

GOD COMES TO SAVE US

**Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 1977**

Isaiah 7:10-14

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

As the feast of the Nativity draws near, the readings of the Word of God speak to us about this nearness that should fill us with great hope. The title of today's homily could be: God comes to save us. God is coming and we ought to experience this coming in our thoughts and our confusion. We ought to experience this coming despite the fact that the horizons of history appear to be closed and finally, we ought to experience this coming because as God comes he will open paths of light. The only thing that is asked of us is to believe and trust in God.

In light of this nearness and living the depths of this hope, we have to reflect this joy of our hearts. This joy is not some superficial happiness like that of many others during this Christmas season, but rather it is the profound joy of faith. Again I say that we have to reflect this joy in the realities that surround us because we are people who have our feet planted on the earth and we live in this present historical situation and we cannot put aside these convictions and these intimate hopes when we feel the repercussions that arise from our situation. Each one of us must confront our own realities and personal problems. Every family has its own history and the family of families, the nation, is also constructing its own history. We who are part of the Kingdom of God and who humbly desire to follow Christ, the Redeemer --- we must be a people of light, (a) a people of strength, a people that as Jesus said is a leaven, a light to the world and salt of the earth. (b) This is the object of our Sunday preaching. I thank the Lord for the good will of our radio audience and those who visit the Cathedral and fill this sacred space. Your presence and your attention is a sign of profound hope. Let all of us who experience this responsibility, all of us who were baptized and form part of this redeemed people of the world --- let us build in the heart of our community a Kingdom of God that is firm, intimate, and holy because it is from our communities that we can radiate the beauty, hope and light that our country needs.

Events of the week

It seems to me that the message that the Pope directed this week to our new Ambassador to the Holy See, Don Prudencio Llach, is in harmony with the thinking of the Archdiocese. According to the news that we have read in the press, the Pope, *beginning with a global vision of humanity, praised the determination of the Salvadorian people in bettering their general condition of life.*¹ The Pope said that the vision of the Church must always be focused on humanity and on their efforts to better the general conditions of the life of our people. The Pope also made clear to the Ambassador that the Church wishes *to respect in a permanent way the competency of temporal powers, that is, the government and also accepts a constructive dialogue with the civil authorities.*²

The Pope also asserted the Salvadorian Church's need for *that indispensable freedom to preach the faith, to teach her social and moral doctrine and to exercise her mission among women and men without any hindrance.*³ The Pope said that this path can *prevent evils and overcome a climate of violence that unfortunately has caused sorrow and mourning in the ecclesiastical area.*⁴ The Pope did not forget our victims, our priests and collaborators in the evangelizing mission of our country. The Pope also highlighted the need to create *a social atmosphere that would correct the injustices that prevent the created goods of this world from being distributed in a more equal way among all people.*⁵

This brief summary of the Pope's message which will be published when we receive a copy of the exact text, this message gives me great joy because I find that the Pope's thoughts provide a base for the evangelical attitude of our Archdiocesan Church. We have not said anything different from what the Pope has now stated. We have defended the global vision of humankind which the present Church preaches here in El Salvador. We have also said that this global vision should not be confused with other ideologies that are not part of the Church's mentality. We have proclaimed that the temporal powers should be respected. On the Church's part we have not meddled in the affairs of the temporal powers and we have accepted, as the Pope stated, *constructive dialogue*. Constructive dialogue means that the dialogue is based on action and is sincere. We are willing to enter into dialogue but this must be done in an atmosphere of trust --- promises are easy to make but for dialogue we must have action and sincerity.

The Pope defended the freedom to preach the faith of the Church without any hindrance and that the Church be allowed to exercise her ministry among men and women. This is beautiful and this is what we have always defended. The ministry of the Church involves human rights because she is the defender of the Lord's law on earth. Therefore everything that tramples upon this dignity and freedom is part of the Church's mission. Thus the Pope supports the exercise of this mission of the Church among men and women and says that this mission should not be hindered. The Pope is saddened by the fact that there has been sorrow and mourning in the ecclesial area and calls upon people to prevent these evils and overcome this climate of violence. We have also cried out with the Pope against violence, whether it be institutionalized violence that represses or subversive violence or the violence of the oppressed --- all those situations in which violence is stained by sin and hatred and resentment. The Church cannot tolerate any violence that is stained by sin.

