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Giving Thanks, Asking Forgiveness, Beseeking God

**New Year's Eve Mass
31 December 1979**

Numbers 6:22-27

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

Dear sisters and brothers and radio audience, as 1979 comes to an end and we celebrate the liturgy of 1 January 1980, our reflection sails on the waters of time toward the ocean of eternity. If we look only at time, we see how swiftly it passes, how the years go by. If we look concretely at the year that is ending, it's impossible for us to cover all its events in our reflection. I will therefore just give outlines of three chapters that each one of us can fill in, depending on how we have experienced this year that is coming to an end. The first chapter will contain the good things, for which we give thanks to God. The second chapter will be the bad things and the sins that have offended God, and for these we ask forgiveness. And the third chapter will be our uncertainty about the future and what the Lord is preparing for us, which will give us reason to lift our hearts to God in supplication.

Giving thanks to God for the good things

In this first chapter, that of the good things, I urge us all to be grateful to God. Not everything is bad. The optimistic vision of Christians finds more things good than bad. Perhaps it is part of our human psychology that when people suffer they see everything through the lens of pain and distress; they forget all the good things there are despite the suffering. For example, the fact that we find ourselves here, safe and sound and full of life, is a good thing that God has given us, the benefit of life, the benefit of time. Let us remember that many of our sisters and brothers could not reach this final day of the year, and let us thank the Lord that we are here today, at year's end, beholding the profusion of good things that the Lord has done for us. Let us take a good look at this bundle of delights and joys and all the solidarity that we have enjoyed with our families and friends.

Speaking from the church's point of view and as pastor, I give thanks to God because we have lived as church in a way that truly makes us happy. The persecution, the testing, and everything the church has suffered here in El Salvador and in our archdiocese has only served to make her flourish even more. I give thanks to God for everything that has been accomplished by the priests, the pastoral agents, the communities, the schools, and all the institutions that are working in the church. Despite the hostility, the difficulties, and the incomprehension, the church has been faithful to Jesus Christ. Each person and each family, as a small domestic church, has so many things to thank God for: father, mother, brothers and sisters, everything that makes our life memorable.

If we remove the regrettable memories of 1979 from this first chapter, we find a basket of gifts we can offer the Lord, like those beautiful offerings I have so often received in the towns and villages! Those gifts are a wonderful expression of our gratitude to God: the fruits of our land, the bunches of bananas, the fruits, the vegetables, the flowers, the works created by the hands of our people. In reality, the number of good things our land has given us and our people have done is incalculable. For this reason, here at year's end, only congratulations are due to those who have made good use of their time not to lament but to work hard, to produce, to do good, to build up. So much good has been done. Let us thank God that we are numbered among those who are building, those who see the bright side, those who receive with gratitude the work of God and the work of humans, those who are helping the efforts being made by our country. Let us thank the Lord for the goodwill of all those who love this land and want to work to make it better, despite the incomprehension they face from every side.

Let this be just a starting point, sisters and brothers, just a suggestion to help each of you to enter into the cherished parts of your lives. For this end-of-year reflection I invite each of you to enter into your heart and consider the personal goods for which you should give thanks to God. This should be our first sentiment because God makes everything good. Even if we have wept and suffered, there is still much that is good for which we should thank the Lord.

Asking forgiveness for the bad things and the sins that have offended God

On the other hand, we have to recognize sin so that, as sinners united with all sinners, we can say to the Lord, «Forgive us, Lord, for refusing to collaborate with you in making our sisters and brothers happy. Forgive the hatred that nests in our hearts! Forgive us, Lord, for the violence that many have made into a religion. Forgive the fanaticism of those who believe that there is no path except violence, vengeance, and destruction! Forgive those who profess a philosophy of nihilism and nothingness and dedicate themselves to destroying and burning and smashing. They have not collaborated in your work, Lord. Forgive all the negativity, wherever it comes from. Forgive those who want to maintain the unjust conditions in our country. Forgive those who don't let others work for the improvement of the country. Forgive all those who are suffering the consequences of either social or individual sin».

Just today, as I was entering the cathedral, a mother in tears gave me a note and asked me to do something for her son, who was imprisoned on December 30. He is Sergio Doroteo Chávez, a union member of CONELCA. The woman would naturally like to have her son with her on this night of cherished family memories, but they have carried him off to an unknown place for an unknown reason. As this year ends, let us keep in mind all those homes that are bereft of a husband, a father, or sons and daughters, not knowing whether they have been tortured or have suffered in some other way the consequences of this situation that cannot continue for it is a situation of sin.

