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THE LORD IS COMING: LET US PREPARE THE WAY FOR HIM!

**Second Sunday of Advent
10 December 1978**

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

You have just heard the words of Doctor Lara Velado¹, and your applause shows that you are truly a free and noble people. It is solid proof of the faith we have that this word of God can throw light on the task of affirming human dignity, a task the church takes on as a sacred commitment. And we do this apart from any political, social, or economic interests; we do it from the unique perspective of the God who created humankind. I thank Doctor Lara Velado, whose words this morning are not just a grain of sand; they have given powerful support to this word of ours which seeks to be ever faithful in interpreting God's message.

We will try to take that same message from the sacred Bible and from the language of the liturgy with which the church voices her prayers. That language fills us with hope and with joy on these Sundays when we prepare for Christmas. Last Sunday we talked about «Advent, a Time of Joyful Hope», and today the sacred liturgy begins precisely with a cry of joy and hope: «Let us go forth to meet the Lord, for he is coming soon!» In our prayer we ask God to remove from us every obstacle that can keep us from our encounter with him.

As is my custom, the title for my homily today draws on the three readings you have just heard: «The Lord is Coming: Let Us Prepare the Way for Him!» And I will treat this theme under three headings: first, the Lord is coming; second, God comes to humankind in diverse ways; and third, Christ is the way and the encounter of God with humankind.

The Lord is coming

First of all, God is coming to save us. That's the meaning of this liturgical word, «Advent», which gives character and unity to this intense season of preparation for Christmas. That suggestive name, «Advent», comes from the Latin *adventus*, which conveys the idea of preparing for an encounter with someone who is «coming». Which of us has never had in his or her life a psychological «advent»? Who has never made preparations to receive a friend, a son or daughter, a spouse, or a parent who is coming from far away? The house is readied, a big welcome is prepared, and the more loved the expected person is, the more cordial are the festivities. That is precisely what the church seeks to inspire in us during this season: a spirit of loving preparation.

¹ Before the homily Doctor Roberto Lara Velado, speaking for the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, addressed a message to the people to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The people received the address with warm applause.

God is coming to save us. As Doctor Lara Velado has just reminded us, when the Second Vatican Council spoke of human dignity, it sought the theological meaning of that concept: «The root reason for human dignity lies in our call to communion with God. ... We cannot live fully according to truth unless we freely acknowledge that love and devote ourselves to our Creator» (GS 19). Only those persons who trust God and are fully committed to him can have the fullness of truth and happiness. «You made us for yourself», says that great humanist, Saint Augustine—«you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you»². There is a strong mutual attraction between human beings and this God who created us for himself. We have received intelligence, freedom, and many other gifts, not for us to waste them or abuse them but to bring them to fulfillment by having them reach their natural goal, the principle and end of their being.

And so the three readings which will guide our spirituality as Christians this Sunday and this week speak to us precisely of the human destiny that corresponds to God's desire. When the human heart gives expression to its most noble interior sentiments, it speaks of its longing to be like God, as you just heard from a layman, a man of the world. The human heart lays claim to the dignity of being an image of God, and it is not satisfied until it encounters that God, who in turn longs to encounter the human heart.

The first reading corresponds to the last days of the exile in Babylon. These chapters were written by the man called Second Isaiah, the name given to an anonymous prophet inspired by the hopes of the original Isaiah. This prophet announces that God's punishment of Israel was coming to an end: «Soon the exile will be over! Soon we will return to our native land!» Then he relates a command of God: «Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated. A voice cries out, "In the desert prepare the way of the Lord"» (Isa 40:1-2a,3). The prophet then describes an epiphany or manifestation of God in the form of a procession: With God going before them to light the way, the people will return from exile through the desert wastelands and will rejoice when they find themselves once again in their homeland.

