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MARY, SIGN OF THE FULLNESS OF TIME

**Fourth Sunday of Advent
24 December 1978**

2 Samuel 7:1-5,8-12,14,16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Beloved sisters and brothers and esteemed radio listeners, the gospel you just heard focuses the attention of Christians on the beautiful image of a pregnant virgin seated by the manger where she is to give birth tonight. The virgin by the manger of Bethlehem is called Mary, and she is the most beautiful figure of this Advent season which is now turning into Christmas. The image tells a story rooted in the secret of the eternal ages, a story that began to be revealed with the beginning of history, a story that was prepared during all the time of the Old Testament and now reaches the «fullness of time».

For the last four Sundays, during the period called Advent, the church has been recalling those long ages of hopefulness, preparation, promise, and announcement. The whole of the Old Testament has been present as we consider these preparations for Christmas. That's why Mary is the person who best represents that Old Testament that was pregnant with Christ, for she is the one who is ready to give birth this very night. She is the best representative of that long period lasting centuries, those years when little by little a mysterious figure drew close to humanity. We are delighted to be able to unite ourselves with filial affection to the Mother of Christ who has also become our mother. May this liturgy of the Fourth Sunday of Advent, which this year is also Christmas Eve, be the way by which all the people of God pay an enthusiastic and heartfelt homage to our mother, the Blessed Virgin.

We are therefore going to give our homily the sweet name of the Virgin: «Mary, Sign of the Fullness of Time». As I usually do, I will divide my theme into these three thoughts: first, the secret of the eternal ages; second, the divine preparations in the Old Testament; and third, the fullness of time symbolized in Mary, pregnant with Christ.

We will see that, just as redemption was worked out over that long history, God wants to keep working in the same way, saving us in history. The preaching of the Gospel must therefore be a prolongation of the saving project of Christ, applying it to our history, to our people, to our reality. The kind of preaching that tells only romantic tales of twenty centuries ago would not be authentically Christian, and neither would our Christmas celebrations if they did the same. True Christian preaching has to immerse itself in God's saving project; it must delve into the tragedy and pain but also into the hopeful aspects of our history and our reality. God continues to save us in history. Therefore, when we reflect back on this episode of Christ's birth in Bethlehem, we are not recalling the birth of Christ twenty centuries ago; rather, we are experiencing that birth now, in the twentieth century, in 1978. We are celebrating Christ's birth here in El Salvador. That is why, with the help of the light of these biblical readings, we need to

extend the reach of the whole history of God's eternal thought so that it includes the concrete realities of our kidnapped captives, our tortured prisoners, and our own very sad history. That is where we have to encounter our God today.

The secret of the eternal ages

Let us reflect first on the secret of the eternal ages. Mary is amazed at the incredible greeting of an archangel who comes in God's name to greet her with the true title by which we should know her: «Hail, favored one! Hail, full of grace! Hail, most exalted of women, the one who has found favor in God's eyes, the chosen one!» Surprised by this heavenly ambassador to earth, Mary asks for an explanation: «How can this be?» She is not rebelling but simply recognizing the tremendous responsibility she is being asked to bear. The angel tells her that in Christ will be revealed the secret of eternal ages from times long past. That is why, Gabriel says, «God is choosing you» (Luke 1:28-29).

This is the mystery of Christ that Saint Paul mentions in today's second reading: «A mystery that was kept secret for long ages and is revealed now in Christ and in the Gospel I preach to you» (Rom 16:25). This what the angel announced to Mary: «Christ will be born by the power of the Most High; he will be called Son of God, he will be great, and his throne will have no end; he will be the immortal king of the ages, the savior of all the hopes of humankind» (Luke 1:31-33). Saint Bernard, the mellifluous doctor, describes this moment most eloquently. He imagines the Virgin silently reflecting about whether to say yes or no, and he whispers to her, «Speak, Mary, say yes. On your lips depends the fate of all history. On the consent that God asks of you hangs all our hope»¹.

The young Virgin Mary, discreet as she is, experiences the illumination of faith. It's the mystery Saint Paul told us about today: God wants to save the world in Christ, and the history of salvation that is about to begin in the bosom of Mary is grounded in the Son of God. Thus, the Gospel announces the divine origin of this salvation that can come from God alone. And of this God of salvation history Saint Paul says, «To him who can strengthen us, to the only wise God be glory for ever and ever» (Rom 16:22,27). Everything depends on God. Every initiative is found there, in the hidden thought of God. Even if God had never revealed to us in Christ the infinite love he has for us, he would still love us greatly, but we would not know it. There was need for a woman to make that thought and that love incarnate, and that woman was Mary. That's why Dante says of her in the *Divine Comedy*: «Oh, Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio—O Virgin, daughter of your son—*termine fisso d'eterno consiglio*—you are the fixed point of eternal counsel»².

