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God Comes to Save in History with the Collaboration of the People

**Second Sunday of Advent
9 December 1979**

Baruch 5:1-9
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
Luke 3:1-6

Dear sisters and brothers, how consoling it is to know that God walks with us in history, for that is the real meaning of this time of Advent! At the very beginning of the liturgical year we celebrate this great reality of «God with us» that was announced by the prophet Isaiah when he said that a virgin would conceive and bring forth a child whose name would be Emmanuel, «God-with-us» (Isa 7:14).

During this season of Advent we celebrate God's entrance into our history. God's desire is to weave the history of the world's salvation together with our own human history in such a way that our human history will bring salvation for humankind insofar as it truly reflects the designs of God's salvation history. Even as history continues on, people must understand that history does not end with time but is embedded already in God's eternity so that God is the Master of history.

The tremendous role of the church is to make the project of God's history a reality within the history of humankind; her job is to see that God's history is reflected in the concrete activities of the people and to endorse everything that mirrors God's salvation project in history. The church, acting with the holy freedom of God, must also reject everything in human history that contradicts the designs and the project of God, who desires to save humankind.

That is why the church must refrain from identifying with the historical projects of human beings even while she sheds light on them. The liberation that the church preaches must be understood from the perspective of the liberating power of God our Lord. This has been explained by Pope Paul VI, and I would like all the Christian communities participating today in this Advent reflection to take the pope's vital guidance into account, now more than ever. He stated, «Many generous Christians are sensitive to the dramatic questions involved in the problem of liberation, and in their wish to commit the church to the liberation effort they are frequently tempted to reduce her mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project. They would reduce her goals to anthropocentric dimensions». (That means making humans the center of history.) «The salvation which the church announces would be reduced to material well-being. The church's activities, forgetful of all spiritual and religious concerns, would become initiatives of the political or social order. But if this happened, the church would lose her fundamental meaning. Her message of liberation would no longer have any originality and would easily be open to monopolization and manipulation by ideological systems and political parties. She would have no more authority to proclaim freedom in the name of God. This is why we have wished to emphasize, in our address at the opening of the Synod, "the need to restate

clearly the specifically religious finality of evangelization. This latter would lose its reason for existence if it were to diverge from the religious axis that guides it: the kingdom of God before anything else, in its fully theological meaning”». (EN 32).

The purpose of Advent, then, with the richness of the Scripture readings we hear on these Sundays, is to remind us of the meaning of God’s project, his history of salvation. It is to that history that we must orient the human forces that are now striving to vindicate and liberate our temporal history. These four Sundays of Advent, then, will spell out for us the dimensions of God’s project.

Last Sunday I was not fortunate enough to be with you here in the cathedral¹, but Father Fabián Amaya made an excellent presentation of the liturgy and the word of God, providing a synthesis of the history of salvation from beginning to end. From the very first God took the initiative, promising to raise up a descendant of King David in whom the Son of God would become incarnate. This son of David would appear as the Redeemer of humankind. That was the start of salvation history: God’s initiative and God’s promise to take the son of a historical king and make him the Redeemer of humankind. And the culmination of salvation history was presented to us in last Sunday’s gospel in which Christ, standing before the temple of Jerusalem, told the people about the end of the ages and the end of history. He said that in those final days «people will see the Son of Man coming with great power and majesty» (Luke 21:27). The second reading then related how, in that definitive phase of human redemption, a righteous and redeemed humankind would encounter the Son of God in his final coming (1 Thes 3:13). And that humankind will include all of us if we have had the good fortune of experiencing and engaging ourselves in the history of salvation.

The Second and Third Sundays of Advent—that is, this one and the next one—present to us the figure John the precursor of Jesus, to show how God uses human beings as his collaborators in the history of salvation. The readings of this Sunday and next help us to understand the conditions God establishes for incorporating people into the history of salvation.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, just before Christmas, will present us with the immediate preparations for the event in which Mary plays a major role: the King of glory, the Lord of eternity, will become also the Lord of our history and will be born in Bethlehem *as part of* our history. Christmas is all about celebrating God’s coming among us to walk at our side in the history of all the world’s peoples. That is why this season is so important, especially for those of us who feel our people’s profound desire for liberation. But let us not confuse God’s great project with earthly projects. Let us instead use that great project of God to throw light on all the redemptive projects of human beings.

Dear sisters and brothers—you who here in the cathedral and you who are listening by radio—let us reflect on this presence of God who desires to use men and women to save the world. Since Christ wants to organize us around himself as a Christian community of faith, hope, and love that will be light to the world and salvation for the nations, let us reflect carefully on what the word of God is telling us. Let us take all our parish communities, our ecclesial base communities, our reflections on the Bible at home, and all our other Christian

¹ Archbishop Romero did not preach in the Cathedral of San Salvador on Sunday, 2 December, because he had been invited to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Diocese of Santiago María.

activities, and let us make of them truly the community of Christ that Saint Paul describes for us today in the epistle.

As is my custom, then, on this Second Sunday of Advent I'm going to give my homily a title. I will call it «God Comes to Save in History with the Collaboration of the People». This title sums up my thoughts about how God comes to save in human history with the collaboration of all of us. From that basis I will develop three reflections: first, God comes to save in the history of humankind; second, as the precursor, John the Baptist symbolizes the collaboration that God asks of people so that they will participate as protagonists of salvation history; and third, the need to apply these great principles to our church (concretely, our archdiocese) and to our history (concretely, the history of El Salvador). What the church must do today in El Salvador is no different from what John the Baptist did: point to God's designs as the only true path for the history of those who want to be saved.