The Bedouins of the desert, who are known as the poets of the Orient, notice that sometimes the wind makes a strange, moaning sound like a human groan. When this happens, they ask, «Do you hear, dear friend, how the wind is moaning?» And the answer comes: «It is the desert that is grieving; it is weeping because it would like to be a meadow». Sisters and brothers, if you only knew what a desert is like—what a frightful thing! It is just sand, dust, sun, aridity. The Eastern mind feels a truly strong desire to transform those desert sands into gardens, meadows, and forests. That is what Isaiah felt, and that is what he tried to express in describing that transformation of the arid desert into a garden that would manifest God's glory. He used this image to express the joy and the hope of a people returning from servitude, punishment, and oppression and finding themselves at long last in the land of freedom. They rejoice because they feel that once again they are a precious and independent people.

A spirit of redemption runs through the whole of the first reading. The prophet states frankly that the people's suffering has come upon them because of their sins, their idolatry, their social injustices, the abuses of the kings who held power. That is why God has punished them, but Isaiah declares that God is now satisfied (Isa 40:2). It is not that God takes pleasure

² SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, I,1: PL 32, 661.

in making people suffer, not even sinners. What God wants to help people understand is that they can never find in earthly things the fullness of joy that he wants for them. God is so eager to fill the human heart that he makes us feel empty when we draw apart from him.

The second reading, from the second letter of Saint Peter, also talks about our encounter with God. To put what Saint Peter is telling us in modern terms, we might say, «Don't confuse theological closeness with chronological closeness». Let me explain that. In the days of the apostles people were very concerned about when Christ would come to judge the world, as he had promised to do. If Christ was coming soon, then they would see him. However, when many people of that generation died, people felt troubled because their enemies made fun of them: «Poor deluded fools, hoping for something that will never come!» So Saint Peter is writing to confirm the people's hope: «Be patient! One day for the Lord is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day!» (2 Pet 3:8).

For God the categories of time and chronology are meaningless. God's main concern is something much deeper: «Be patient because God is patient and is waiting for his sons and daughters to be converted» (2 Pet 3:9). What God desires is to encounter people where they are. It may happen late in life, perhaps even in old age when the only fruits to be gathered are the spoiled ones of a wasted youth—nevertheless, God is patiently waiting. The encounter may happen when one is young—even now we see young people who have found their joy in God. But after all is said and done, time for God is very different; it is like that comparison of a thousand years to one day. For God there is something more profound: his saving work, his encounter with human beings, whether children, young people, or the elderly. It may happen now; it may happen in the future, but what God hopes for above all is that the whole of this human family he has created in the world will share with him the joy and the happiness of divine life. «You have made us for yourself»³.

So the second reading speaks to us about the destiny of humankind; it tells us that we as a people are moving toward a new heaven and a new earth, so that we won't remain on our knees idolizing the goods of this earth which will only be consumed in the end. This second letter of Saint Peter uses apocalyptic language to describe how all the elements will be destroyed (2 Pet 3:12). No doubt he was borrowing from contemporary, non-Christian apocalyptic writings, which foresaw a cataclysmic end to material things and told how the heavens and the elements would be consumed in fire. We don't need to understand this literally, but we should grasp the great reality that is conveyed by this fanciful oriental language about apocalyptic conflagrations: what exists in time has only relative value, and in the course of time it will all come to an end. The only true paradise is the «new heaven and the new earth» that God has promised us (2 Pet 3:13); only there in the new creation will God's encounter with humankind be stabilized forever. And that is where we are headed: from this earth where we are now, we are moving toward an encounter with God. It is an encounter we must make our own in our hearts, in our lives, in our homes, for that is where our God is encountered.

Dear sisters and brothers, I wish there were someone who could give my words the prophetic eloquence they need to shake up the inertia of all those people who are on their knees worshipping earthly goods! They want things like gold, money, property, power, and politics to be their supreme gods! All those things are coming to an end! All that will remain in the end is the satisfaction of having used them to serve the will of God. The only thing that will

³ Ibid.

remain is the satisfaction of being a person who was faithful to God, whether in politics or finances or whatever—someone who knew how to manage the transitory, relative things of the earth according to God's will. Never make them absolutes! There is only one absolute: the One who is waiting for us in the heavens that will not pass away and on the earth that will not pass away. «There is only one God, and there are no other gods apart from me» (Exod 20:3). So spoke God with divine zeal so that the people would not adore anything on earth but would know that, whether on earth or in eternity, human beings are made for God and that only in God will they find their satisfaction.