Ages ago, before anything existed, God was thinking of you, blessed woman full of grace. You were the fixed point in God's thought. Just as a lad in love thinks constantly about his beloved, so God was in love with you. He loved you because you were to be his collaborator in this incarnation of his thought. He needs you, he loves you, you are blessed, «the fixed point of his eternal counsel». Even though Mary in her humility and her smallness was unaware that God had been thinking of her for endless ages, at that very moment the eternal Word, the One through whom all things were made, became a fetus and then a child and then a man crucified on Calvary to save the world. For that to come about he needed the immaculate bosom of this

¹ SAINT BERNARD, *Homilies on the Excellences of the Virgin Mary*, 4,8: PL 183,78.

² DANTE ALIGHIERI, *The Divine Comedy*, III, 33.

woman. How wonderful it is to think that Mary was already there, in the secret eternal thoughts of God. And we were there too, but as objects of pity, as people in need of redemption. Mary was there as an object of redemption because she is also a creature, a daughter of Adam, but at the same time she is God's collaborator, chosen from the mass of sinners and made holy and pure. God made use of her bosom to give us the Son of God made man.

Everything begins with God. In the first reading it is God who sends the prophet to the greatest king Judea ever had. In the gospel it is God who sends the archangel to speak to Mary. We are celebrating Christmas now in 1978, and it is the same God with the same love and the same desire who comes to us. Mary in Bethlehem is the thought of God made tenderness, made adoration, made hope. He is the God who comes to us in Mary. Let us not forget this, sisters and brothers, for this is the salvation of all our history, the salvation of each one of us. If you feel misunderstood and have a personal problem that no one seems to know about, you should realize that there *is* someone who understands. God has loved you from all eternity. You are a key detail in that history that God is creating for his glory. That's why Paul says that «glory for ever and ever is to be given to God» who has the eternal secret (Rom 16:27).

This is the great joy of Christians: «I know that I am in the thought of God, as insignificant as I may be, an abandoned soul that no one even has in mind». Today when every one is thinking about Christmas gifts, imagine how many people there are out there whom no one ever thinks about. Take thought, you who live on the fringes, you who feel that you count for nothing in history. May my voice reach those of you who are imprisoned like a ray of Christmas light and hope. May my voice speak also to those of you who are infirm, to the old folks in the Asilo Sara, to those of you who are sick in hospitals, to those of you who live in shacks and shantytowns, to you harvesters of coffee who are trying to earn your only income for the year, to you who are suffering torture. The eternal counsel of God keeps you in mind and loves you. And just as the Virgin Mary allows that thought of God to become incarnate in her womb, so also you have in her a mother at Christmas (as I rejoice in having), a mother who teaches us the way to our brother Jesus. Let us be convinced of this, dear sisters and brothers. Let us be truly sisters and brothers without distinction of social classes, without first- and second-class citizens. Let us all be raised to the stature of God's heart and to the stature of the Virgin's heart. God keeps us in mind and loves us, and that eternal counsel, kept secret for long ages, is soon to be revealed.

The divine preparations in the Old Testament

Now, on to my second thought: Mary continued to be present in the mind of God when he began to create the world. God wanted to save us *in* history. If that mystery kept secret for long ages was going to be realized, God wanted it to be realized in history, and so he began to create a history. According to biblical revelation, creation was the first chapter in that salvation of humankind; it was the first act in the salvation that God wants to work among us; it was the first step in the relations between God and human beings. We have to keep this ever present in our minds: the natural created order, the golden riches, and all the products of earth, were made by God. As the history of salvation began, the first chapter was creation: «Let there be light. Let there be seas. Let there be minerals. Let there be cattle. Let there be everything» (Gen 1:3-27). And God told the human beings, «I have created it for you. No one can take absolute possession of it. All of it is made for the happiness of the human family that I am creating in the world» (Gen 1:28-29).

In its document on divine revelation, the Second Vatican Council sums up and synthesizes this history of God's salvation. It tells us that God, «wanting to make known the way of heavenly salvation, revealed himself from the start to our first parents» (DV 3). As soon as creation was underway, the order of eternal salvation was also in place. Our first parents began by disobeying God, but even so «after their fall God's promise of redemption aroused in them the hope of being saved, and from that time on he ceaselessly kept the human race in his care, giving eternal life to those who perseveringly do good and search for salvation» (DV3). Those centuries when the earth was becoming populated with humans, from the time of Adam's creation up to the time of Abraham, are called «the time of ignorance» in the books of the New Testament (Acts 17:30). That «time of ignorance» was the time of human infancy, like those days when parents see their child taking its first steps and asking for things, but still lacking the use of reason.

The Council document continues, «Then, at the time God had appointed, he called Abraham in order to make of him a great nation» (DV 3). Here begins the great history of salvation that took concrete form in one people, a people that was to serve as a model for all the peoples of the planet. They knew that it was only in the God who created them that they could find the salvation for which all people hope.