God comes to save in the history of humankind

My first reflection, then, is this: God comes to save in history. In today's readings I find two passages that are most enlightening. You just heard today's gospel describing the historical and political setting: «In the fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea» (Luke 3:1) The gospel then explains the political situation of Palestine, which was ruled by the Roman Empire and governed by four tetrarchs, that is, rulers over a territory divided four ways. The land in which Jesus lived was governed by four kings who were under the Roman Empire. Within this historical and political setting there was also an ecclesiastical history: it was «during the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas» (Luke 3:2a). It is within this precise historical framework that Saint Luke begins to tell us about the word of God. It was in this setting that «the word of God came upon John, the son of Zechariah, in the desert» (Luke 3:2b). There could hardly be a more solemn prologue, or one more imbued with that precious historical moment when God joined us as a fellow traveler in our history. It is always that way: God works his salvation making use of the emperors, the kings, the rulers, and the priests of the time. They are the ones who set the framework for the moment of God's action in earthly history.

It was there, among those four kings of Palestine and among those palace intrigues, that God entered history. It was there, among the superficialities of a religion that had become so legalistic that people had to ask what the first commandment was for honoring God (Mark 12:28). There in the midst of human intrigues God entered history to rescue the victims of those intrigues and the peoples long dominated by empires.

Times change, but the project of God remains always the same: to save human beings in history. That is why the church, commissioned to carry out this project of God, cannot identify with any particular historical project. In those days the church could not ally herself with the Roman Empire or with Herod or with any of the kings of earth or with any human political system or strategy. She can shed light on all of them, but she must always remain faithful to her role of announcing God's project, which is salvation history.

Today's first reading offers another precious detail that confirms my ideas about how God saves in history. Baruch was a prophet who collected in a book the religious sentiments left as a heritage by the earlier prophets. In today's reading Baruch recalls the time after the Babylonian captivity, when another empire, Persia, carried off the children of Israel as

prisoners. Even as the people were lamenting their situation, the prophets were announcing the return from exile to Jerusalem. Here again we see the history of a people humbled by exile but still given life by salvation history. The exile itself was a sign of the people's need to be saved. They could do nothing by their own strength. God would come—that was the message of the prophets. During this Advent season, when salvation in Christ is newly proclaimed, these historical events remind us of how God keeps saving people in history.

The dramatic description of how the capital of Israel was plundered, destroyed, and left in ruins inspired people to dream of a new Jerusalem. The prophets often spoke of the new Jerusalem that the exiled people would find when they returned. As they traveled through the desert on their way back to Jerusalem, the people would hear a voice like the voice of heralds announcing the visit of a king: «Prepare the highways because God is coming at the head of the people. Make straight the twisting paths» (Mark 1:3). Baruch gives a beautiful description of the magnificent roadway that would make that historical return possible; it would be a masterpiece of architecture and engineering: «God has decreed the flattening of all the high mountains and the everlasting hills; he has decreed the filling of the valleys to make the ground level so that Israel can walk in safety, guided by the glory of God» (Bar 5:7).

Baruch says that Jerusalem, a city of this earth, will be filled with God's sacred revelation displaying for us the marvels of his kingdom and his redemption. The city will be given the name «Righteous Peace, Godly Glory» (Bar 5:4), and all nations will be invited to travel to Jerusalem, the emblematic capital of God's kingdom: «Arise, Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Spirit, overjoyed because you are remembered by God. They were led away on foot by their enemies, but God will bring them back to you rejoicing, as if transported in a royal carriage» (Bar 5:5-6).

Do you see how salvation history takes advantage of world events in order to sow hope and repentance in the people? Salvation history promises God's return, and the people rejoice that God is their companion in history. This is what my first reflection has to teach us in this Advent season, dear sisters and brothers. We have great hope that God moves with us in our history. God has not abandoned us. God even makes use of the injustices we commit, waiting patiently for us to return. When that happens, our salvation here in El Salvador will also be called by that precious name found in God's word today: «Righteous Peace, Godly Glory» (Bar 5:4). Let us do everything possible so that our Salvadoran history will be truly a history of salvation.

John the precursor as a symbol of human collaboration in salvation history

To that end, my second reflection treats of John the precursor as a symbol of human collaboration in the salvation history. It is during this season of Advent, and especially this Sunday and next, that the church seeks to introduce us to the marvelous, providential figure of John the Baptist.

It had been announced by the prophets that a herald or an angel would appear before the coming of Christ and announce that the time was near at hand. Some people confusedly thought that the herald might be Elijah, who had been taken up into heaven; people believed that he would return announcing God's arrival in the world. In interpreting that tradition, however, Christ referred rather to John the Baptist and told the people, «Elijah has come already» (Matt 17:12-13). Today's readings tell us about that mysterious person in Jewish

tradition called John the Baptist. John is the central figure of Advent because he was the angel, the precursor, the one who announced that Christ was already present in the world. Today's gospel reading from Saint Luke, which is the gospel for this whole year, identifies John as the voice prophesied by Isaiah: «John went through the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of conversion for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the oracles of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice cries out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Let valleys be raised, and let the mountains and hills be made low. Let the winding roads be made straight and the rough ways smooth, and all shall see the salvation of God'"» (Luke 3:3-6).

John's voice was one of hope, but he stated clearly the conditions for that encounter with God, which we'll treat more explicitly next week. Right now we'll discuss John's preaching, his baptism, and his call for people to be converted and baptized. Baptism was a penitential rite by which all those who acknowledged their sins and manifested their desire for spiritual purity would be cleansed. The people needed to be converted by having the moral stains and grime removed from their hearts, and only those who were converted would see the Lord return to his people. That's why it is in our interest to make the mission of John the Baptist truly present here in El Salvador. And it *is* becoming present, as can be seen in the beauty of this morning's liturgy, which shows that we as a Christian community are carrying out the prophetic mission of God and announcing the salvation of all people.