That is the heart of the Advent message: the Lord who is coming and the people who go forth to meet him. The church is preparing her community to celebrate Christmas, but not to celebrate it as a profane feast dedicated to commerce, business, vice, and gluttony. How sad it is that Christmas has become so secular and commercialized! How sad that we have not understood that Christmas reveals God's longing to encounter humankind! How sad it is that we fail to see that we will never be happy until we truly encounter God!

The paths by which God comes to us

And so I would like to respond to a second question or a second thought: what are the paths by which God comes into history? On what path am I personally traveling to find that God who comes to save? On what path is El Salvador going to find salvation in that God? Are we at a crossroads or on a dead-end street? Will we Christians be ridiculed, as were the ones to whom Saint Peter was writing? No, sisters and brothers, this is not just an illusion! God is coming, and his paths come very close to us. God saves in history—in the history of every individual—for our history is God's own history. That is where God wants to meet us. We should be happy that we don't have to go look for God in the desert. We don't have to go look for him in some special place in the world. God is in your very heart. «The kingdom of God is in your hearts», said Christ (Luke 17:21). That is where God walks, on the paths of history; they are the concrete paths of our national life, our family life, our personal life.

The prophet Isaiah's description of the paths of Israel is magnificent. The people ask, «Where will God come forth to meet us? We are poor, exiled and humiliated; we are oppressed by an invading power that has taken away our freedom and made us prisoners». Who would have dared to tell that exiled people that by those very same roads on which the invaders came to humiliate the Holy Land, the people were going to return triumphant and singing hymns of joy, as the psalmist sang, «What joy I felt when they told me: we are going to the house of the Lord!» (Ps 122:1)? Jerusalem was the life of the Jewish people; without Jerusalem they felt as good as dead. Recall that beautiful psalm about the rivers of Babylon: «Our oppressors asked us to sing a hymn to our God, but how are we going to sing a hymn in a foreign land? May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth and my hand be crippled if I ever forget you, Jerusalem!» (Ps 137:3-6). What patriotic spirit! I think the Jews' patriotic spirit revived while they were in exile. It was in exile that their hope came back to life, their hope that the homeland was not forever lost. God makes use of these humiliating circumstances to give us greater joy when we finally return to him converted.

The history of Isaiah's time tells us that in those days the people prepared special highways when they wanted to carry the image of a god or an emperor or a king to visit a city. Even today special roads are built for the visits of important persons. That is the image that

Isaiah has before him when he proclaims, «Prepare a highway for the passage of God! Let the valleys be filled so that the crooked ways are made straight. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed!» (Isa 40:4-5). This passage of Isaiah helps each one of us to apply the image of the road to our own lives. The road on which God encounters human beings is the road of their lives, and that's why it's called the «road of life»! What is most important is the way I lead my life. If my life is led badly, then it will not take me toward the encounter with God. If my life is led according to the law and the will of God, then I will be encountering God all the time. The same applies to God's encounter with a people. The way El Salvador lives its history will determine the way God encounters this homeland of ours. If our people's history is badly conducted, if it has become materialist and full of injustices, then those are not the Lord's ways. «Make straight his paths!» That is the cry of Advent; that is the cry of the prophets that finds its full resonance in John the Baptist, the final flowering of prophecy: «The Lord is coming. Prepare the way for him!» (Mark 1:2).

