was a rejection of the preaching and message of Father Robert Drinan, whom you heard here last week¹. On the other hand, there was a presentation of the visit of the Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States (OAS)².

I see a contrast between these two news items. The declarations of Father Robert Drinan leave many people scandalized and give others great hope, whereas the presence of the OAS is announced in ambivalent fashion: it awakens doubts and fears since it is made to appear that the commission is being manipulated. Father Drinan provokes scandal because he touches a sore spot. Moral theology speaks of three kinds of scandal. True scandal is that provoked by a sin or a fault; this is normal scandal, the real scandal that true evil produces in mature, sensible people. Another kind of scandal is the childish scandal produced in the faint-hearted, those who are scandalized by everything. A third type of scandal, that which is truly sinful, is the scandal of the Pharisees, the scandal of those who could not tolerate Christ. This is the scandal directed against people who try to point out injustices and disorders. You can draw your own conclusion about the type of scandal that is involved in the publication of these articles.

¹ In *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 January 1978), two items were published under these titles: «Interior Ministry Rejects Accusation of Jesuit on Repression» and «Judgments of the Jesuit Drinan Considered Partial».

² The Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States (OAS), made up of Doctor Carlos A. Dunshee de Abranches, Doctor Fernando Volio, and Professor Tom J. Farer, visited El Salvador 11 to 18 January 1978 to investigate the observance of human rights in the country.

At the same time, people recognize the courage in the voice of priests who denounce things that the church has continually denounced and who point out the real fears that exist in our people. For example, there are people who should have presented themselves to the Human Rights Commission, but they did not have the courage to do so because they are afraid. What does that mean? It means that when Father Drinan speaks about the fear of the people and the *campesinos*, he is not lying. This is a reality that we see at this very moment. There are *campesinos* who ought to come forward but do not have the courage to do so.

Therefore I ask: how has this visit of the commission been presented? What reports have appeared in the newspapers portraying the victims of human rights violations?³ Who is reporting on other groups that have been assaulted? The reporting is biased. We could say that those who accused Father Drinan of speaking in a prejudiced way are doing the same thing with the OAS Commission: they are making it look partial. We hope that the human rights proponents in Latin America who are now present in El Salvador will speak with the same maturity and courage as Father Drinan did. We hope that they will rise above all intrigue and manipulation and know how to discover the truth by listening to those who should be heard. They have asked for collaboration, and I want to tell you in the name of the church that the voice of my office has always offered collaboration so that truth and justice are brought to light. Injustices have been denounced, and in light of these denunciations we ask the members of the OAS: do you know how to respond to the question that arises from so many of our homes: where are the disappeared? Just answering that would suffice. Just give this information to the many families who are suffering and do not know if their loved ones are alive or dead. Where are they? What is their situation?

This is the incarnation of Christ in our history and among our people. That is why it is painful, sisters and brothers, to present our poor country in this light, but when a picture comes out bad, the blame is not in the photography; it is in the object being portrayed.

We have also been saddened this week by the assassination of the journalist Doctor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, and we join with the people of Nicaragua in lamenting his death. During our weekly interview on Wednesday we expressed our solidarity in suffering with the victim and his family and with the truth that he proclaimed. We also expressed our repudiation of every type of criminal activity.

Many letters from Amnesty International have arrived at our office inquiring about the situation of many prisoners, but I was especially moved by the questions concerning the case of the young woman Lil Milagro Ramírez. We also received letters from the families of Victor Manuel Rivas and Julio Antonio Ayala. The sentiments of these letters fill me with great emotion: «For us the voice of the church is the voice of justice, the voice of those of us who are not heard». Thank you for understanding this, sisters and brothers, for the church does not want to be anything else. Rather than a voice lost amid the tumult of distortion, confusion, and manipulation of the news, the church wants to be the voice of those who have no voice.

Life of the church

³ *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 January 1978) published a photo of relatives of the security forces with the following text: «Victims of terrorism. Relatives of members of the National Guard who have died in action against terrorist elements operating in the country appear today before the Human Rights Commission of the OAS».

Moving on, sisters and brothers, in the name of Christ who desires «that all may be one» (John 17:21), I announce with joy the week of prayer for Christian unity. Protestants and Catholics have together prepared a program that appears in *Orientación* and will be read here in a short time. We will celebrate the traditional week of prayer from January 18 to 25. I make an appeal to all you Catholics and also to you, dear Protestant sisters and brothers. I know that you listen to me, and I'm so grateful when you tell me that you listen with great devotion—thank you! If we truly love Christ and the Gospel, then, I invite you to pray devoutly that this scandal of division among Christians be eliminated from the world. This division among Christians prevents Christ from being known, whereas unity among Christians would give great credibility to Christ's church. Let us not be a hindrance, dear Protestants and Catholics. Let us unite in one faith as Christ desired: one single flock beneath the divine staff of the one Pastor (John 10:16).