I want to insist, dear sisters and brothers, that a very clear distinction must be made in our time: there is a difference between talking about «the people» and talking about «the people of God». What is the difference? «The people» means all those who live in our country, the whole Salvadoran people, including those who have no faith or are indifferent. All of them, whether they believe or not, are «the people». But when we say «the people of God», we mean the Christian community, those Salvadorans who have received the message of Christ and been converted. In order to make their conversion known, they have been baptized, and they are now preparing «a perfect people for the coming of the Lord», as John the Baptist proposed to do. Thus the people of God is a select group. We don't say this proudly or smugly because it may be that if we're not truly converted we do not really form part of the people of God. Even beyond the limits of the church, the people of God includes all those individuals who have no knowledge of Christ but who have placed all their hope and trust in God. That's why we can say that not all who believe are among us, nor are those who are among us all believers.

This morning we must try to identify with John the Baptist as the precursor since we truly believe that God wants to advance salvation history by using women and men who believe in him and who with him form a «community of love», as Saint Paul calls it today (Phil 1:9). In his letter to the Philippians Saint Paul tells us, «From the first day until now you have been my collaborators in the work of the Gospel». (Phil 1:5). The community that saves the people is made up of those who collaborate in evangelization. «God is my witness», says Saint Paul, «and this is my prayer: that your community of love may abound more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight» (Phil 1:8-9).

I am very glad to be able to make this distinction and to claim this immense honor for all those who want to be called church or Christian community. To earn that title it is not enough simply to meet and discuss the Bible. What God asks of us is something more profound: he asks of us the desire for conversion of the precursor, John the Baptist. He wants us to identify with

this man who, in the midst of empires and kingdoms and political systems, stood his ground as the missionary of Christ.

Certainly during the time of John the Baptist there were great political entanglements! There were political groups just as there are today. Some were in favor of the empire; others were against it. Among those who opposed the empire, there were different parties, what today we'd call political organizations of the people, and some of these had armed factions. The history of Jesus' time is amazingly like our own. John the Baptist didn't create a party for himself but instead became a herald of the King. He spoke words of salvation for one and all, as we'll see next Sunday. The Lord calls everyone to be part of his people, but he is also ready to reject anyone who is committing sin, even if the person happens to be a king. And it was precisely because John called Herod to account that he had to pay with his head; he was brave enough to denounce the sin of the king himself (Mark 6:17-29). Still, John did not identify with any faction. The Christian community must grow in love, in faith, and in the word of God. The people of God through its communities must be an expression of the love that saves. To the extent that it is truly Christian, our community is saving our country today.

Dear sisters and brothers, dear priests, dear lay ministers, dear sisters doing pastoral work, dear catechists, dear celebrators of the word—you are a great crowd of people doing pastoral ministry! Blessed be God! Still, let us take pains to make the church truly a precursor of the Lord. May our work in the church be so intimately identified with Christ that his love truly becomes our community's love and his radiance truly becomes our community's radiance. Let us think as Christ thinks, and let us pursue the liberation of our people as a part of salvation history, which should shed light on all the historical forms of salvation.

There is only one history of salvation, and by its light we should illuminate every attempt to save, liberate, and vindicate human beings. All these attempts will be authentic only to the extent that they aspire to, identify with, and are guided by salvation in Christ. They will be false and spurious to the extent that they distance themselves from the mind of Christ by yielding to vengeance, radicalism, and prejudice. The only efforts to save the people who are truly of Christ are the ones that seek the common good of the people by the strength of the Lord; those that seek only the benefit of a particular faction are not of Christ. In the present political and historical setting the church, like John the Baptist, must be the protest of the Lord; she must be the voice ever crying out in the desert: «Prepare the way of the Lord!» (Luke 3:4). This call goes forth to the hearts of all of us so that we will truly seek the encounter with God that will make us blessed even on this earth.

This is something I want to stress, dear sisters and brothers: to the extent that we seek out this history of salvation, we also become incarnate in the history of our people. There is often a tendency to think that the religious sensibility of the Christian community distances us or alienates us (as we say today) from the realities of earth. But the very thing we're learning this morning is that God wants to save us in history and that the more we make the history of El Salvador our own history, the more we will have Christ within us and among us. So we don't need to import into El Salvador any form of imperialism. The salvation of God is right here in our people and in our history. Christ is right here, he is Salvadoran. Those who best understand our history will also best understand how God wants to liberate and save this people of El Salvador. We don't have to learn from other places what we already know here because of the faith we have in our own people.

Our church and our history²

And so as part of my sermon, but also to throw light on our concrete community, my third point will treat of our church and our history. As you analyze for yourselves this providential message of God that has been given to us today, consider the things that must be done in our church and in our history if these are to reflect the history of God's salvation in El Salvador. Or conversely, what things are there in our Salvadoran history or even in our Salvadoran church which do *not* reflect God's kingdom and which we must therefore eradicate as sinful? For sin is everything that is opposed to God's saving design in history.

How has the past week been in our church? Yesterday we celebrated the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This mystery of the Virgin Mary inspires not only particular communities but the whole people of God to celebrate the dawning of liberation for the peoples. The sinless Mary, lifted untainted into heaven after passing through secular history, is the perfect image of a church that desires to collaborate with God in saving the world, as Mary did. No human being collaborated in saving the world the way Mary did; no one has entered into such close solidarity with God as Mary did. That's why her very person projects the image of the saving force that brings about human liberation.