The document goes on: «After the age of the patriarchs, God instructed the people through Moses and the prophets so that they could recognize him as the one true God, as a provident Father and just Judge, and so wait for the promised Savior» (DV 3). This was the mission given to Moses. God charged Moses with freeing the Jews from captivity in Egypt and leading them through the desert toward the Promised Land. This historical account reveals the nature of the salvation that God wants to work with all peoples. God wants to free all people from slavery, and he needs prophets like Moses who will tell people about their true dignity: «You don't have to be slaves of anybody! You must strive for the freedom that God is offering you!» Exodus is a book that should be treasured by all peoples for it teaches us about human dignity.

We are still talking about the creation of humanity. Human beings are not born to be slaves or to be oppressed by anybody. Our freedom is what makes us equal to God: «Let us make man in our image and likeness» (Gen 1:26). What distinguishes God is his supreme freedom, far beyond the freedom of any creature. Human beings have a relative freedom that consists in freely obeying their Creator, but *only* their Creator: «You shall have no other gods besides me. I am your God, you are my people» (Exod 20:3). This sacred freedom was constantly preached by Moses and the prophets. With fearsome language they denounced every attempt to oppress the people, every sin of abuse, every act that disfigured human dignity. Sisters and brothers, read the marvelous books of the prophets, and you'll find that what we are saying now is only a faint shadow of what we should be saying in the name of God, for God is zealous in his desire to protect the faint reflection of his freedom that is to be found in human beings and society. We need more courage; we need the courage of true prophets so that we can call by their proper name those who are murdering, those who are enslaving, those who worship idols, those who are divorcing the reality of the true God from the image of God on earth, which is each and every human being from the moment they are conceived in the womb of a woman.

Finally, this Council text states that «in this manner God prepared the way for the Gospel down through the centuries» (DV 3). This is a beautiful text for us to read at Christmastime for we behold these words coming true in the expectant Mary who will soon give birth. Mary somehow synthesizes all the preparations that were carried out over centuries. Tonight Mary will be giving birth to the fullness of the revelation of God's infinite love, which through the centuries has been unfolding and disclosing itself in the chosen people.

The Council refers to Mary as the blessed woman who in the mind of God was preparing the way of the Gospel. It states in number 55 of *Lumen Gentium*: «The books of the Old Testament narrate the history of salvation, by which the coming of Christ into the world was slowly prepared» (LG 55). Didn't it seem to you, as we were reading the prophecies during these last four Sundays, that we were hearing the footsteps of a divine being who was drawing close to us? That is how the Old Testament prepares us for the coming of Christ into the world.

«These earliest documents, as they are read in the church and are understood in the light of a further and full revelation, bring the figure of this woman, the Mother of the Redeemer, into a gradually clearer light. Under this light, she is already prophetically foreshadowed in the promise of victory over the serpent which was given to our first parents after their fall into sin» (LG 55). Mary was already there at the beginning of history when Adam and Eve felt ashamed and were obliged to leave Paradise. The promise of a woman who would crush the head of the deceitful serpent prefigured Mary, for she was to bring about victory over sin. It is in this light that Mary already appears prophetically foreshadowed in Paradise.

«Likewise, she is the Virgin who will conceive and bear a son, whose name will be called Emmanuel» (LG 55). The Council cites here the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa 7:14). When foreign armies were invading the Holy Land and making the very king of Jerusalem tremble, the prophet announced that a time would come when a virgin, without losing the glory of her virginity, would conceive and bear a son who would be named Emmanuel, which means «God with us». On Christmas Eve we read this beautiful prophecy about the expectant virgin, a woman who is going to be a mother but will continue to be a virgin. As today's gospel tells us, this is the sign that «for God nothing is impossible» (Luke 1:37). Just as God made it possible for a sterile old woman like Elizabeth to conceive and give birth to the precursor, John the Baptist, so he told Mary, «You will remain a virgin and not lose your virginity. By the work of the Spirit of God you will conceive and give birth on Christmas, and your body will preserve the secret of virginity» (Luke 1:35-37). This also was a foreshadowing of the ancient times when preparations were being made for this holy night.

«The Virgin stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, those who confidently hope for and receive salvation from him» (LG 55). The heart of this poor girl-child of Yahweh pulsed with all the aspirations of the Old Testament, all the people's hunger for God—«Come, Lord, to save us!» It captured all the anguish of the people taken away captive to Babylon, so much in need of a savior. Yes, all the longings of the prophets who asked God to send the Savior he had promised were alive in the heart of the Virgin. And we repeat here what we've been saying since the First Sunday of Advent: no one can celebrate Christmas authentically without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the prideful, those who think they have everything and so despise others, those who have no need of God—for them there can be no Christmas. Christmas is only for the poor, the hungry, those who are in need of someone to come and help them—and that someone is God, Emmanuel, God with us. Without poverty of spirit we cannot

be filled with God. If God had not found in Mary the immense emptiness of her humility, he could not have come into the world; there would have been no one worthy to receive him. We give thanks to God, and we have to thank the Virgin as well. If God chose her to be his mother, it was because she was holy in her humility; it was because no one could express the poverty of Israel as well as she could. Nor could anyone express the longing of all the nations as she could. Mary is the expression of our own neediness as Salvadorans. Mary is the expression of the anguish of those who are in prison. Mary is the suffering of the mothers who have lost their sons and daughters (and no one tells them where they are). Mary is the tenderness that anxiously seeks a solution to our problems. In our country Mary finds herself in a dead-end alley, but she remains hopeful that God will come to save us. I hope that we all will imitate this poor child of Yahweh, realizing that without God we can do nothing, that God is the only hope of our people, that Christ alone, the Divine Savior, can save our country.