I have not had the opportunity to thank and congratulate all those who made possible the World Day of Peace. The event left behind very profound and noble echoes, and these alone bespeak gratitude and recognition. But recalling these unforgettable celebrations, I do want to remind you to read and reflect on the New Year pastoral message that some of us bishops have published⁴. Also, the members of the National Commission for Peace and Justice have published their commentary on Pope Paul VI's message: «Yes to Peace! No to Violence!»⁵.

I have not had the opportunity, sisters and brothers, to read you a telegram message that arrived recently from the archbishop of Tegucigalpa, whom we were hoping to have here. We invited him, but he wrote, «I am sad that I cannot accept your kind invitation, but I wish you much success during this seminar on peace». As a sign of our fraternity, the priests from our seminary traveled to Tegucigalpa to participate in a course for seminary personnel. When they presented a birthday cake to Archbishop Santos of Tegucigalpa, he told them, «Please take half the cake to the archbishop of San Salvador as a sign of unity». His words reflect what I said previously about the Lord of Esquipulas: the church in Central America is united. It is politics that spoils this unity. Hopefully one day we will live out this faith that Christ proclaimed to us: «... that all may be one» (John 17:21).

The time has arrived for our schools to open their doors once again. I want to remind the Catholic schools that they should meditate profoundly on the recent document that was published by the Sacred Congregation for Education⁶. You know that the church watches over the pastoral work of Catholic schools through a congregation, a body that might be compared to a government ministry. The pope exercises his teaching role through the Catholic schools. I would like to remind you of some phrases that appear in the document: the Catholic school is a means of serving the «church's saving mission»; it is a means for «promoting the formation of the whole person, since the school is a center in which a specific concept of the world, of the human person, and of history is developed and conveyed»⁷.

«One must recognize that the work of a Catholic school is infinitely more complex and more difficult than ever before since this is a time when Christianity demands to be clothed in

⁴ Message signed by Archbishop Oscar A. Romero, Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas, and Bishop Marco René Revelo. See *Orientación* (8 January 1978).

⁵ See *Orientación* (8 January 1978).

⁶ SACRED CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Catholic School* (19 March 1977). Full text published in *L'Osservatore Romano* (31 July 1977).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

fresh garments, when all manner of changes have been introduced in the church and in secular life, and particularly, when a pluralist mentality dominates and the Christian Gospel is increasingly pushed to the side lines»⁸. These words of the pope demand that Catholic schools put aside any traditions that separate them from the church's teaching. They must not accommodate themselves so as to please certain sectors; rather, they must be messengers of the church's truth for our changing times.

The true mission of the schools, says the document, is «to cooperate more closely with the apostolate of the bishops, both in the field of religious instruction and in the more general Christian education which they endeavor to promote by assisting people to a personal integration of culture and faith and of faith with living»⁹. This is the objective of a Catholic school. Let us avoid those shameful situations where students graduate from our schools having learned about the faith but then fail to translate this faith into action and so create unjust, sinful situations and other disorders of a corrupt society. If a Catholic school wants to be a missionary of the church, it must remember that every mission must be connected to and in communion with the church's teaching. That is why the document says that «the Catholic school receives from the bishops in some manner the “mandate” of an apostolic undertaking»¹⁰ and must be in communion with the hierarchy¹¹. It is impossible to conceive of a Catholic school that wishes to follow a line different from the church's teaching. Let us keep this in mind so that we know whether to consider a school as truly Catholic or not.

Finally, sisters and brothers, I want to speak with delight about the exuberant religious life in our own church. During these days we have established the Bethlehemite Sisters in a mission in El Paraíso and the Sisters of the Assumption in Chalatenango, where they will attend to Potonico. Very soon the Guadalupana Sisters will go to Arcatao. A course of adaptation is being prepared to train people for this new mission that the church is entrusting to the sisters. We also had the pleasure of greeting several superiors general who visited El Salvador during these days: the superior general of the Dominican Sisters of the Annunciation who work in Santa Tecla, Suchitoto, and Quezaltepeque; the superior general of the Oblates of the Sacred Heart who work in the Colegio Sagrado Corazón, in Aguilares, in Lourdes, and in Dulce Nombre de María; and the superior general of the Oblates of Divine Love, who work in the Colegio La Sagrada Familia and the María Dimagio Catholic School and do pastoral ministry in Citalá.