At Puebla the pope stated that «devotion to the Virgin forms part of the very identity of Latin America»³. It is impossible to understand Latin American history without taking into account devotion to the Virgin. We have felt this very especially on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, though perhaps not as much as the people do in Nicaragua, where it is a national holiday. In any case, this mystery makes Mary the object of much love in our communities. I want to evoke here, as part of our living history, the image of the Immaculate Conception in Cojutepeque. That city was the capital of the republic when Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, and there in Cojutepeque is where the crown was placed and where it can now be seen. The crown was a symbol of the Salvadoran people's great faith and their belief in the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception. But there are also other places that celebrate the feast with great devotion.

I had the privilege of celebrating the feast in a town in Guatemala, right beside a scenic lake where the Carmelite congregation has a house for spiritual retreats. Seven young women made their religious profession there and committed themselves to the service of God on this lovely feast of the Virgin. I was pleasantly surprised to realize that our radio station YSAX can be heard perfectly well there on the heights of Carmel Juyú, and no doubt they're listening to me now. Please receive our greeting and our gratitude for the wonderful hospitality you offered me there and for the joy I felt in celebrating the Virgin's feast in the midst of such an outpouring of devotion to her⁴.

Speaking of religious sisters, there in Guatemala Mother Marta Alicia Reyes celebrated twenty-five years of religious consecration to God, and here at home Sister Nelly Rodríguez of

² In this third reflection Romero combines the usual sections on the «Life of the church» and «Events of the week».

³ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Zapopán, Guadalajara», 30 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (11 February 1979).

⁴ Archbishop Romero was in Guatemala from 4 to 8 December 1979 at the invitation of the Carmelite Missionaries of Saint Teresa. He wrote in his diary, «I have felt the benefit of a small vacation in the midst of all the commotion of our present ministry». *Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Su diario*, Archbishop's Office of San Salvador, San Salvador, 2000, 324.

the Colegio Sagrado Corazón yesterday celebrated her silver jubilee. Also yesterday, Father Alejandro Pineda Rodríguez celebrated his first Mass in Ahuachapán—another homage offered to the Virgin of our peoples.

The people of San Nicolás Obispo, Tonacatepeque, celebrated their patronal feast and they're now preparing for confirmation on December 30, when many young people will receive the sacrament of the Holy Spirit.

The diocese of Santiago de María held another ecclesial event that was a sign of the redeeming presence of Christ among us. They celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of that diocese, which was established on 2 December 1954 and is now being led by Bishop Rivera Damas. At that time Pius XII only dreamt of the church presence that is now the reality there. The jubilee celebration featured some reflection on the theology of the local church and the bishop. Wherever there is an episcopal seat and a bishop who is a successor of the apostles there is a special presence of God's salvation in history, namely, the church. And the church has been working there intensely, thank God. During the celebration we regretted the silly and disrespectful attitude of the People's Revolutionary Bloc, which occupied the kiosk in the park and proceeded to make a lot of noise while the celebration was in progress. The celebration was a success nevertheless, thanks to the fine organization. We learned that the young protesters were not from Santiago de María. We really feel that such ridiculous displays are an offense against the people's sincere devotion.

This week Bishop Rivera and Monsignor Urioste left for Holland to represent our archdiocese, which was invited by an ecumenical solidarity group to send people to speak at activities aimed at raising funds for the development of our Latin American peoples. So this coming week our dear brothers, Bishop Rivera and Monsignor Urioste, will be busy in that regard. I recommend them to your prayers so that their talks on the situation in this country and in Latin America will inspire a sense of communion in the hearts of the generous Christians of Holland and bring help for our peoples.

With regard to aid organizations, this week we had visits from two German institutions, Adveniat and Misereor. Their representatives were informed of how effectively we use their generous assistance, which comes from the Christians of Germany. One of the projects they support is the work of the sisters in the rural areas. The representative from Adveniat was able to greet all of them since they happened to be making their spiritual exercises together. He recognized the tremendous work we are able to accomplish among ourselves thanks to German aid. As you can see, the missionary spirit of the church is quite alive.

In Chalatenango a group of young men are taking a graduate equivalency course. When I visited them I was pleased with their optimism about being able to study for the priesthood. Let us pray hard to the Lord so that these young men with late vocations can actually become priests. They will certainly be very generous because they realize that their vocation is doubly meritorious.

In our diocese there are also catechumenal communities that are continuing with their programs these days. They are part of the life of this community of ours that is nourished by the word of God and by faithful Christian living.

This evening a Cursillo of Christianity will be finishing. The cursillo movement has a method for developing lay spirituality that has not lost its vitality. We thank God that it is inspiring conversion and apostolic work in many lay people.

The schools of Fe y Alegría are another activity of our community of faith and love. This week they finalized their labors in five academies where they give technical training to young people of both sexes. This work of helping our young people develop skills is now celebrating its tenth anniversary, and it deserves great praise.

The members of the parish community of Quezaltepeque are on their way to resolving the split which has troubled that town. I want to remind you that Father Roberto has remained faithful, thank God, to his parish ministry despite the difficulties he's had. I hope that the community will find a solution soon so that once again there is just one flock under one pastor.