The Council document continues, «Finally, after long expectation of the promise, the times are fulfilled in this exalted Daughter of Sion, and the new economy is established: the Son of God takes from her a human nature so that by the mysteries of his flesh he might free humankind from sin» (LG 55).

Mary, sign of the fullness of time

And here, finally, comes my third thought: Mary, sign of the fullness of time. It's going to take some effort for us to understand how God saves in history and how time is a necessary element for salvation. We have seen how God develops things through the ages. Creation was the beginning of time. What occurs to me at this moment is that creation is like when a painter is inspired to paint a picture. He asks what he will paint it on, and the first thing he does is spread out a blank canvas. That's what God did in creating: the blank canvas was the ages. «Let the passing of ages begin because I am going to paint the beautiful picture of salvation across the ages». The Israelite conception of time, which is reflected in the Bible, is very different from the western conception that we have. We measure time exactly, and that's why we have watches and calendars; time for us is something mathematical. In contrast, for Israel time was experience; time was event. There we have it in the Bible: «There is a time for weeping and a time for laughing» (Wis 3:4). And the heavenly bodies appeared dividing the nights from the days, the times when people are working (Gen 1:14). In the Bible time is the blank canvas on which God and human beings are painting history, and that history will be beautiful if it's painted in accord with the eternal project. God draws the secret of the endless ages on this canvas of history in collaboration with us, for we have in our hands the history of salvation. If, on the other hand, we deface this blank canvas that God has stretched out for us to paint our history on, along with him, then we'll end up painting only our caprices, not the eternal secrets of God; we'll only paint human passion, human politicking, human selfishness, human abuse. And what results from that? The history we have now! It's as if we took the magnificent painting that a great artist is working on and put it within easy reach of a mischievous child—soon we'd come and find it all spoiled and stained. That's what we are for God: spoiled children who have disfigured his eternal projects.

But we have here today, thanks be to God, a person who has allowed his project to be carried out to perfection. It is the woman who in today's gospel declares, «Behold the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word» (Luke 1:38). There is no alienation here. Alienated rather are those who, like Satan, tell God, «I will not serve you. I will

do whatever I like». They are the ones who sink into the shadows of nothingness. The Council tells us that when people sin, the cord that unites them with their Creator gets frayed and finally breaks. Or as Christ said, «When a branch is cut from a tree, it is no longer any use; it just dries up» (John 15:6). Anyone who sins is a severed branch. But Mary tells the Lord, «I am a branch fixed fast to the trunk. I don't want to separate from you. I want to bear the fruit you give me, the fruit of your sap, the fruit of your thought. May it be done to me according to your word» (Luke 1:38). This is the story of salvation.

In this conception of God's time we're considering, the fullness of time has arrived: the canvas stretched by God has a center point, just as an artist has a focal point in the picture he's painting. That focal point in our history is called the fullness of time. It is the precise moment when the Word becomes flesh in the womb of Mary. At that moment the life of God comes into humanity after centuries of preparation in the Old Testament and brings to us the fullness of divine life and, with it, the exciting dreams of a God who wants to exalt us and sanctify us. The Council says that «the mystery of humanity can no longer be explained except in the mystery of the God who became human» (GS 22). If any of you want to understand your own mystery, the meaning of your pain, your labor, your anguish, your hope, then stand alongside Christ. If you do what Christ did, obeying the will of the Father and letting yourselves be filled with the life that Christ brought into the world, then you will become fully and truly human. But if when I compare myself to Christ, I find that my life is the antithesis, the opposite of that, then my life is a disaster. This is a mystery that I cannot explain any further except by turning to Christ, for it is he who shows us the true shape of what it means to be human. Salvation will be given us only in Christ.

In Christ is to be found everything that he later entrusted to his church: «All power in heaven and earth has been given to me. I have chosen you as my apostles and friends. I have taught you the secret of the endless ages, God's plan for saving all nations and embracing all peoples in the Christian faith. I therefore command you to go and preach this Gospel! Those who believe will be saved, and those do not believe will be condemned» (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:16). Ever since then the church has been Christ's missionary as the bearer of the treasure of salvation. In these days I feel immensely honored that my poor words, even though many people spurn them and ridicule them, are a vehicle of salvation and a bearer of the truth that saves. These words reveal the secret eternal designs of God and call us all to conversion. We must create a kingdom of God among the women and men of El Salvador. We must make our diocese into a church that corresponds to the eternal designs of the Lord. That is my job, and that is the job of my fellow priests, of the catechists, of the sisters, and of all those who grasp the reality of this church, which cannot hope to be anything else than the fullness of Christ in time.