Today's gospel is a precious one. This year the basic Scripture readings are from Saint Mark, so I implore you to learn from this secretary of Saint Peter what beautiful expressions are found in this gospel. Mark tells us, as Paul does, that the Gospel doesn't just tell us about Christ's life. The Gospel has force, for it is the divine presence of Christ who has come to the world. That is why you just heard the first verse of Saint Mark solemnly proclaim, «The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God» (Mark 1:1). It is another way of saying: the secret of life is knowing Christ. The stories, the miracles, and Jesus' words are not what's most important; what is important is discovering his identity. He is God who has come into the history of Israel in this unassuming child of the Virgin of Nazareth, and because of that he will be found as well in the life of every person who becomes Christian. Christ will come to the encounter of every people and every person to the extent that they are open to receiving him. Saint Peter tells us the same in today's second reading, «May the Lord be very patient with you because he does not want anyone to perish. He wants everyone to be converted» (2 Pet 3:9). These are the ways of God! Today the Gospel of Saint Mark sums up the preaching of John the Baptist, of Christ, and of the church in a single phrase: «Prepare the way for the Lord!» (Mark 1:3).

John the Baptist is himself a path; he is a man who has been made a road. That is what every Christian should be: someone who becomes a path, who becomes light, who becomes witness. We must be like John the Baptist with all his virtues and his integrity. John preached to the people not only by pointing out the Lamb of God but also by living a sincere and simple life in austere poverty. And he had enough courage to confront the king even though the king had him beheaded. «It is not lawful!» he declared to the king even though that judgment cost him his life (Matt 14:4). John the Baptist is the model of the way. Only people like him can become beacons that will show us the way. But no matter how great they are and how many people follow them, such people can only proclaim, «After me comes one who is mightier than I, and I am not worthy to stoop and loosen his sandals. I am doing nothing more than pointing out the one who saves the world. I am not the savior» (Mark 1:7).

We as Christians must be just as transparent as John the Baptist in order to demonstrate that a power exists that is saving the world: it is God who became human in Jesus Christ! John Paul II, during his solemn inauguration as pope in the middle of Saint Peter's Square, cried out with the voice of the Baptist, «Open all doors to Christ! Have no fear! I announce this to people in every sphere of activity: in politics, in business, in worldly affairs. Do not be afraid. Only

Christ has the answer. Yes, only he has the words of eternal life»⁴. This is the mission of the church, and all of us *are* church. Consequently, if we truly want to honor this people of God to whom we belong by baptism, we have to make ourselves as transparent as possible to the presence of Christ, the Savior of humankind in the world. We should not believe in other ways of salvation but should preach the one and only Savior. We should not confuse the complete liberation that comes from Christ with the partial liberations offered on earth. Christ's are the true ways.

Life of the church

My third thought today is that Christ himself is the main highway to the encounter with God. But before concluding with this thought, I want to pause here and reflect, because if our personal lives and the history of our people are the concrete paths by which God is coming to save Salvadorans in this year 1978, then we need to have a thorough knowledge of these paths. I am therefore concerned that my preaching of the Gospel not be something disincarnate. I want this Sunday sermon to shed light on the lived realities of our week. I do this here, but I do it only very incompletely because our history is extremely complex and each one of us as individuals has his or her own history. Here I can do no more than give an example of how we must try to meditate on the word of God so that it illuminates the reality of our history and our lives. Everyone of us and every family must try to illuminate the history of our homes and our consciences with the help of the Gospel, which is the only radiance that saves us.

With great reverence and gratitude I make use this week of the pope's own words and teaching. Please take note that the pope also is quite concerned about the concrete realities that he experienced this week. In his talk on Sunday, he asked the United Nations to help the refugees of Vietnam, and he expressed regret about how few countries are willing take in these poor exiles⁵. He also asked for the liberation of a woman that Italian kidnappers have had in their power for fifty-five days⁶. He spoke about Nicaragua and specifically appealed for the freedom of individuals and of the people as a whole; he commended the religious faith and hope of the Nicaraguans and urged them to remain faithful to their Christian inspiration and not to despair⁷. He sent Cardinal Bertoli to mediate in the crisis of Lebanon⁸. It's important to observe how the pope is dealing with the realities of earth! Like Moses in the desert, he is a pastor who is always shedding light on the situation of a people who are thirsty, who are hungry, who are grumbling, and who can easily get lost!

