

ALL PEOPLE ARE GOD'S INSTRUMENTS

Holy Innocents, Antiguo Cuscatlán
December 28, 1977

1 John 1, 5 – 2,2
Mathew 2, 13-18.

Our diocese of San Salvador preserves one of those typical customs that is also an expression of popular piety and unites us with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who is preached throughout the world. Here we are referring to this devotion that every year is celebrated by people from every part of the Diocese: devotion to the Holy Innocents.

Here on the side of the church we are able to see images that children have brought in their pilgrimage from so many different places. This is the faith and the devotion of our people that is expressed in the innocence of these children who identify themselves with the child Jesus during this Christmas Season. At the same time, our children have created nativity scenes made of plastic. These images remind us of the presence of the children in Bethlehem, those children under the age of two whom cruel Herod sought. They remind us of the painful situation that was created in Bethlehem when Herod, a blood-thirsty man, wanted to eliminate every person who posed an obstacle to the empire and every danger that threatened his desire to rule. Therefore, he sent his soldiers to assassinate the children of those afflicted mothers. The same here, next to the altar the image of a woman represents those mothers. How they cried out as they tried to snatch the innocent flesh of their children from the hands of those executioners who mercilessly killed them. Here popular devotion calls this woman Saint Joanne, who represents those mothers.

You can see we are in the presence of folklore that must be preserved with the typical values of our Salvadoran tradition. I wish to thank the Somascan Fathers who have preserved this tradition in this parish and I also want to congratulate all of you, my beloved sisters and brothers, who are present here before this typical image of the Holy Innocents that is venerated in this Church of Antigua Cuscatlán. Faithful of the parish and pilgrims who have come here from so many different places, as the spiritual guide of these customs that are related to the Church and the gospel I want to speak these words with you so that we become true believers of the gospel and true children of the Catholic Church. I do not want us to remain on a superficial level of a popular custom and devotion.

Religious piety is a wonderful occasion to deepen ourselves in the gospel. There is, however, a great danger that we can convert religion into simply popular custom, some folkloric tradition, some artistic and human tradition that has no gospel roots. Therefore, I want to take advantage of this popular, scenic, folkloric devotion to the Holy Innocents in Antiguo Cuscatlán to deepen our roots in the gospel. Allow me to invite you to reflect on three thoughts: 1) all people are God's instruments; 2) the true innocence that saves is that which is given by Jesus Christ; 3) even the errors and crimes of people lead us to the triumph of Jesus Christ and the realization of God's plans

All people are God's instruments

In the first place, we have encountered various people in the gospel, people in whom we can see ourselves, our history and our present situation. We should read the gospel not as some novel that recounts events that occurred twenty centuries ago but rather as the story of the incarnation of God who became man in an historical moment. Thus from the perspective of that moment we can learn how to live the gospel at this present time in which we live. We need a little bit of imagination when we read the gospel because we have to move from the environment of the gospel to our situation here in El Salvador in 1977. This is how we should read the gospel. During those moments when we encounter difficulties in our family or our life as nation or our own individual lives, let us read the gospel and apply the message to our lives so that the gospel illuminates us during those moments of affliction and hope, so that it illuminates our family and our individual and our national life.

Who are the people that appear here in this gospel scene? At the center of this story are the innocent ones, children under two years of age. Together with them are their mothers who defended their children with the bravery of women who see their children in danger of death. They are willing to give their own lives and feel that it would be better if they were killed rather than their children. Another person is Herod, a most blood thirsty individual. Flavius Josephus, an historian who lived at the time of the evangelists and during the time when the gospels were written (we also have centuries of profane history and one of these histories was written by Flavius Josephus), tell us that Herod had a sick desire for power and as a result suspected the whole world of conspiring against him. He killed members of his own family because he suspected them of wanting to remove him for his position of power. Anything that seemed to threaten his power made him fearful and so he sought ways to eliminate these threats. The gospel tells us that Herod feared this king of the Jews that the Magi from the East announced. He was filled with terror and ordered all children under the age of two years of age to be killed. In this way he hoped to eliminate the danger to his power.

We also encounter in the gospel a very understanding person, Saint Joseph. In a dream he heard a voice that warned him: *Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him* (a). Thus Joseph, who is God's instrument in order to save the Redeemer, goes to Egypt. The gospel then makes the following commentary: *He stayed there until the death of Herod, so that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, "Out of Egypt I called my son"* (b). This is a prophecy that does not refer explicitly to Jesus, but refers to the People of Israel who were enslaved in Egypt and whom God freed by bringing them to the Promised Land. But look at the beautiful perspective of the gospel: Christ who returns from Egypt and is defended by God is like the incarnation of the whole people of Israel who were also defended by God from slavery and oppression. This is the beautiful application that we must make: Christ was persecuted but protected by God. God avails himself of people like Saint Joseph who become his instruments and in this case, Jesus once against returns safely to his country.

We encounter in the gospel some cruel persons such as Herod's emissaries, the soldiers and other people who were sent to fulfill his immoral orders. When a king gives orders to kill children and other people, the soldiers have no obligation to obey. This was a cruel, immoral and bloody order and yet the slavish swords killed the innocent ones.