Fullness of time means the sacraments that Christ brought to transmit his life to humanity. Fullness of time means the hope of eternal resurrection that is sown in the heart of Christians. Fullness of time means the exclamation that all of you will utter in a short while: «We announce your death; we proclaim your resurrection. Come, Lord Jesus!» Christ is present, says Saint Paul, from the moment of the arrival of the fullness of time, from the moment when the Word of God was conceived and a woman gave birth to him. In that same Christ born of Mary was revealed «the secret that was hidden for long ages» (Rom 16:25). To know Christ is to know the unique truth of history; it is to join with God in painting the truest

history through our incorporation into Christ, who is the image of the invisible God and the realization of the Lord's eternal secret.

You will understand then, dear brothers and sisters, why in the Sunday homily the archbishop tries to incarnate the eternal secret of the endless ages within the concrete reality of history. It is then that it becomes clear to you, even if you don't like it, that that bright light of eternity is shining on the blunders of our history and declaring, «That's not the way history should be!» On the other hand, that same light will say to those who are doing good, «Yes, that *is* how history should be!» That is why we make use of the light of this God who arrives at Christmastime to analyze our reality, and we do so in the enchanting presence of Mary, sign of the fullness of time, because she is the one who fully experiences the reality of our people. Indeed, that was her job: incarnating Christ in history. Mary becomes Salvadoran and so incarnates Christ in the history of El Salvador. Mary takes on the name of your family and mine in order to make our families' histories incarnate in the eternal life of the Gospel. Mary identifies with each one of us in order to bring Christ to birth in every individual. Blessed are you if your devotion to the Virgin truly takes this form!

That's why the Council warns preachers to be very careful not to promote false ideas about devotion to the Virgin (LG 67). Unfortunately, devotion to Mary sometimes separates us from Protestants, such as when Catholics practice a form of idolatry of the Virgin, a Mariolatry. Our true belief is that Mary is nothing like an idol. The one and only Savior is God in Jesus Christ, and Mary is his human instrument. She is the daughter of Adam, the daughter of Israel, the incarnation of a people, the sister of our race. Because of her holiness she was able to make the divine life of God incarnate in history. Therefore the truest homage that a Christian can pay to the Virgin is to follow her lead in trying to make the eternal life of God incarnate in the vicissitudes of our fleeting history.

We recall these things so that you can see that the church's efforts have been the same in every age. In olden times the Roman Martyrology used to be read on this day, the twenty-fourth, at noon in all the monastery dining halls, just as it is done today here in the cathedral. The Martyrology is a book that announces the celebrations of every day of the liturgical year, but on this day it does so in a very solemn way. The reader recited, «The twenty-fourth day of December. In the 5199th year of the creation of the world, from the time when in the beginning God created heaven and earth; from the flood, the 2957th year; from the birth of Abraham, the 2015th year; from Moses and the going-out of the people of Israel from Egypt, the 1510th year; from the anointing of David as king, the 1032nd year; in the 65th week according to the prophecy of Daniel; in the 194th Olympiad;»—see how incarnation takes place in profane history?—«from the founding of the city of Rome, the 752nd year; in the 53rd year of the rule of Octavian Augustus, when the whole world was at peace, in the sixth age of the world: Jesus Christ, the eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, desiring to sanctify the world by his most merciful coming, having been conceived by the Holy Ghost, and nine months having passed since his conception, was born in Bethlehem of Judea of the Virgin Mary, having become man».

What a superb synthesis of history, from creation and Abraham on! Oh, and I forgot to mention David, who is the subject of the first reading. God, through the prophet Nathan, tells King David that from his dynasty will descend a future king whose reign will never end (2 Sam 7:16). This is the first link in the long chain of announcements about how Christ will become king and messiah. When Jesus passes near those of us who are blind, needy, and leprous, all of

us who suffer the anguish of these times will cry out, «Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!» (Mark 10:47). Christ comes, gathering together all that history that was read so solemnly in the Martyrology, for on this day someone is going to be born who is not a man like other men but comes to gather together a long history beginning with the secrets of God's endless ages.

Life of the church

This week we have lived the final chapter of this history of ours, which is different from that of other peoples. When we heard that the pope will be coming to Puebla on January 27, the announcement filled us with great joy. Now we will travel to Puebla with the hope of meeting the successor of Peter and discussing with him the pastoral work being done here. In his Christmas greeting the pope said something that resonates well in our archdiocese: «There can be no peace wherever human rights are trampled on»³. Moreover, in his search for this peace, the pope has sent a mediator to resolve the conflict between Argentina and Chile⁴.