In the parish of San Martín there was a false alarm. The pastor, Father Rutilio Sánchez, was denounced for having an arms deposit, and the National Police were about to carry out an operation there. However, they had the good sense to consult first with the archbishop, who intervened. The pastor agreed to allow a search of the rectory at the parish; Father Tilo himself and two witnesses from the archbishop's office searched the house. The conclusion was that the denunciation was pure calumny, so the reputation of that rectory has been cleared. A false report tried to involve me in the matter, saying that I was responsible for turning Father Tilo over to the police. I want to protest against that kind of unfair misrepresentation. I know there's an effort to discredit the archbishop, but I can call as witnesses the police, Father Tilo himself, and the archbishop's office. Everything possible was done to defend Father Tilo, not to betray him. (Applause)

Our Christian community is working hard to organize confirmations like the one we celebrated in the church of Corazón de María. The service took place in Flor Blanca and was organized by all the pastors of the vicariate of La Asunción.

We also celebrated with great fervor the anniversary of the two priests who were killed on November 28. Father Nicolás Rodríguez was killed nine years ago, and Father Ernesto Barrera one year ago. The coincidence of these two crimes occurring on the same date should make us reflect on the fact that ours is a society that kills its priests.

Father Mariano Brito, chancellor of the curia and pastor of the Colonia Luz, has returned from a trip to recover his health. Besides his restored health he brings many testimonies of solidarity and many reports on the pastoral experience of the Christian communities in South America.

With sadness I report that the Good Shepherd Sisters, who have been true angels in the women's prison, are going to have to stop offering that service to the church for reasons beyond their control. However, they have promised to keep collaborating in the prison ministry of the archdiocese. Let us hope that the Ministry of Justice, which is in charge of the prison, can work a miracle and keep the sisters from leaving.

Sister Rosa Beatriz Vaquerano will be leaving our diocese soon. She has worked with tremendous pastoral zeal in Plan del Pino. She's going to Spain, but we hope that she'll also return. Two Belgian sisters were seriously injured in an accident. I ask your prayers for their

quick recovery. The Passionist Fathers have now consecrated the first young Salvadoran for their congregation. We hope that there will be many more Passionists following in his footsteps.

We have confirmation that Abbot Roger from Taizé will be with us for the Christmas youth festival that is being prepared by our seminary for Saturday the twenty-second and Sunday the twenty-third. An all-night vigil will be held from Saturday to Sunday. Details will be soon forthcoming, but I want to urge all you young people to take part and to hear this fascinating man who has attracted young people from all over the world. Right now he is in South America, and he had to change his itinerary in order to be able to come and spend Christmas with us. He'll be here on December 22 and 23. During the festival some of the seminarians will be solemnly commissioned for ministries, thus taking another step toward the priesthood they long for.

We are also going to celebrate the World Day of Peace, as the Holy Father has requested. The pope has worked hard for unity in these times, giving us an example of how we also should work for the gift of unity among Christian churches. So I now urge everyone, all Catholics and Protestants of good will, to prepare for this celebration of Unity Week, which is traditionally held from January 18 to 25.

In recent days the pope has made some statements of great value to us. I want to refer to his reflections because they throw marvelous light on our Salvadoran history. As pastor of our church that carries on the history of the world's salvation, the pope is pastor of the whole world and so illumines the history of all peoples. For that reason we can draw from his allocutions much enlightenment for understanding the history of El Salvador, such as the statement he made about the true meaning of progress. What he said was this: «The Gospel contains an invitation to progress. Today the world is filled with many invitations to progress. No one wants to be against progress! But the problem is knowing what true progress consists in, and how we can and should work for progress»⁵. The pope explained what he meant by commenting on the liturgical texts of Advent, saying that true progress is that which bears within itself a profound sense of the truth of Christ. There can be no progress without Christ⁶. Advent, therefore, places us at a marvelous juncture at this time in El Salvador, for it is a time when we are told that God saves our people in history and that salvation and progress will come to us to the extent that the people hold fast to Christ, who is the saving God.

The pope also gave a marvelous explanation of the relationship between the public and the private sectors. Appealing to lawyers, jurists, and the world in general, the pope stated, «Certain countries have juridical systems in which the public sphere is given such great priority that the private sphere is practically negated. There are other juridical systems, in contrast, where collective demands and interests, including the most basic ones, are subjected to the private sphere and to individual interests. In both cases», said the pope, «people are made victims, whether in their private or in their social dimensions, of legislative power that is used as an instrument to dominate either the individual or the social body instead of being used as an instrument of justice»⁷. The pope therefore stated, «There is an urgent need for a

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the Parish of San Clemente», 2 December 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (16 December 1979).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, «Allocution to the Union of Italian Catholic Jurists», 7 December 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (27 January 1980).

valiant effort to restrain, on the one hand, the disconcerting ways in which the private sphere is exploited for public ends and, on the other, the ways in which the public sphere is manipulated for private ends»⁸. (Applause) Do you see how this concept applies to our situation, in which a minority seeks legislation that favors them while the majority of the people count for nothing? We do well to keep in mind what the pope has said, «There is only one criterion for deciding this complex matter: respect for the human person»⁹. Whether they are rich or poor, human beings are what is most important in the social system of any country.

The pope also referred to the role of women in the world and to the mission of teachers. With regard to women the pope said, «Your essential contribution at this juncture of society consists above all in your resolute commitment and your unambiguous witness in favor of whatever shores up the true dignity of human beings and contributes to their success at both the personal and the community level»¹⁰. The pope warned against manipulating the discourse about women for the sake of causes that are sometimes self-seeking¹¹.

What he told the teachers was that they had a duty to keep their knowledge and their pedagogy up to date and that they should know how to inculcate human ideals in the children and young people entrusted to them¹².