I also want to commend the group of priests from this diocese who spent the past week in spiritual exercises. Please understand that we priests also have to work hard to affirm our identity. We realize that the more ruthless this world is in which we exercise our priesthood, the more prone it will be to defame and malign us. We therefore have to be even more faithful to our priestly identity.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily at the Official Inauguration of his Pontificate», 22 October 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 October 1978).

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, «Sunday Allocution », 3 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (10 December 1978).

⁶ In the general audience of 15 November 1978, John Paul II interceded for the liberation of Marcella Boroli Ballestrini, kidnapped in Milan. *L'Osservatore Romano* (19 November 1978).

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the Ambassador of Nicaragua in the Vatican», 7 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (17 December 1978).

⁸ «Cardinal Bertoli Sent by the Pope to Lebanon» in *L'Osservatore Romano* (10 December 1978).

In regard to the priesthood, I regret that I have to refer to something that I would like to have remained private, but since it has already been aired in public with a certain maliciousness, I have to make a public clarification as well. Several times in *La Prensa Gráfica* there has been idle speculation about why Bishop Revelo was relieved of his job as vicar general⁹. There was a private memo that should have been delivered to him privately. How did that memo become public? It was not publicized by the diocesan office. Some interpret this situation negatively, saying that the auxiliary bishop and I are politically at odds; according to one report, he doesn't want to follow my «hard line». That is false. You all know that I respect the opinion of anyone who is in communion with the church. So then, what has really happened? Nothing more than compliance with the church's canon law¹⁰. Canon 366 states, «The vicar general is designated freely by the bishop, who can remove him at his discretion». And canon 369 dictates, «The auxiliary bishop should report to the bishop about the principal activities of the curia and should inform him about those things that ought to be done for the protection of clerical and lay discipline». The canon also orders the vicar general to «take care lest his powers be used against the mind and will of the bishop». Those who know what happened when the statutes of Caritas¹¹ were changed will find an adequate explanation. This removal from office was ultimately motivated by an abuse of power such as would not be tolerated in any minister or in any vice-president of the republic. Nevertheless, we remain in communion with Bishop Revelo, and he will continue working as auxiliary bishop, for that depends directly on the Holy See.

Regarding the problem of Caritas, I inform you that a legal denunciation has been presented to the Ministry of the Interior since all the lawyers agree on the illegality of the attack on the archbishop's authority. The archbishop is the only person who can authorize a change of statutes, and they were changed behind his back.

With pastoral joy we also make mention of the various communities we have visited. I especially want to mention today the parish of San Sebastián in Ciudad Delgado, where they held a very fervent novena to pray for the eternal rest of Father Rafael Ernesto Barrera.

With regard to this case, I want to make a clarification about what has been published these last few days. Even though the papers had no room for the communiqués of the archbishop's office, they nevertheless echoed some statements of the FPL that contained a wealth of scandalous details¹². Concerning this, we hope that some proof will be given that these are authentic messages of the FPL. But even if they are authentic, I want to make something clear. Regarding their claims about the supposed political militancy of Father Neto as a member of the FPL, I reaffirm what I said last Sunday: I have not received any direct information to that effect, and my knowledge of the case comes only from what has been published in the papers.

I am not at all convinced of the veracity or the authenticity of that information, but given the fact that it has been made public, I want to use this occasion to ratify the position of the

⁹ *La Prensa Gráfica* (29 & 30 November and 6 December 1978).

¹⁰ Archbishop Romero quotes the *Code of Canon Law* of 1917, which was valid until the promulgation of the new Code in 1983.

¹¹ «The Case of Caritas» in *Orientación* (19 November 1978).