The archbishop of Managua has also expressed his pastoral concerns, as you read in the press this week⁵. We want to take this opportunity to show once again our solidarity as an archdiocese with the Archdiocese of Managua and the hierarchy of Nicaragua. We are united with them, and we experience the same reality that they do. For us Christians everything that is human is a part of our lives.

A review of our communities also gives us some idea of the history of our church. Last Sunday in the Colegio Guadalupano about a thousand Catholics—members of the base ecclesial communities or other lay movements—celebrated a grand Christmas gathering. They produced a concluding statement which reaffirms their ongoing commitment to doing this indispensable work of creating church communities and forming small groups where people can reflect more deeply on the Gospel⁶. I take advantage of this news to encourage all of you to try to organize yourselves into small groups. If some people are suspicious of such groups, they are quite wrong. These groups are simply cells of the church, grass-roots ecclesial communities. Their purpose is to help people reflect on the Gospel in a more intimate, familiar surrounding and in ways that culminate in the Eucharist and the sacraments.

In this regard, I want to thank *Orientación* for its commentary on the pastoral instruction regarding the sacraments. Their commentary read as follows: «Restructuring the sacramental life of the church gives people the profound ability to be salt, light, and leaven. ... Many people have prostituted the sacraments by reducing them to mere rites or ceremonies. Others have made conscientious efforts to deepen their faith, but they have prescindend from celebration of the sacraments and so have been left with no effective way to express their paschal faith. As a result, they run the risk of losing their identity as Christians»⁷. Today's edition of *Orientación* includes part of the instruction, and the commentary I just read makes the point I want to make. We need more than just biblical reflection, and we need more than just sacraments; we need the two things together. We need biblical reflection that helps us

³ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the Cardinals and Prelates of the Roman Curia», 22 December 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (31 December 1978).

⁴ *L'Osservatore Romano* (31 December 1978).

⁵ *El Diario de Hoy* (18 December 1978).

⁶ «Statement of the First Archdiocesan Encounter of Base Ecclesial Communities and Lay Movements» in *Orientación* (24 December 1978).

⁷ «The Archbishop's Pastoral Instruction» in *Orientación* (24 December 1978).

discover the meaning of the sacraments, and we need the sacraments to celebrate and enliven the biblical faith we profess. Bible without sacraments would be Protestantism. Sacraments without Bible would be what many of us have already experienced: rites that have lost all their meaning. Thank God, the people in these base communities I mention are trying to recover that priceless unity between the word of God and the church's sacramental life.

We also visited the Colonia Rosario de Mora, where there were confirmations and first communions. And last Sunday, when we were installing Father Juan Antonio Gutiérrez as the new pastor of San Sebastián in Ciudad Delgado, we had the opportunity to witness that community's sacramental life and biblical reflection.

In La Vega we celebrated the feast of the Virgin of Los Remedios, a lovely tradition of San Salvador. As we said just now, this is a devotion by which Christians grow in love of the Virgin as a way of celebrating Christmas. I also thank the chaplain, Father Roberto Crespín, who invited me to participate in a celebration of the Virgin of Los Remedios in the district of San Laureano of Ciudad Delgado.

Finally, to bring to an end this reflection on preparation for Christmas, I experienced a great grace in being able to celebrate in San José Guayable the feast of their patron, Saint Joseph, which is commemorated there on November 19. In Quezaltepeque as well they celebrate their patron Saint Joseph within the context of Advent and Christmas.

I had a very picturesque visit to the remote village of Potonico. I went there to preside at an act of eucharistic atonement since the sacramental species had been robbed from the church. When I arrived there, a little group of children introduced themselves to me as the «Committee of Solidarity with the Orphan Children of Chalatenango». They told me that they formed the group to express their solidarity with the children whose parents have been killed, imprisoned, or disappeared. They understand that thousands of children have been reduced to misery and malnutrition, and that others are suffering anguish because their fathers are behind bars or are being tortured or perhaps are even dead and buried. They gave me a very nice letter; I can't read all of it, but it expresses the feelings of these children who have been taught that we should not ignore the pain of others. They want to celebrate Christmas in their own happy homes but without forgetting the distress that exists in so many other homes. I want to tell these children that I'll be happy to grant them the meeting they request; they can come at the time and hour indicated. I congratulate the Assumptionist Sisters and Father Luis Recinos, the new pastor of that town, Potonico, for the great pastoral work that they are undertaking.

I was in the community of Soyapango for confirmations, first communions, and marriages. The visit to the elderly and the sick in the Asilo Sara also consoled me greatly because I observed that, besides the great work of the director and the collaborators, there are young students eagerly helping out, including many girls from Sagrado Corazón, Sagrada Familia, and the Liceo Salvadoreño. This inspired me to issue a call to those youngsters. I told them, «This is how Christianity should be lived: pushing the wheelchairs of the elderly and the infirm, and bringing consolation to people who perhaps don't have young people to comfort them». This is a wonderful gesture that the young people are making toward elders who need their help. Let this call go forth along with that of the children of Chalatenango, so that our young people commit themselves generously to the charitable work our religion promotes.