As you can see, sisters and brothers, the Gospel message is becoming incarnate in so many ways that we rejoice to think of how truly alive our church is, prolonging the mystery of Christ in El Salvador. Preaching this homily, therefore, is very easy. Today's readings present us with three priceless thoughts that we should absorb so that as Christians we will come to a greater understanding of the mystery of Christ as we move through this liturgical year. The first thought is that God wants to save everyone. The second is what Saint Paul writes in his letter: God wants to save us by forming a people on this earth. And the third thought is that God saves people by taking away the sins of the world. The gospel presents Christ being baptized and presented as the «Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world».

God wants to save everyone

⁸ Ibid., 10-12.

⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 72.

Our first thought is based on the words of the prophet Isaiah, who speaks in very poetic passages about the Servant of Yahweh. Who is this Servant of God? This remains a mystery: it might be some mysterious person, or it could refer to the people of Israel, but in any case it is a prophecy that points to Jesus Christ, the true Servant of God. This Servant of God is given a mission: to bring together the scant forces of the people who now live scattered in exile. God tells him, «Is it a small task for you to be my servant, to reestablish the tribes of Jacob, and restore the remnant of Israel? I will make you a light to the nations so you can bring my deliverance to the far ends of the earth» (Isa 49:6).

How this fills us with joy, sisters and brothers! Living here in El Salvador in 1978, we are confronted by this universal vision of God in Christ. «I make you the salvation of all the ends of the earth». Here on this feast of the Lord of Esquipulas, the crucified Christ is present in Central America and in our diocese. He is the Servant of God, the Christ who we believe has gathered us together in this Mass. He is present in all the communities that gather to meditate on these words. As the Council tells us, Christ becomes present in the words of the priest who preaches, in the mystery celebrated on the altar, in the Communion we receive, in the sacraments that purify us (SC 7). Christ is the Servant of God saving all the ends of the earth.

We ought to be filled with enthusiasm to know that no one, not one of us, is excluded from salvation. God calls everyone, and therefore the church cries out for justice and rejects the scandal of the Pharisees; she repudiates violence, lies, crimes, and persecution. But she never cries out for vengeance; she always speaks with love and calls sinners to repentance, for God desires to save them. God invites those who have killed and slandered and persecuted to return to him. They are the prodigal sons whom the father is waiting to save (Luke 15:20).

I am very happy, sisters and brothers, that my enemies listen to me. You who are faithful and listen to me with love and devotion, please pardon me for saying this, but my enemies are listening to me because I speak to them words of love. I do not hate them, nor do I seek revenge. I wish them no harm. I ask them to be converted and to be blessed with the blessedness you have, for you possess the joy of your faith, like the son in the parable who was always with his father (Luke 15:31). Yesterday a friend of mine affectionately told me, «I hope you know that all the good folks are with you». My sisters and brothers, I don't know how to distinguish between good and bad people. You are all children of God, and the Lord loves you all. Today's readings present us with a universal call to salvation.

God wants to save us by forming a people on this earth

My second thought is that God wants to save us as a people. He does not want to save each of us in isolation. That is why the church today more than ever before emphasizes what it means to be a «people». And that is why the church experiences conflicts: the church does not want just crowds; she wants a people. A crowd is a bunch of individuals, and the more lethargic they are, the better; the more conformist they are, the better. The church rejects the communist propaganda that religion is the opium of the people. She has no intention of being the opium of the people. It is others who drug the people and put them to sleep, and they are happy to keep them that way.

The church wants to rouse men and women to the true meaning of being a people. What does it mean to be a people? A people is a community of persons in which everyone works together for the common good. And what is the common good? The Council states, «The

common good is the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own development» (GS 26).

A society's or a political community's reason for existence is the human person, not the security of the state. When Christ said, «The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath» (Mark 2:27), he was stating the principle that all laws and all institutions exist for the sake of human beings. The human person is not for the state; rather, the state is for the human person. The development of humanity depends upon our concept of the human person.

I want to read you this incomparable passage from Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*. In his recent discourse to our ambassador the pope applied to Salvadorans these words that you can read in *Populorum Progressio*, number 20: «This is what will guarantee man's authentic development: his transition from less human conditions to truly human ones» (PP 20). Do you see? It is not some mass of people; it is the transition of each and every person to more human conditions.