¹² «FPL Says that Father Barrera Belonged to their Movement» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 December 1978) and «Father Barrera Motto Was a Guerrilla, Says the FPL» in *El Diario de Hoy* (9 December 1978).

church in this archdiocese, a position which I believe is clearly defined in my pastoral letter on «The Church and the People's Political Organizations». This position can be summed up with these words: «In every pastoral labor, all individuals [including priests], parties, and organizations should always have as their first objective to be animators and guides in the faith and in the justice that faith demands, according to the great Christian principles we have already considered»¹³. «The priest's main task is to keep alive the evangelical norms of thought and action; to remind the faithful, as Jesus did, of the Father's love for one and all; and to urge them to follow Jesus in implanting the kingdom of God among all peoples. ... If in an exceptional case a priest were asked to work more closely in the concrete mechanisms of the political process, such a case would indeed be exceptional because the priest would be acting in a supplementary role that does not correspond with the normal vocation and ministry of a priest. In such a case the bishop would be obliged, after a sincere dialogue with the priest in the light of faith, to make a Christian discernment about the apostolic value of the work in question»¹⁴.

Every time I dialogued with Father Ernesto Barrera, we spoke about the important challenges he had in his pastoral ministry with workers, how he should encourage them and guide them in the faith and in the justice that our faith demands. He never communicated to me that he was offering further collaboration in concrete political activity or that he had joined the FPL for that purpose. Nevertheless, if it proves true that he belonged to that organization, he joined without the archbishop's knowledge or approval. So let this be a warning for all pastoral agents, because the archdiocesan policy is clearly defined and will not change.

I would like to say something more about the ineffectiveness that sometimes characterizes the claims of certain groups. For example, I spoke before about the inappropriate shouting during the funeral of Neto Barrera, when members of the Bloc were calling for «vengeance». That is a word that is foreign to the church's language. All the same, if the FPL insists on claiming that Neto Barrera was one of their number, I want to recall and reaffirm the commentary of radio station YSAX:

The church's pastoral orientation is clear. The priests who have become active members of groups such as FPL, ERP, FARN, or any similar group are doing a disservice to the church, to the archbishop, and to the cause of the poor. And the FPL does a disservice to the church when it boasts that a priest belongs to their ranks. In so doing they make it clear that they are not looking out for the church's interests; they care nothing about how carefully the church has preached God's kingdom in El Salvador; they could care less about the harm they may be causing the church. The fact is, though, that their present actions are helping rather than harming the church because, as any astute observer of the situation will realize, if someone wants to harm the archbishop at this moment, the best way to do so is to claim that Father Barrera belonged to the FPL. A suspicion therefore arises about whether the communiqué is authentic, whether it was put out by the FPL or by agents of the extreme right who want to do damage to the archbishop. In any case, the damage turns into benefit. After this it should be quite clear not only that the archbishop is not associated with the FPL but that the FPL is in no way associated with the archbishop. If they were, they would have tried to protect his image by respecting his good intentions.

¹³ *The Church and the People's Political Organizations* (6 August 1978) 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

I don't want it to be said either that the archbishop is naïve in this regard and that priests like Father Neto were taking on militant roles behind his back. Let me tell you this: the church does not have a strict system of internal vigilance such as the Armed Forces have, but even members of the Armed Forces commit all kinds of crimes, presumably without the authorities knowing it. The newspapers this very day tell us about a major who belongs to no less than the military central command: he was caught in an armed assault in which he robbed twenty-five thousand *colones*¹⁵. That's what today's paper says. (Applause)

But I want to tell you clearly the qualities I have seen in Father Neto Barrera as I accompanied him, and I want to do so especially now at this time of his death when his community and his family are grieving together. There were many wonderful things about him. Many of you know how conscientiously Father Neto performed his priestly duties. The proofs abound. The constant and faithful way he exercised his priestly ministry casts doubt on the suspicion that he was committed to anything prohibited by the archbishop. I remember that in one of his last interventions he asked for the people's solidarity with the archbishop. This is what causes doubt about the authenticity of the communiqué, which should not be accepted as genuine until there is absolute proof.