My sisters and brothers, we see that there is a whole group of people who are presented to us in the gospel story and we are able to see our own history reflected in them. We see evil people and must not act like them for this is the sin that the Church repudiates. The Church is the Kingdom of God that attempts to engrave in the hearts of people the good that appears in the gospel in order to eliminate from our society and families and from women and men all the evil that the gospel also repudiates. Thus as the Church reflects on the different people who are presented in the gospel which recounts the events surrounding the Holy Innocents, she must proclaim the Kingdom of God in order to say to all of you: *My dear pilgrims, who have gathered here in Antiguo Cuscatlán on this feast of the Holy Innocents, let us be like Mary and those providential individuals whom God used to realize his plan of redemption. All who are here, all of you who are Christian have received the vocation to be good --- good fathers and good mothers, good collaborators who make the Kingdom of God present in our world. All Christians who are here have to commit themselves this morning to collaborate with God. God needs women and men to be instruments like Saint Joseph and the angels who collaborated with God in the development of his plans of love and salvation and hope on earth. Blessed are those Christians who know how to sanctify their lives with the gospel and who, like Saint Joseph, become instruments of God's salvation.*

My sisters and brothers, the Church must also look at these pages of the gospel and reflect on the evil that is presented there in order to say to people today: *Do not act in the same bloody way as Herod. Do not be slaves like the soldiers who obeyed Herod's orders and killed innocent children. Do not be cruel or torture or treat others disrespectfully. Do not make mothers, like Saint Joanne, cry because their children have disappeared and they do not know where they are. Do not be cruel because God wants no part of sin. It is necessary to change your lives. It is necessary to restore tranquility and hope and security to our nation and our present situation. Those who are involved in violence and assassinations, those who make blood flow in our nation are not God's beloved children as long as they continue to do these things. My sisters and brothers, today on this feast of the Holy Innocents, justice cries out against injustice, innocence cries out against sin and goodness cries out against evil.*

My sisters and brothers, on this day of the Holy Innocents we must also listen to the cries of so many innocent people who could have and should have been born, but their own mothers did not allow this to happen. The sin of abortion, the sin of contraception, the sin of Herod is repeated today in those areas where the gift of procreation that God has given to men and women is prostituted. This gift is bestowed on people not just for pleasures of the flesh nor to be used in some selfish way as we saw in the person of Herod who gave no importance to his own children --- in fact he gave no importance to anyone or anything except his own power. The sin of abortion is the sin of Herod. My sisters and brothers, we come together today to rend our garments on this feast of the Holy Innocents and we cry out: *How cruel is Herod! How cruel are the soldiers!* We know that today many more people than that small group of children in Bethlehem die. It is horrible to think that in so many hospitals and clinics and in so many other clandestine ways, thousands and thousands of innocent lives are aborted from the wombs of their mothers. What a wonderful example we have in Saint Joanne who defends the fruit of her womb against those mothers who order their children to be killed!

My sisters and brothers, in whatever form it takes place, to kill another is a crime. In an institutional way soldiers kill and those who abduct others also kill and mothers kill their children through abortion. All of these are crimes that cry out to heaven. On this day of the

Holy Innocents the Church speaks for those who are unable to speak, those who were assassinated in such cruel, vile and immoral ways. The Church cries out: *Lord, forgive us because without a doubt it is because of our faults that so many punishments have fallen upon our land! Forgive us and may sinners repent and return to the grace of God so that there is no more violence or bloodshed among us.*

The true innocence that saves is that which is given by Jesus

My sisters and brothers, let us now focus on the central figures in the gospel, the innocent children and there is just one thing that I would like to say here: the true innocence that saves is that which is given by Jesus. Many people might ask: since these children could not speak and were not even aware of what was happening, what merit did these children have that they should now be venerated as saints at our altars? What merit did these children have that they should now be rejoicing in heaven with the saints who performed great works and suffered martyrdom in a very conscious way? What merit? My sisters and brothers, it is precisely this word *merit* that communicates to us the message of this feast of the Holy Innocents. Children under the age of two merit the joy and the happiness of God in heaven that we, as adults, await because we are going to gain this reality as a result of our good works. But good works are not enough. Our personal merits, our effort to be good people, and repentance for our sins are human realities that would have no value that would merit opening the doors of heaven --- that is impossible.

For this reason Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans states that we are not saved by our good works but by our faith in Jesus Christ (c). The two are necessary: good works as a condition for our human merits so that in turn Christ gives us a share in his divine merits. The world is saved by the merits of Christ, the Redeemer. We are still in the month of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Mary was conceived immaculately and did not have the mark of original sin. This was not because Mary had some type of merit before she was born, but rather, as our theology tells us: through the attention of Christ's merits, Christ made Mary immaculate. Before she was born she was preserved from the stain of original sin. Children are saved in the same way.