A meeting of bishops and cardinals from forty-four countries is being held in Manila to study how closely attuned the church is to the concerns of the Asian continent. I am delighted to think that our own Latin American meetings in Medellín and Puebla have set a pattern for what is happening now in other places. I would only like to ask of you, Christians of Latin America, that you support the efforts of the Asian church, which is trying to coordinate the message of salvation history with the work of saving our peoples. Let us try truly to be what the bishops in Asia are seeking: a church fully attentive to what the people are experiencing.

The World Council of Churches, according to our newspapers, has shown interest in making human rights a major concern for the pastoral work of the Protestant churches. The following statement was made by Marta Benavides and Mr. Pineda, who have come here with a special commission of the National Council of Churches: «During these days the commission has seen popular demonstrations take place without incident; people's organizations can express themselves through the mass media; labor conflicts are resolved. At the same time, the commission has seen published in the press the positions of sectors that do not agree with certain changes. There is certainly much work to be done here. There is also fascism, along with vestiges of administrative corruption».

What I want to point out in this appraisal on the part of our Protestant friends is the concern for human rights that is evident among our separated brethren. At the same time, we regret that many non-Catholic Christian denominations among us have opted for a form of Christianity that is so spiritualized that they believe that concern for earthly affairs is a betrayal of the Gospel. Unfortunately it is this type of Protestantism that is most widespread in

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to Participants in the Twelfth National Congress of the Italian Association of Catholic Teachers», 7 December 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (27 January 1980).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse at the Italian Women's Center», 7 December 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (10 February 1980).

El Salvador; it views the Catholic Church as having abandoned the Gospel and become communist. We are saddened by the fact that many Protestant denominations, because they take this alienating, compliant stance that is not troubled by earthly injustices, receive from the official regime the kind of support that has been denied the Catholic Church. The church has been persecuted because it preached justice and right order for the people whereas the Protestants have received only benefits precisely for helping to keep the people dormant. (Applause)

Let us hope that this mission that the National Council of Churches of the United States has sent to El Salvador and Central America will awaken our Protestant sisters and brothers from their slumber and their faulty spirituality. And I say this with all the more reason about our fellow Catholics who still think that the Gospel can prescind from justice in the world; they don't believe that the true Gospel of Christ is concerned about the realities that we human beings experience here on earth.

What I have said here, dear sisters and brothers, should be nourishment for our Christian community. Since this community of ours involves the people in salvation history, we must also look at the events of the week and judge them from the saving perspective of God. Even these last few days, however, have been so complicated and so intense that, instead of chronicling them here, I'm going to state certain sets of principles which should throw some light on the reality of El Salvador.

At the same time, I am delighted that the church no longer needs to be the voice of those who have no voice. Now many others are able to speak, and they are speaking. Many for whom we previously spoke are today speaking out boldly about what is happening with the people. Many timid voices are now daring to be heard. Let us hope that our people will be filled with courage and organize and will apply pressure, but let us hope that they do so wisely and correctly so that the people will make progress.

Let us hope one day the church, as the pope said at the OAS, no longer has to be concerned about people's rights because they will be empowered by their own society to exercise those rights themselves¹³. And let us hope that one day our own country is organized in such a way that human rights are truly respected. When that happens, the church will be able to dedicate herself more directly to her particular mission of evangelization. That is what I attempt to do here because it will always be necessary to illuminate human history with the light of salvation history so that people will be saved. What I want to present to you now, therefore, is not isolated facts but the principles that shed light on those facts.

The most obvious conflict this week is the one that has arisen between the interests of the majority and the interests of the minority. That conflict became especially manifest this week in both the economic and the political realms.

In the economic arena the oligarchic sector has, like some people's organizations, ordered production to be halted in order to defend their interests. The cotton growers were using this tactic until the security forces removed the workers from the Entre Ríos facility. By the way, I want to say that the intervention that was requested of the church in that Entre Ríos

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, «Discourse to the Organization of American States», 6 October 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 November 1979).

occupation had no other purpose than that of working toward a peaceful solution and avoiding bloodshed and violence. We thank God that the church could help out in that regard, but a more thorough resolution of the problem must be guided by enlightened principles.

Next week the thirty-five agricultural, industrial, commercial, and service associations that make up the ANEP have decided to organize a half-day shutdown in the metropolitan area to express their solidarity with those who are suffering more or less violent pressure for defending the interests of the majority of the people¹⁴. For their part, the *campesinos* and the organized workers have also declared strikes on the estates and in the factories, and in some cases they're holding hostages until their demands are met.

The first group, that is, the sector of the oligarchy, has requested the intervention of the security forces to protect their interests and their private property. The second group, that is, the sector of the workers and the *campesinos*, has on occasion relied on armed people's groups to press their demands. I hope I'm wrong, but it seems likely that the right-wing forces, seeing that the armed forces are no longer doing their bidding, will attempt to create paramilitary groups in order to defend their interests. Certain leaflets and campaigns in the posh neighborhoods give some indication of this danger of the right resorting to arms.

Where is justice? It is necessary to study each concrete case. We would never finish this homily if we tried to analyze them all here. I only want to remind you of the principles that the pope has already laid down for us. What is the goal of progress? It's not that just a few people have everything while the rest of the people have nothing. Progress consists in everyone attaining the truth and the salvation of Christ. The pope has also told us that the main criterion in all our relations must be human beings. The criterion of justice that must prevail should not be that of guaranteeing the preservation of accumulated wealth; it should be assuring that a society's wealth and private property fulfill a social function; that is, all ownership should allow the basic needs of all Salvadorans to be satisfied.

