

178

## I Bring You Great News: A Saviour Has Been Born to You!

24 December 1979

Isaiah 62:1-5

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

I congratulate you, dear sisters and brothers, not only because it is Christmas but because you are courageous. Many people are frightened and are locking their doors, and many of our churches are giving way to psychosis, but the wide-open doors of the cathedral are an image of our confidence and hope in the Redeemer who is born to us. Here in the cathedral this evening you are giving a living example of what Christmas should be. Here in the middle of the world—despite the danger, the vicissitudes, the psychoses, the fears—there is hope and there is joy, and they are not simply feigned. Our hope and joy are not like the courage that has no rhyme or reason; rather, they reveal the profound reality that dwells in the heart of the church and should be the powerful driving force that enlightens every Christian.

If we try to reflect on the marvelous event presented to us just now in the three sacred readings, I think we'll find three ideas that will serve as our message for this year in El Salvador. First of all, the angel says to the shepherds, «I bring you great news: a Savior has been born to you!» (Luke 2:10-11). What this means is that a principle of ever-eternal newness and renewal has been introduced into history. Second, the angels tell the shepherds, «This will be the sign for you: you will find him wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger» (Luke 2:12). Here I find the image of a God who immerses himself in human misery and infuses our suffering and pain with divine meaning. And third, the multitude of angels sing, «Glory to God in the heavens» (Luke 2:13-14). This is the great invitation Christ extends to us: our destiny is tied up with the glory of God, which means that we must live brimming with optimism and never flagging.

### «I bring you great news: a Savior has been born to you»

First of all, I say, the birth of Christ means that God is injecting newness into human life and history. Until Christ was born, history was growing old, but now it is rejuvenated. It is like when a farmer grafts a shoot onto a dying tree trunk—that's how the prophets announced it. This very night we hear the prophet Isaiah speaking about the desert's flourishing: «The one who was called "Forsaken" shall now be called "Beloved"» (Isa 64:4). Everything that seemed to be dying of sadness is now alive with joy.

If we are seeking a profound explanation for our Christmas joy, which many people feel but few understand, then we find it here: newness has entered the world. Christmas is always new, and it is always *news*. Every Christmas Eve, even though twenty centuries have passed, the angel keeps announcing, «I bring you great news», and the world is renewed with this fresh shoot that has been grafted onto history.

How I wish, dear fellow Christians, that we would assimilate this news so as to make it our way of life, our proclamation, our confidence, our security. How I wish that we would be inspired, not by the pessimism, sadness, psychosis, and fear all around us, but by the angel's confident message: «I bring great news». Whatever catastrophes may come, there is always renewal. God has come, and the Spirit of God «makes all things new» (Rev 21:5).

Despite all the changes in history since Christ was born, this kingdom of God that Christ brought into the world is ever an inspiration for each new age. There's not enough time tonight to recount the profound changes in history that have been inspired precisely by that holy, wholesome treasure preserved in the church of Jesus Christ.

Today in El Salvador we are also experiencing a time of renovation, one that has often been compared to childbirth. The nation is giving birth to a new age, and that is why there is pain and anguish; that is why there is bloodshed and suffering. «When a woman gives birth», Christ says, «she experiences distress, but when the new child is born, she forgets all her pains» (John 16:21). These sufferings will pass, and we'll be left with the joy that at this painful moment of childbirth we remain Christians and that we live holding fast to faith in Christ, who never lets us surrender to pessimism.

How I would like tonight to shout out over all the fields of El Salvador the great news of the angels: «Fear not! A Savior has been born!» (Luke 2:10-11). What now appears hopeless, a dead-end street, is being marked out by God and filled with hope. Tonight is a night for lively optimism. We don't know how, but God will rescue our country. The new age will shine bright with the good news of Christ who «makes all things new» (Rev 21:5). While the cycles of history grow old, the Good News remains always alive, for the great renewal of the Spirit of Christ was permanently implanted on the night we're commemorating right now.

**«This will be the sign for you: you will find him wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger»**

My second point was that today's gospel tells us that Christ was wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask the Redeemer, «Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?» Christ sent them back with the answer: «Tell John the Baptist what you observe: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised—and most marvelous of all—the poor have the Good News proclaimed to them! And blessed are those who take no offense at me!» (Luke 7:20,22-23).

This is the message of Jesus who was wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger, poor as the poorest of the poor. I don't think that even the poorest people are born in caves on a cushion of hay, but for Jesus there was not even a decent bed where his poor mother could bring him to light. The penniless Christ wrapped in cloth is the image of the God who humbles himself. It is what theology calls kenosis: he emptied himself of all his glory; God appeared as a slave and let himself be crucified and buried as a criminal.

This descent of God has great meaning for us tonight. Let us not seek Christ in the opulence of the world or among the idolatries of wealth. Let us not seek him in the struggles for power or among the intrigues of the mighty. God is not there. Let us seek God where the angels say he is: lying in a manger on a little straw, wrapped in the poor bit of cloth that a humble

woman of Nazareth could afford. There we find resting the God who has become man, the King of the ages who makes himself available to us as a poor little child.

If we want to find the child Jesus today, we shouldn't contemplate the lovely figures in our nativity scenes. We should look for him among the malnourished children who went to bed tonight without anything to eat. We should look for him among the poor newspaper boys who will sleep tonight on doorsteps, wrapped in their papers. We should look for him among the poor shoeshine boys who perhaps have earned enough to buy a little gift for their mothers. Or who knows, maybe some of those boys failed to sell all their papers and will be given a tremendous scolding by their stepfather or stepmother. How sad is the situation of our children! All this Jesus takes on himself this very night. Or think of the young *campesino* or worker who has no job or suffers some infirmity. Not all is joy tonight. There is much suffering. There are many broken homes. There is much pain and poverty.