God does not want us to be unhappy. God does not want weeping that is the fruit of injustice and assaults on human dignity. There have been many offenses against human dignity this year, and much has been destroyed. There has been little collaboration with God. The dark aspects of 1979 seem to set the dominant tone for the year, and those who are given to pessimism would say that there was nothing good about 1979. But that is why I wanted also to proclaim all the good that was there, for that will give us the courage to face sincerely and clearly whatever evil exists. The evil must be taken away by the power of the «Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world» (John 1:29). Our church must work to remove completely

from the face of our country the dominion of iniquity, the dominion of Satan, that hellish dominion sadly reigning in all shapes and forms, seeking to supplant the only One who should reign in time: the Lord God of history.

The end of the year should therefore make us resolve in our hearts neither to collaborate with evil nor to organize for the sake of doing evil. As all Christians should, let us carry the ferment of love and justice and social renewal to our people who so desperately need these values which Christianity offers. These days remind us of the sad saying of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: «He came to his own people, and his own people did not want to accept him» (John 1:11).

Among the good things and the bad things, we must mention the voice of the church that has announced clearly the goodness of God who continues to enlighten us with his revelation and his word. But at the same time the church has denounced those who prefer the darkness to light and have scorned the voice of the church and refused to heed it. Let us hope, now at the end of the year, that their consciences reproach them for having been guilty of refusing to receive God into our country, into our homes, and into our lives.

For all these reasons we ask the Lord for forgiveness. During the rest of this night, let us all spend some time analyzing our own lives. I will do so myself regarding my most important duties as pastor. What could I have done but did not do? What did I do badly? As a limited human being, I am the first to recognize that not everything I've done was good. When I ask the Lord during Mass to forgive my sins of omission, I am indicating the most mysterious chamber of the evil in every heart: what could have been done and was not done. So much emptiness in our lives! So much good we could have done!

Here we are at the end of the year, reflecting together in this cathedral and over the radio. Given all the good things God has showered on us, he had a right to expect a fig tree loaded with fruit on this final night of the year. Who knows whether the Lord will draw close to my life and find nothing but what he found on the fig tree he cursed because it produced no good fruit. «Cut it down», he told the worker; «why should it take up space?» (Luke 13:7). There are so many people living here in El Salvador! There's almost no room for us, some say. Why are there so many if they're not producing holiness? Why are there so many if they're not doing good? Why are there so many if they're only fighting and doing evil and destroying one another? Lord, we are a barren fig tree—have mercy on us! Now at the end of this year we want to make a resolve for the coming year, just as the worker made a pledge to the landowner: «Don't cut it down yet. Leave it to me. I'm going to fertilize it well, and if when you come next year you find no fruit, then cut it down» (Luke 13:8-9).

Let us ask the Lord for another chance, but let us make good use of it. Lord, whatever you want to give us of life, we want to make use of it to produce more. We don't want our lives to leave no trace. We don't want lives that are harmful, useless, and empty. We would like to have our hands full today. How happy we'd be if we had taken full advantage of the 365 days to bring to the altar on this last day of the year a worthy offering, a plentiful harvest of a year rich in holiness, goodness, love, and labor!

Uncertainty about the future

A third chapter for our reflection looks to the future. These days the newspapers and the other media are telling us that the government is passing through a critical, uncertain moment. If those responsible for the government are listening to me tonight, let them be aware that our people, who look to the government as a force that God sends to save and not destroy, are asking them not to fight among themselves. In the future that comes with this new year, we expect of them a noble effort to rise above their own feelings so that what prevails in the end is the good of our common homeland, the good that we all desire.

We want to tell all Salvadorans that it's very true: we live in uncertain times. What awaits us in 1980? Will this be the year of civil war? Will this be the year of total destruction? Have we forfeited the mercy of God with all the blood we've already shed since it was spilt with such hatred, repression, and violence? In the face of this uncertain future, may the Lord have mercy on us. I don't want to be pessimistic. Rather, I want to tell you that we must be sustained by the force of prayer.