With regard to the wage differentials established by the minimum wage law, which have been the cause of various disturbances, we should certainly remember that the criterion has been that the minimum wage for coffee harvesters can be paid out of the proceeds from the crop but that such is not the case with cotton and sugarcane. Still, we should also ask whether such a norm should justify the huge difference of six *colones* and twenty-five cents between some workers and others. The fact is that all those who are working have the same needs¹⁵. In saying this I don't mean that the producers alone should be responsible for bringing all the salaries up to fourteen *colones* and twenty-five cents. I have personally witnessed the difficulties of the producers, especially the small ones, in dealing with pressures and demands that are impossible to satisfy. Here, then, is where the intervention of the government is needed. The government must find some way to redistribute the revenues that God has provided for the benefit of all Salvadorans.

A similar case can be seen in the letter of the Association of Salvadoran Bus Owners, which states that they have presented a number of petitions but have received in return only words;

¹⁴ «The Productive Sector Decrees Temporary Work Stoppage», Communication of the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP), 7 December 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (8 December 1979).

¹⁵ «Manifesto of the FECCAS-UTC to All the Salvadoran People», 6 December 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (8 December 1979).

nothing they request has been granted. Recalling that the revolutionary junta promised the People's Revolutionary Bloc that the fares on the five primary routes would be lowered, the drivers state, «We are in agreement with lowering the fares, but we insist that our own requests be granted as well».

This is a situation where the common good may require that the government provide subsidies so that justice is done by the people. We know that even in countries with greater economic resources there are hotels, even for tourists, that have to be subsidized by the state. How much greater is the need here since it's not a matter of luxury but of the subsistence of our *campesinos*, whose only cash income during the year is what they earn for harvesting coffee, cotton, and sugarcane. So let all this be kept in mind when considering the common good so that there can be a quick resolution to the discontent resulting from these situations.

There is always a need for structures of justice and of fair distribution that are better than the ones that now prevail among us. The situation is urgent. Let us hope that government officials are strong enough to move forward despite all the blustering threats of the wealthy. Let them not be daunted, as earlier regimes were daunted when they saw the need for changing structures but didn't dare to follow through because the power of money was stronger than the will of the government. (Applause) At the present time I would wish that the main concern of the ANEP and all the others defending their own interests were not safeguarding their status but seeing how the country's economy can make it possible for all Salvadorans to sustain themselves and their families with dignity by the fruit of their labors. This is the ideal that we must seek among all of us. (Applause)

At the same time, I make an appeal to *campesinos* and workers not to resort to violence to defend their interests, especially since you have interlocutors who are willing to discuss your tremendous difficulties, as impossible as they may seem to resolve. Do everything in your power to engage in dialogue and to use all the peaceful means available.

Some very positive measures have been taken this week, such as the prohibition of the sale of properties of more than one hundred hectares¹⁶. The aim of this measure is to guarantee the possibility of agrarian reform in the future.

Politically this conflict between the minority and the great majority is revealed in the many statements of different organizations, parties, and associations, which are supported by various demonstrations. In different ways efforts are being made to pressure the junta to support political and economic measures which favor some interests rather than others. In order to resolve these conflicts in the political sphere, the criteria we mentioned before should prevail: the placing of human beings before everything else and the search for truth as the road to true progress.

With regard to the demonstrations, I have noticed that various people's organizations, and even the bourgeoisie, are trying to mobilize women¹⁷. Don't forget what the pope said: the participation of women in politics is valid, but women shouldn't allow themselves to be used to

¹⁶ «Government Decree No. 43», 7 December 1979, in *La Prensa Gráfica* (9 December 1979).

¹⁷ The People's Revolutionary Bloc organized a mobilization of women during the last days of November. *La Prensa Gráfica* (29 November 1979). Also, during the week of December 2 to 8 the main newspapers in the country published many paid advertisements of the Crusade for Peace and Jobs, which called on women to take part in a demonstration on December 10. *La Prensa Gráfica* (6 December 1979).

advance particular interests, especially if these are selfish. Women should analyze critically what they should participate in and what they should not. (Applause) Now is the time. Salvadoran women have always had great dignity. May they pay honor to that tradition and not let themselves be manipulated, especially against their will.

The other problem on which I'd like to focus is that of the political prisoners and disappeared persons. Some steps have been taken. The manifesto—or rather the first report—of the commission makes some very valuable recommendations¹⁸. For example, it states that the persons truly responsible for this situation should be put on trial and that the clandestine prisons must be prohibited in the future¹⁹. (Applause)

For me, two of the recommendations are especially valuable today. The first concerns the case of the sacristan of Soyapango, for whom we have ourselves been crying out. Our voice has found an echo in the investigatory commission, which says in its third recommendation, «A process should be immediately begun against the person responsible for the detention and disappearance of the sacristan Tomás Flores García, who on October 16 of this year was arrested by the Treasury Police in the city of Soyapango and has not been seen since. According to the evidence gathered, we can reasonably presume that he died on the compound of that security force. This evidence has been made available to the court responsible for trying that case»²⁰. (Applause) We have, therefore, a bright light being shone on this case that we have often decried. Finally we know now, thanks to the evidence of the investigatory commission, where the sacristan of Soyapango disappeared.

We are also happy with the fifth recommendation: «Compensation should be given to the families of the disappeared persons whose deaths can be verified or presumed. The amount should be determined by a socio-economic study carried out for that purpose»²¹. I believe that the junta has decided to act in this matter and is willing to carry out these recommendations. Let us hope that it will be done effectively.

I want to thank the investigatory commission for their considerate letter of December 3, in which they responded to the claim or suggestion I made in my homily two weeks ago. They explained to me the objective of the commission, and they stated that what I requested in my homily was included as part of the recommendations they made to the junta. Many thanks for that attention and for that clarification.