But let us not view all this with demagoguery, sisters and brothers. In taking all this upon himself, the God of the poor is showing us the redemptive value of human suffering. He is showing us the value it has for redeeming the poverty and suffering which are the world's cross. There is no redemption without the cross, but that does not mean our poor people should be passive. We were indoctrinating the poor when we told them, «It is God's will for you to live poor and hopeless on the margins of society». That is not true! God in no way wants social injustice. God demands justice whenever there exists the tremendous sin of oppression. The greatest violence comes from those who deprive so many people of happiness, from those who are killing the many people who are starving. God is telling the poor, as he told the oppressed Christ when he was carrying his cross, «You will save the world by making your suffering a protest of salvation and by not conforming to what God does not want. You will save the world if you die in your poverty while yearning for better times, making your whole life a prayer, and embodying everything that seeks to liberate the people from this situation».

The pope recalled this in Mexico when he said that devotion to Mary was not for the weak of heart<sup>1</sup>. Mary knew how to endure flight into exile, marginalization, poverty, oppression. Mary was the daughter of a people dominated by the Roman Empire. She saw her son taken prisoner and tortured. She saw him die unjustly on the cross. Mary cries out in holy defiance, declaring that God «will send the proud and the arrogant away empty-handed and, if necessary, bring the mighty down from their thrones. At the same time he will give his grace to the lowly, to those who trust in his mercy» (Luke 1:52-53).

By being born this way, Christ has a lesson for the poor countries and the humble hostels; he has a lesson for those freezing at night in the coffee harvest and those sweating by day in the cotton fields. He is teaching them that all this signifies something and that we shouldn't miss the meaning of suffering. Dear brothers and sisters, if there's one thing that makes me sad in this hour of El Salvador's redemption, it is the thought that many false redeemers are allowing the suffering that is our people's force of redemption to go to waste. They use the people's hunger and marginalization for demagoguery. The people's suffering should not be made a motive for resentment and desperation; it should make people look to the justice of God and realize that this situation must change. And if necessary, like those who

---

<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, «Homily at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Zapopán in Guadalajara», 30 January 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (11 February 1979).

have already given their lives, we must be ready to die, but always with the hope that comes from our Christian faith.

How I wish that child, nestled in straw and humble cloth, would speak to us this Christmas of the sublime value of poverty! How I wish that all of us who are reflecting here would bestow divine value on our sufferings great and small! Starting tonight, let us be more intent on offering to God whatever we suffer. Let it be joined with the sacrifice of the altar and be made into a host that redeems and sanctifies our lives, our homes, our society.

If there were less demagoguery and more holiness among the poor, salvation would come very quickly to our land. If only we knew how to accept today the message of that poor, humble child who gave himself totally to save the world! Tonight we Salvadorans very much resemble the newborn Jesus, for our society is as steeped in poverty as was the Bethlehem of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

### **«Glory to God in the heavens»**

So my third and final thought for Christmas is the song of the angels, «Glory to God in the highest» (Luke 2:14a), which points to the eternal goal of our lives. Let us give the things of earth the relative value they deserve, but let us not give absolute value to wealth, to struggle, or to any party or organization. Nothing on this earth has absolute value. Everything is relative before the one and only Absolute, so that all human glory should be oriented toward God. Let us keep far from us pride, arrogance, and the divinizing of anyone or anything on this earth—far, far from us!

Speaking through the angels, the child in Bethlehem tells us that there is only one God and that we cannot serve that God if we serve the idols of earth. Let us walk this earth always living, struggling, and working just as Christ did. When he was taking leave of this world on the day of his ascension, Christ told the apostles, «I came from the Father, and now I return from the world to the Father» (John 16:28). This is the circuit that must be closed: «I come from God, and I will work in the world at the mission God has given me in bringing me to birth at this time, in this age, in this country, with this vocation, in this situation. I will fulfill my calling so that at the hour of death I can say, “Now I return to the Father”».

Let us live always mindful of our origin in God, never losing sight of our destiny, which is the glory of the Most High. Let us live always nourishing our lives as Christ nourished his: «My bread is to do the will of my Father» (John 4:34). In all the circumstances of life he taught us to pray, «Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven» (Luke 11:2). Nothing else need be done but the will of God. Blessed are those who are in tune with the Father’s will in every moment of their lives. They are the heroes; they are the saints; they are the immortal and blessed ones, the ones who are ready to receive the Christmas message, ordering their lives to the glory of the one and only God, to whom they sing, «Glory to God in the highest heavens» (Luke 2:14a). Those are the heights that our lives will reach when our actions, as humble as they may be, are suffused with the same spirit.

These are the three reflections I offer you, dear brother and sisters. In order to find the secret of joy, let us keep them in mind always, not just on Christmas Eve. Let us remember the child who brought newness into history, into our lives, into El Salvador, into everything that is life and nature. Let us remember the child who was born in a manger and wrapped in cloth so

that our poverty, our pain, and our suffering would make sense to us. Let us remember the child whose crib reminds all of us that our destiny is the glory of God in the highest heavens. May this Eucharist be for us an encounter with the Jesus who every day is alive in our Mass, reminding us of this great message of Christmas. Let it be so! (Applause)