Children ought to be baptized because it is not through the personal merits of the person baptized that makes one Christian but rather it is the redemption of Christ that can be applied to a child, even though this child might not have the use of reason. The merits of Christ applied to the innocent children under two years of age is what made it possible for these innocent martyrs to become glorified souls. We should not think that the children in heaven are still only two years old. The soul developed there in heaven, the soul of a child who was just born, is equal to the soul of a wise person who acquired much wisdom on earth. The wisdom of this earth does not make a person happy in heaven but rather it is the vision of God that is acquired through the merits of our Lord, Jesus Christ that makes a person happy.

In this sense, my sisters and brothers, the message of the Innocents is a reproach to the adult world. We have too much faith in ourselves. We believe that the world should thank us. We believe that we are going to be saved because of our own merits. But this is not true; we do good works because if we do not do this we will not be saved but condemned. The gospel says: *For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink* (d). All the evil that we have done, all the good works that we did not do are cause for the following condemnation: *depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire* (e). Yes, it

is certain that we need good works to be saved but we are not saved just because of our good works, rather these good works must be added to the infinite merits of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

An artist was dying and she called her priest-confessor. This woman had acquired a great quantity of money, received great applause for her work and much fame. In tears she said: *Father, I feel a great emptiness.* She continued to cry and then said: *I am pained to have to present myself to God with my hands empty.* Look, my sisters and brothers, fame and power and money and glory in this world are useless. In fact all these things remain here on earth at the moment of death. Any merit that we might have gained as human beings will not help us in heaven. Indeed, our hands are empty if we have not acted out of a love for God. The priest, who was listening to the artist's confession, had a wonderful idea to comfort this woman at the time of her death. He removed his crucifix and placed it in her hands saying: *Do not say that your hands are empty. Now you have Christ in your hands. Present yourself with Christ before the tribunal of God. We are unable to save ourselves because of our own merits --- neither our money or honors or fame will save us. We are saved by Christ who shed his blood for us. Trust in him! Allow him to fill the emptiness that you now experience! Forget about all these earthly things that are useless in your future life and hand yourself over to Christ. Cry over the emptiness you experience but do so with a great trust in Christ and Christ will fill this emptiness.*

My sisters and brothers, it is beautiful to reflect on the fact that today on the feast of the Holy Innocents, this name is given to these children not because of their own merits but because of the merits of Christ who began to be the Redeemer from the time he was a child in the stable at Bethlehem.

Even the errors and crimes of people lead to the triumph of Jesus Christ and the realization of God's plans

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, my third and final point is the following: all that occurs in history leads to the glory of Christ, our Lord. This gives us great consolation and hope. No matter how much people (like Herod and the soldiers) want to hinder the reign of Christ and eliminate him in his infancy, nonetheless all of this matures for the good because this Christ, who flees to Egypt, will return to fulfill the promises of the Father. No one can detain this. The plan of God has to be realized despite the hindrances of humanity, or perhaps it is better to say, the plan of God has to be realized by making use of the crimes of men and women whom God has placed here in the world as his instruments so that the world might experience the feeling of emptiness when God is not present. Christ will triumph! Christ will triumph over the evil intentions of those who want to kill! His Kingdom will triumph and his plans are the victory of faith. This is the victory that has overcome: faith and Christian hope.

My sisters and brothers, this pilgrimage to the church of Antiguo Cuscatlán in honor of the Holy Innocents that preserves the joyful tradition of our people becomes a prayer for our personal intentions and the concerns of our family. But in a special way, my sisters and brothers, I ask you to pray especially for our land of El Salvador and for the Church that has given us this faith and hope and love. Pray that in this present situation of our national history we might not see ourselves as victims, as though everything is lost. Let us look at the triumph of Christ over the ambition and the evils of humanity. Pray that as the child Jesus in the arms of Mary and Joseph was able to rise above the intrigue of evil, so too may the Church, that is the prolongation of Christ in history and protected by God, always fulfill her

obligation of being the good instrument of salvation and the courageous instrument that roots out of the world the sin that hinders the Kingdom of God.

Let us then celebrate this Eucharist in which the Lamb of God takes away the sins of world, this Lamb of God who is Christ and who was born in Bethlehem, saved by God and now moving forward his plans of salvation and love --- may this Lamb of God inspire this community that is gathered together in prayer at the time of this beautiful devotion to the Holy Innocents. Let us lift up this prayer that has great value, as we have said, not because of our own merits or alms-giving or candles that we light or because of our own popular devotion but rather Christ is God made man. Christ is present and gives meaning to these alms, these lighted candles and these prayers. This pilgrimage in honor of the Holy Innocents has a divine value because we have faith that this is not just our prayer alone but rather that Christ is present in this morning's Mass and in the faith of each heart and that it is Christ who offers this prayer to God and gives an effective meaning to the prayer and pilgrimage that we have undertaken this morning.

Let us proclaim now our Creed. We are able to speak because we are not like the Holy Innocents who were still unable to open their mouths to speak the word. Indeed, the word is given to our hearts and our lives. Therefore, let us proclaim our faith in God.

Margin References (a) Mt 2,13: (b) Mt 2,15: (c) Rm 5,1-2: (d) Mt 25,42: (e) Mt 25,41.