Despite all this we are still fearful that the steps being taken are very small and that the commission is moving too slowly. There is an urgent need to speed up the procedures so that in a fairly short space of time we will see concrete solutions to these problems that profoundly affect the people. I believe the process is being hobbled by legalism and legalities. Why was it that previously there was never so much talk of respecting the constitution? The constitution was then trampled on in every way possible. Now, precisely when an attempt is being made to reinstate respect for human rights, the laws should not be used to obstruct this process that guarantees human dignity. I want to recall here that great saying of Jesus Christ about the

¹⁸ The reference is to the Special Investigatory Commission for Political Prisoners and Disappeared Persons, established by the Revolutionary Governing Junta on 7 November 1979.

¹⁹ «First Report of the Special Investigatory Commission for Political Prisoners and Disappeared Persons», 23 November 1979, in *Orientación* (9 December 1979).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Sabbath: «The law exists for human beings, not human beings for the law» (Mark 2:27). In order that peace may soon return to the country, let us hope that the government takes real steps forward without letting itself get entangled in a bunch of legalisms. (Applause)

Another way in which salvation history relates to the history of our people has to do with the kidnappings. This week Adolfo McEntee was kidnapped for the second time²². Also, the ambassador of South Africa has not yet been freed though I offered my service for his case²³. Nor have Jaime Batlle and Jaime Hill been released²⁴. Once again, then, I earnestly beseech the kidnappers to respect the dignity and the freedom of these brothers of ours.

In this matter of kidnappings, I also deplore the abduction of the thirteen-year-old child Fidel Ángel Argueta Morales. A ransom of 250,000 *colones* was asked of a family whose economic condition does not allow them to pay such a large sum²⁵. Though this case has, thank God, already been resolved for the best, I want to take time to congratulate Fidel's family for having recovered the boy and for the unity, courage, and Christian spirit with which they confronted the problem. I also want to congratulate their friends and neighbors, the mass media, the Boy Scouts, and others as well for the spontaneous and generous collaboration they gave the family so that they could recover the kidnapped child. Fidel's family has asked me to thank all those who helped them, and I urge all Christians to reflect on what it means to kidnap a thirteen-year-old child and how much suffering that causes. Let's work together to avoid a repetition of such deeds, especially when they're made to look like common crimes.

For that reason I also want to unite myself in Christian solidarity with the family of Douglas Vladimir Fuentes, the boy who was shot dead in Apopa, along with a watchman. I've received a written testimony which corrects the distortions that appeared in *El Diario de Hoy*²⁶. It says that the child was sitting on the steps with his mother at eight-thirty, when the watchman came for his pay. When a car arrived and two men got out of it, the watchman placed himself between the child and his mother. The child was hit by a bullet that passed through the side of his waist; he died before arriving at the clinic. The letter offers other details, but I'm especially interested in this observation: «Archbishop, I don't know whether more people will die this way for lack of prompt purging of the security forces. We will continue to see our people die slowly of social ills since many military officials are trying to salvage the feudal system from which they profit. I believe that the Salvadoran Armed Forces should join in the people's revolution in order to free us completely from the apparatus of state oppression that still is very strong». (Applause) In this regard, there are confidential reports that the Armed Forces have apparently acquired new trucks and radio patrol cars. What's the purpose of all this?

Our Legal Aid Office has denounced other clandestine sites and has provided the investigatory commission with information about some arrests that were only recently revealed because people were afraid to report them before. Legal Aid has also helped to

²² A coffee grower and businessman of Santa Ana, he was kidnapped on 3 December 1979. *El Diario de Hoy* (4 December 1979).

²³ Archibald Gardner Dunn, Ambassador of South Africa in El Salvador, was kidnapped by the FPL on 28 November 1979. Archbishop Romero condemned this kidnapping in a message dated 1 December 1979: «About the Kidnapping of the Ambassador of South Africa», in *Orientación* (9 December 1979).

²⁴ Two Salvadoran businessmen kidnapped on 13 September 1979 and 31 October 1979 respectively.

²⁵ *El Diario de Hoy* (4 December 1979).

²⁶ *El Diario de Hoy* (7 and 8 December 1979).

resolve some labor conflicts, such as the one at the LEÓN factory, and they are working now at HILASAL, ARCO, and IMES.

Finally, I want to thank the family of Don Carlos Ayala and Doña Cecilia de Ayala for their donation of an organ for our cathedral. The generosity they've shown has impressed me greatly. God will reward them for this gift.

I want to conclude by expressing my gratitude for the congratulations I've received regarding the doctorate *honoris causa* that the University of Louvain will confer on me next February 2²⁷. As I've said on many occasions, I don't feel that all these honors are for me, nor do they make me vain. Rather, I am happy to share them with you, dear sisters and brothers, because of our pastoral ministry of evangelically defending human dignity and human rights. You are the ones receiving all these honors. It is in your name that I will receive the degree if God wills.

Let us finally conclude our evangelical reflection for today. We have seen how the great variety of events that so tightly entangle our history do not succeed in entangling the golden thread of God's salvation, which continues to be announced to the peoples. Today's readings clearly reveal to us that God saves nations in their history, and that is also true for El Salvador. God is saving El Salvador in its history. Let us be filled with hope. Let us not live this month of December as if there were no Christmas. Rather, let us celebrate Christmas in this gloom of December, whose very darkness makes all the more visible the bright hope of history's Savior, who will come to save our country. Let it be so. (Applause)

²⁷ «Letter of the Rector of the Catholic University of Louvain», 5 November 1979, in *Orientación* (2 December 1979).