I want to remind you that the investigative commission has not concluded its work and that it will soon publish the results of its investigation. Be patient, as Saint Peter has told us today, because for God a thousand years are like a single day (2 Pet 3:8). The impatience of those who want to sow calumnies should yield before the patience that comes with truth, for the truth opens paths more majestically than the turbulence of hatred and enmity.

Another community I visited with the same motive of consolation was Plan del Pino, where I wanted to comfort a widow and some orphans as well as the parish. I also went to Tonacatepeque for their patronal feast, Saint Nicholas. In the village of La Junta in Comalapa, the parish of Nueva Concepción of Chalatenango is grieving over another sacrilegious robbery of hosts and sacred vessels. In Potonico, Chalatenango, the hosts were stolen last week. This coming Saturday, December 16, at ten o'clock in the morning, we will make an act of reparation to which I invite all the villages near Potonico.

I want to greet the parish of Candelaria of Cuscatlán and its pastor, Father Interiano, as they celebrate their patronal feast, Dulce Nombre de María. I congratulate them for enlarging their parish school. I send greetings also to the pastor and the parish of San Rafael Cedros which on December 16 will be holding the sixth graduation of the San Rafael School.

In La Libertad, where some American priests from Cleveland are working, I also had the pleasure of seeing a very lively community. Ministering also to this very active community are some Maryknoll Sisters (also American), some Daughters of Charity, and some Ursulines. On that same morning of the Immaculate Conception, the pastoral council of the parish was created.

Various religious communities celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception in special way. On that day in Dulce Nombre de María, Sister Ángela María Cáceres commemorated twenty-five years of being an Oblate of the Sacred Heart. The Good Shepherd

¹⁵ *El Diario de Hoy* (9 December 1978).

Sisters also paid homage to the Virgin with great enthusiasm. In the community of Cojutepeque, where there is a historical relic of great value, they especially venerate an image of the Immaculate Conception that was crowned at the time of the dogmatic definition in 1854.

Another very popular feast of the Virgin is drawing near: Our Lady of Guadalupe. In anticipation we greet the community of La Ceiba and all the parishes that venerate the dark-skinned Virgin as well as all the persons who bear her name.

This afternoon at four o'clock we will be celebrating the patronal feast of Portrero Grande in Aguilares.

On behalf of the community of the Colonia Amatepec I want to invite all young people to a youth encounter today; it began already, at eight o'clock this morning in the Colegio Cristóbal Colón in the Colonia Centroamérica. Father Luis Burguet awaits you there. Father Burguet, who is in charge of Amatepec, announces that the blessing of the church and the confirmations which had been planned for next Sunday will be postponed until Sunday, December 24, when I will also have the joy of being with that community. That's on Sunday the twenty-fourth at eleven o'clock in the morning.

I would also like to announce that the Commission of Laity has organized a gathering of the base ecclesial communities and the lay movements for next Sunday, December 17. The theme for study will be «community». This event will take place in the Colegio Guadalupano. We invite all Catholics who belong to the base ecclesial communities to come and learn about this pastoral method of working in small groups in order to get a better understanding of the biblical sense of our faith.

On the afternoon of December 8 we held an ecumenical meeting with our Baptist sisters and brothers. We had with us Brother Charles Harper from the World Council of Churches. He brought greetings and admiration for the community of the archdiocese from the World Council and also from the Symposium on Human Rights that was held in Chile. Thanks be to God for his evangelical witness!

We have also received other very important visits, such as the one last Sunday of the English parliamentarians who presented their petition with 118 signatures nominating me for the Nobel Peace Prize. I thanked them in the name of the whole people, for it is with the people I share this great honor of being nominated. (Applause) One of the parliamentarians told me—and I don't say this, I repeat, out of vanity because my own honor is quite secondary to that which is owed to all of you—one of them said, «Now that I've come to know the reality in which you live, I would nominate you not once but twice for the Nobel Prize». (Applause) They showed great concern for the ways in which human rights are being violated in this country, and I think they have received plenty of information. They also analyzed the kidnappings that have taken place recently, especially those of English citizens.