Yesterday we joined with the Franciscan Sisters to celebrate the fifty years they have been working in this country. It was a beautiful spectacle in the church of Our Lady of Fatima in Planes de Rendero. Along with the superior general of the congregation, who came from Mexico, there were four provincials and more than three hundred sisters, completely filling the church. How wonderfully God is blessing them with vocations! The only thing I asked of them was that, while remaining faithful to their vocation and their charism, they try to adapt themselves fully to the work of the local churches. That is the best way for the sisters to show fidelity to their vocation: not keeping themselves reserved and apart but getting fully involved with the pastoral concerns of the priest and the needs of the people. It's really wonderful to be able to count on the work of that great army of Franciscan Sisters, who remain true to their charism but are always at the service of a people who has such great need of them!

At eleven o'clock today we will be in Amatepec, and at four this afternoon in the Colonial Bernal, celebrating Christmas there as well. Our celebration of Christmas here in the cathedral will be tonight at seven o'clock. Likewise, on December 31 the celebration will be at seven in the evening. Make every effort to come and pay homage to this holy night when Jesus is born from Mary's bosom. So tonight at seven o'clock, here in the cathedral.

I want to give my full support to the campaign on behalf of the archdiocesan Caritas that you've probably heard about in the media. For many people Caritas has fallen into disrepute because of malfunctioning caused by our carelessness, our negligence, and perhaps also our sins. Still, we want to recover the beautiful image expressed in that word «caritas», which means «charity» or «love». We want to make our archdiocesan Caritas a true school of charity and love. We shouldn't be content with waiting for donations to arrive from the United States and then simply distributing them. Rather, we're going to try to be true to the beautiful slogan of Caritas: «Let each person give what he can, but let no one fail to give something»—even if it's just a smile, which contributes tremendously to love. Today in the cathedral there will be a second collection which will be dedicated to the work of Caritas. The persons responsible are already here with us, and I ask you to collaborate with them. I ask the same of all the parishes and the communities, including those communities that are in communion with their bishop right now through this radio broadcast. Let them designate a person to collect donations, even if they're very modest, and then send them to the inter-diocesan Caritas. This is not a requirement, just an invitation. «Let each person give what he can, but let no one fail to give something».

Events of the week

Regarding the problem in the university, you all know about the abolition of CAPUES and the decree of the legislative assembly⁸ aimed at normalizing the activities of El Salvador's alma mater. These measures have raised people's hopes and provided a Christmas truce for this extremely complex problem. We share the concerns of all those who are committed to restoring to this center of higher learning its character as a worthy center of culture, while working within the norms recently decreed by the legislative assembly. We hope that everyone, in a sound academic spirit, will cooperate in working for the common good. The recent legislative decree aims at having this problem solved by the members of that esteemed teaching community, the professors and students themselves. The hour has come, then, for us

⁸ «Decree No. 108 of the Legislative Assembly of the Republic of El Salvador», 16 December 1978, *ECA* 363/364 (1979) 92-99.

to get to work and achieve the goals we have set. This is not the time for vindictiveness and demagoguery. This is not the time for tendentious machinations aimed at impeding the negotiations that are attempting to resolve this difficult situation. It is clear that neither the professors alone nor the students alone nor the university alone can resolve a problem that afflicts the country as a whole. The professors and the students need to collaborate in seeking a resolution, and it is our hope that they will allow the other authentic sectors of the country to participate. We are convinced that the solution lies in dialogue among all the different groups in our country. Keep in mind also that it is not the quantity but the quality that counts in deciding about these great responsibilities. Let us not disrupt the attempts at normalization by stubbornly adhering to demagogical criteria of mass participation. I am sure that, like the church, other institutions of this country want to collaborate in discovering paths toward a solution. The members of the university have a duty to consult with other interested institutions and persons, for the problem is truly a national problem. The support we give as pastors of the church will always be characterized by honesty, loyalty, and justice. That is why we state clearly that we will raise our voice in protest whenever the procedures are pursuing illegitimate interests instead of the common good.

We were invited to participate in the swearing-in ceremony of the new leaders of the Unified Conference of Salvadoran Workers. In doing so, we reaffirm the church's desire to be present to the world of the workers in accord with her evangelical mission. We assure all workers that the church is fully behind your just demands, and she also condemns all attacks on the dignity, the freedom, and the rights of workers.

You know that there's a radio program called «The X in the Harvest», which has broadcast many denunciations of the Ministry of Labor. Since we want to make this program available to *campesinos*, it can now be heard at five-thirty on Thursday afternoons. We also want to say that during this Christmas season we are extremely concerned about the dire situation of many poor *campesinos* and their children who are fleeing the cold. They have no shelter for their bodies; they have to improvise hammocks in the fields and among the coffee groves. We must be convinced that the Good News is for everybody in El Salvador. The Lord, who created us to work his salvation in all things, wants happiness for us all.