As we review, then, from this perspective of time the good and the bad in the past and consider the uncertainty of the new year and beyond, I want to reflect with you, sisters and brothers, on the biblical readings. Today they tell us that we humans cannot do everything but that rather a mysterious force comes to us from above. Precisely on this first day of January the Bible reminds us that God commanded Moses to tell his priests this formula for blessing the people: «May the Lord bless you and keep you! May he let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! May the Lord look kindly on you and give you peace!» (Num 6:24-26). This manner of invoking the name of Yahweh reminded the people of their covenant with God and strengthened their confidence in the Lord.

All the readings today tell us that this confidence is not some illusory sentiment. Rather, as Saint Paul tells us today, it is the people's response to the initiative of God's love: «When the right time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, to rescue those under the law so that we might be adopted as children and heirs and might call God "Father" through the Spirit he has given us» (Gal 4:4-6). And the gospel tells us about the child who was born and was found by the shepherds; to them it was announced that he was the Savior of the world who brings joy to all.

At the end of this year, sisters and brothers, whatever the prospects of pain and suffering and uncertainty that are our human lot, I urge you to raise yourselves up to God's eternity and see flowing from there his blessing, his Son, his forgiveness, his divine adoption that makes us his children and heirs of heaven, his offering to share his eternal life, the eternal destiny to which we are called.

It is here that the year recovers all its greatness, for it is a pilgrimage. We have done nothing more than walk a small stretch in the great pilgrimage of history, which includes all of humankind. It includes our ancestors who are no longer with us, and it includes our descendants who have not yet come into the world. We all form one great humanity traveling in the great pilgrimage of history, while God is working his marvelous wonders in our midst. El Salvador is not the whole world, nor is 1979 the whole of history. They are only small spaces and times among the many marvelous things that God is doing for humankind.

The Lord's providence is a reality. We say «divine providence» so easily, but it means that God is governing. He does not abandon us; he keeps loving us despite our infidelities. The God of our people, the God of our ancestors, the God of our history walks with us—let us not doubt it. This certainty that God has come to be our companion in history makes us realize that the rulers themselves are nothing more than instruments of the Lord our God and that all human beings are called to be collaborators of God. God wants us to join with him in creating our own destiny. Therefore, let us look with serenity toward God despite the instability of our times. God exists. God will not abandon us. God walks with us. God has come.

And so I end with this final thought: How did God come into the world? Today is the first of January, the feast of Mary, Mother of God. Today's gospel told us how the shepherds hurried toward Bethlehem and found the infant in the manger. When Mary heard the marvelous things the shepherds were saying, she «treasured them all, reflecting on them in her heart» (Luke 2:19). Mary has brought God to us. This faithful woman conceived Christ in her mind through faith before she conceived him in her womb. She believed; she placed all her trust in the Lord. And though in Israel she was a poor little nobody, she is the greatest of all today because she was the door through which God entered the world. This is the feast day of the Virgin, an ideal day to begin the year! Mary is the history of the God who becomes human history in her very womb. The Council called her the star of God's pilgrim people (LG 68). There in eternity she is the joy of those who have reached the definitive goal.

But we are still moving in the tide of time. We see the years pass; we see 1979 dying and await the birth of 1980. In heaven this continual passing of time does not exist. Time is an imperfection; time treats of the transitory. Eternity is the eternal now, and Mary enjoys that eternal youthfulness, that eternal beauty that never withers, that life that never dies, eternal life. From that eternity our mother Mary, mother of our spiritual life, is already nourishing us and suckling us so that one day we may be worthy to share in that eternity. But we experience it even now to the extent that we become more Christian here, incorporating more fully to ourselves the eternity that Christ brought to Mary's bosom and offering it to others so that they also become eternal despite the passage of time. People are already eternal when by faith, by love, by the church, by their prayer, by their trust in God they receive the eternity that God has brought into time.

Let us give thanks to the Lord for this great gift of Christ and Mary. On this final night of the year let us find in the arms of the Virgin, as the shepherds did, the Christ who is the guarantee of our security, the Christ who tells us to be confident for he has won the battle. By faith we also come to possess that certainty of Christ. Have great faith, dear sisters and brothers. May the new year be distinguished above all by the great confidence in our hearts, confidence that we are not walking alone through history, especially since it comes with such great uncertainty. The year has not died but has been simply another step toward realizing the eternity that Christ has brought us. As Christians we watch the years pass not with nostalgia or sentimentality but with the joy of those who are moving toward an encounter with true life, with the eternity that never fades. Let it be so! (Applause)