I also had the honor of receiving a visit from Mr. Raymond Chevaley, the regional delegate of the International Red Cross Committee for Central America. He is quite well disposed to help us with our difficulties, just as he has been doing for Nicaragua. We also spoke about the kidnappings and what could be done about them.

I want to mention the very great honor of receiving a letter brought to me by one of the interpreters who accompanied the parliamentarians. The letter was signed by three great cardinals: the cardinal of England, the cardinal of Paris, and Cardinal Suenens of Belgium¹⁶. In the letter they manifest a warm fraternal sense of solidarity because they understand our reality and want to give us a word of encouragement to keep us strong in our efforts on behalf of the Gospel.

The interpreter also told me that in England our pastoral letter on the people's political organizations and their relation with the church has been very well received. One English bishop commended it «for its clear exposition of the church's teaching». Right now they're preparing a translation which will be published in England.

Events of the week

I also want to mention the four kidnappings—my leaving mention of them for last doesn't mean they're in last place but rather a matter of great concern. A Dutchman, Mr. Schuitema, was kidnapped by the FARN on November 24; two Englishmen, Ian Massie and Michael Chatterton, were kidnapped on November 30, also by the FARN; and finally, a Japanese man, Mr. Suzuki, was kidnapped on December 7, it is not known by whom¹⁷.

I want to express my heartfelt solidarity with them and their families, and I state my willingness to help as far as my pastoral ministry is able. And if these words of mine are reaching the ears of the kidnappers, I want to give voice to the pleas of all the church and tell them this: if you are seeking to solve the world's problems by violating the right to freedom and to life, this is not the right way. We have proclaimed our support for all that is just in the people's demands, but there is no way that we can support such assaults on human dignity. We therefore ask that you do everything possible to free these men so that their homes are not deprived of the joy of having their loved ones with them at Christmas. I want the cries of all El Salvador to reach you: we want a Christmas without political prisoners and without anyone kidnapped! (Applause)

Finally, the voice of the poor always finds an echo when it is heard. As I was entering the church, a *campesino* from Pinar of Metapán asked me to request your prayers for his wife, Esther Martínez, who died on October 24. He is here with his family. I want to tell you, my brother, that all the people's sorrows, especially those of the poor and the suffering, are echoed in the heart of the church. We are very happy to pray for your wife.

Christ is the path and the encounter of God with humankind

We conclude our homily by inviting you to move spiritually to the altar, where my third thought is already a reality. In his gospel Saint Mark does not so much seek to present us with a life of Christ as to tell us, «The God who became man is here with us». Mark's is the only gospel that begins with those sublime words: «The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God» (Mark 1:1). When Christ came as the Son of God, people felt as though all the paths of their lives and their history were meeting up with the one great Way, with the One who said, «I

¹⁶ These were the Cardinals Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster; Leo Jozef Suenens, Archbishop of Brussels; and François Marty, Archbishop of Paris. *Orientación* (17 December 1978).

¹⁷ Takakazu Suzuki was an executive of INSINCA.

am the Way. No one comes to the Father except through me» (John 14:6). That is where salvation is to be found: in Christ.

The three readings speak to us about that same Christ. He was announced by Isaiah as the one who would come to save the people in the midst of their catastrophes. The second reading proclaims that he will come soon and expresses hope that people will be converted. And in the profound theology of the Gospel of Saint Mark, Christ himself is present among us. Let us go forth to meet him, sisters and brothers, because he is not very far away. The zone where God meets up with each one of us is Christ. Meeting up with Christ is meeting up with God. When we place the hope of the nation and our situation in Christ, we are saying, «God is coming to save us». Let it be so. (Applause)