The pope describes these conditions in his encyclical, and we should keep them in mind because they define what it means to be a people. When they are not realized for every Salvadoran, then the people suffer «less human conditions, such as the lack of material goods that are necessary for at least a minimum standard of living». Less human conditions also exist when people «experience a moral poverty that results from selfishness, and even less human are those oppressive structures that arise from the abuse of wealth or the abuse of power, from the exploitation of workers and the injustice of transactions» (PP 21). These are all less human conditions. Don't you think that they refer to certain realities here in El Salvador?

The passage to more human conditions is also described by the pope: «The rise from poverty to the acquisition of life's necessities; the elimination of social ills; broadening the horizons of knowledge; acquiring refinement and culture. From there one can go on to acquire a growing awareness of other people's dignity, a taste for the spirit of poverty» (PP 21). It is admirable that the church places this spirit of poverty here among the more human conditions. Being poor and having a spirit of poverty is not underdevelopment; it is human development. The more people live this spirit of poverty, the more human they become. The more they are victims of avarice, the less morally developed they are.

The pope continues, «More human conditions include an active interest in the common good and a desire for peace». And still more human are those «persons who can acknowledge the highest values and God himself, their author and end. Finally and above all, there is faith—God's gift to people of good will—and our growing unity in Christ, who calls God the Father of all people» (PP 21). What a beautiful description of what it means to be a people! The day that we Salvadorans escape from this accumulation of less human conditions and move toward personal and national conditions that are more human—by which we mean not only economic development but the spirit of faith and adoration of the one and only God—then that will be the true development of our people.

The reading from Saint Paul speaks to us about the «church of God in Corinth» (1 Cor 1:2). We can speak instead about the church of God in El Salvador or the church of God in each nation where priests and bishops work together for human development. This is not subversion or communism or a desire to gain power. We respect temporal power, but we want to create in people's consciousness a feeling of being a people, not just a crowd. We seek the

development of individuals and a type of well-being that violates no one's rights but cultivates love and faith among all who are children of the Father of all.

Because the church preaches this development of the human person, she has been maligned. Where the church refrains from this kind of preaching, she has no problems. That is why I say to all of you who are pastoral ministers—priests, religious, Catholic schools, pastoral movements: we have to follow the line that Saint Paul sets down for us. We have to form the church of God as the community Christ wants: a community inspired by his love to become the ferment of a pluralist society. The church does not want everyone to become Catholic, but she wants Catholics to be true missionaries of this message of development and to promote unity, development, light, and also criticism. The church wants people to have a critical consciousness and to be aware of the different ways of thinking in a pluralist society for this is the diversity that God desires. We should not judge everyone with the same criteria; rather, the beauty of pluralism in our own Salvadoran reality should enhance us as humans and strengthen the unity of our nation.

God saves people by taking away the sins of the world

Finally, sisters and brothers, my third thought: Jesus is presented in the River Jordan as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. «He existed before I did», says John the Baptist. «I am announcing him because the salvation of humankind consists in receiving the baptism of the Spirit that he brings» (John 1:30,33). Jesus wants to instill the life of God into people's hearts so that they will be renewed interiorly, and in this way he takes away the sins of people, of families, of society. This is the mission entrusted to the church, a difficult mission: to uproot sins from history, to uproot sins from politics, to uproot sins from the economy, to uproot sins from wherever they are. What a difficult task!

The church has to confront conflicts caused by great selfishness, great pride, and great vanity because so many people have enthroned the kingdom of sin among us. The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for denouncing sin, and for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores reacts strongly when someone has the courage to touch the sore and say, «You have to treat that. You have to eliminate that. Believe in Christ and be converted!» Christ alone can take away the sins of our Salvadoran society and create a genuine community of people, and of such a community God will be truly proud because God has created the diverse peoples as one family.

How wonderful it is to think of God as the Father of all peoples who live according to God's ways and who love one another in this pluralism of nations! What a great diversity of characteristics! Just think of the countries of Central America as five children of God, each one with its own distinctiveness. How marvelous it would be if these five nations, freed from the sins of their history, their politics, and their conflicts, were to present themselves on this feast of the Lord of Esquipulas as brothers and sisters of Christ. As peoples devoted to God, they would move from inhuman conditions to conditions worthy of God's children and would become images of his presence in this small territory known as Central America!

Dear sisters and brothers, do you see now how the incarnation of Christ, born in Bethlehem and revealed in the Epiphany, has to be the bright light that illuminates our reality in El Salvador? As Salvadorans and as church, we are going to hope for these things as we say our Creed.