The Human Rights Commission of El Salvador has again visited the prisoner Isabel Rodríguez Barrera, who is hospitalized in El Hospital Rosales. As we said before, there is no judicial proceeding against this person, yet he has had his freedom restricted for more than one hundred days now. It is feared that he will be removed from the hospital during this Christmas season. He is being constantly guarded by police detectives.

On Thursday, December 21, Father Carlos Stettler⁹ was expelled from Guatemala. He was sent to our country and handed over to the authorities of our government. The same situation is being repeated: from Guatemala to El Salvador, and from El Salvador to Guatemala. What agreements exist between these nations?

This week two men who had sought asylum in the embassy of Venezuela left for that country: Reynaldo Cruz Menjívar and Vinicio Avalos. We have already made reference to the case of Menjívar, and we're happy that he is now—hopefully—out of danger.

⁹ *El Diario de Hoy* (22 December 1978).

We are saddened by the death of two watchmen of radio station YSU. It is a painful experience for their families. Also, on the night of Thursday the twenty-first the military authorities captured two journalists working for that station. Other journalists have called the action «arbitrary» and have reported on the treatment the detained men were given by the police¹⁰. I'm happy that these journalists issued such a brave denunciation of the maltreatment of their colleagues. Now they'll understand why a pastor also issues a denunciation when a *campesino* is assaulted. Let us hope that the mass media will be as eloquent and diligent in defense of our *campesinos* as they have been in defense of their fellow journalists.

Our archdiocesan information office has received a document called «The Testimony of a Disappeared Person». The document contains the declarations of Francisco Baltazar Campos Mendoza, a onetime political prisoner who sought asylum in the Mexican embassy. He tells about the tortures, the interrogations, the prisoners with whom he spoke, and the way in which he was able to escape. Those who wish to read this bulletin can get a copy in our office¹¹.

I end my homily stating that our intention for this Christmas Eve Mass has been suggested by the mothers of the disappeared persons. The Mass is being offered for all those persons who are victims of kidnappings and disappearances. We also want to express our solidarity with those who are suffering and to issue still another call for a Christmas without political prisoners and without kidnappings. The four men now kidnapped—two English, one Japanese, and one Dutch—have still not been able to return to their homes. I want to repeat that the commission has tried to mediate; they asked for a meeting in the president's office, but that request was denied. This is affirmed in a document signed by the four members of the commission. Since the efforts made by the commission and by the families and companies of the kidnapped men have been futile, we declare that the government has the obligation to provide information about the whereabouts of the five prisoners whose release is being demanded: Lil Milagro Ramírez, Carlos Madriz, Jorge Luis Zelayandía, Gonzalo Parada, and Sonia Estela Ramírez. The commission wants to do more, and the families also want to do more. They would do anything to rescue their loved ones! So we hope that the government will provide information concerning a demand over which the families have no control. Whoever the people are who have those men in their power, we ask them to work for their release by setting conditions that are within the negotiating capabilities of the families or the companies or the commission. The commission is ready to help in any way it can.

But besides the four kidnapped men, we are concerned about the 108 disappeared persons and the seventy-two political prisoners¹². Many of them are in the Gotera prison, many have gone into exile, and many *campesinos* have taken refuge in the mountains. Given this situation, we want to repeat what we have been constantly crying out to those responsible and those who can do something: «Let us have a Christmas without political prisoners and without kidnappings!» There is still time.

I also want to ask you to pray for Alejandro Quinteros, also known as El Apache. His name is well known since he was a police agent responsible for torture. He has died and was found collapsed over the steering wheel of his car; one paper says it was a stroke, another a

¹⁰ *El Diario de Hoy* (23 December 1978).

¹¹ *Orientación* (17 December 1978).

¹² The list of the names of the disappeared and the political prisoners was published in *Orientación* (24 December 1978).

heart attack¹³. We pray that God has pardoned him, because the church in her denunciations seeks only the conversion and salvation of everybody, even those who are assassins and those who have gratuitously declared themselves enemies of the church.

Thanks be to God—let us now end on a tone of joy and optimism. Christmas inspires good sentiments in people's hearts. On Sunday, December 14, the Society of Radio and Television Artists and Reporters presented a show in the Teatro Libertad for the benefit of the burn victims' ward at the Hospital Rosales¹⁴. We've also learned about the many visits that choirs and students and others have paid to the sick, the imprisoned, and other people who are suffering. Blessed be God for the great goodness that is in the hearts of Salvadorans. We just want to remind you of what the Council says: «Do not give as alms what is due in justice» (AA 8). Before we offer cheap charity in the form of gifts and piñatas and the rest, let us examine our social justice. There can be no Christmas peace if there is no true justice in the ways Salvadorans relate to one another. That is the peace that we long for! From this perspective of peace founded on justice, I wish you all with great affection a happy Christmas! (Applause)

¹³ *La Prensa Gráfica* (21 December 1978); *El Diario de Hoy* (23 December 1978).

¹⁴ Thursday 14 December. *El Diario de Hoy* (22 December 1978).