The Pope also highlights the fact that a social atmosphere should be created in El Salvador that will mend the evident injustices. We should be very clear about this idea. The Pope points out the fact that there are evident injustices in our environment and asks for the creation of a social organization that will allow created goods to be distributed more equally among all people. My sisters and brothers, as you can see at this Christmas time, I feel that I have been given a great gift from the magisterium of the Church because the words of the Pope verify the preaching of our Archdiocese and we can see that we are in harmony with the gospel. I say this because the Pope is always for me the touchstone of the authenticity of the doctrine that God has revealed to humanity.

My sisters and brothers, for this reason I rejoice and, as you can see, not everything is pessimism. Since we have repudiated injustices and laws that are not in accord with Christian thinking I am happy to have become aware of a proposed law that deals with taxes on real estate.⁶ Those who are considering this legislation do honor to a government that is concerned about the well-being of those areas that have fewer resources, particularly the rural

areas where it is necessary to provide services and loans in order to resolve the problems of health, education, housing and others. Naturally these resources have to come from the agricultural areas, but this must be done in a way that does not diminish their enthusiasm to continue making progress in the technical area of agricultural systems. In other words, we are talking about Christian and social justice.

Hopefully in fulfillment of the Pope's desires, we will one day have in El Salvador those laws that are mindful of the sectors that have fewer resources. It is in this way that we will see that when our country eliminates these situations of social injustice she will then be able to overcome the dangers of terrorism. Indeed, hatred and differences will disappear when our laws provide us with a national institution that is in accord with the thinking of God who has created us so that we might experience ourselves as sisters and brothers to one another. For this reason, my sisters and brothers, and also in light of this thought, I want to express my solidarity with the 280 girls and the 130 boys and 60 adults who use the School Concha Viuda de Escalón that was established thirty-four years ago. These people are in danger of being unjustly displaced from there. I call upon those who have the competency to resolve this problem to do so justly. I also hope that a just solution, one that respects human dignity, will be found for the labor problem that has arisen in the Quality factory and for the problem that has arisen on the estate of San Francisco in Zacatecoluca where people are being displaced.

Life of the Church

My sisters and brothers, I also rejoice at this time of Christmas because during this week the Church has lived some very joyful moments. For example, on Thursday we had a very useful clergy meeting during which we evaluated the circumstances in which we have worked during this year that was so complex. I believe that I can highlight three characteristics of this meeting of the priests: sincerity, solidarity with the bishop and optimism.

A sincerity in which the priests spoke openly about the deficiencies and even about the sins that we might have committed in the unpredictable circumstances of our ecclesial lives during this past year. A sincerity that also led us to look for authentic gospel means so that as collaborators we might build with Christ the Kingdom of God in El Salvador.

The solidarity of the priests with the bishop profoundly moved me in such a way that today, as I am speaking here with my voice, I feel as though all the priests and religious men and committed laity in the pastoral work of the Archdiocese are supporting me. It is not my voice alone, the voice of a single person that cries out in the desert but rather I know that in every parish and in every community there is a priest, a group of women religious, a group of faithful laity who are in full solidarity with the thoughts of this unworthy servant who has been chosen to lead this Diocese and is also the expression of the life of the Church in this whole area. I thanked the priests and they committed themselves to an even stronger solidarity. In fact, they returned to me the phrase that I have spoken here, namely, *whoever touches one of the priests, touches the bishop*. The priests said: *whoever touches the bishop, touches the priests*.

I thank you once again my beloved brother priests, and I want you to know that I will never in conscience betray this profound vote of confidence and solidarity. I also congratulate you for your optimism and joy and for your willingness to suffer, if it is necessary, to suffer in the name of the Lord. It is clear that our priests are filled with great

hopes for all of our people and I call upon you to show your own solidarity, understanding, and friendship with the work of our beloved priests.

In Suchitoto all the priests of the Department of Cuscatlán gathered together to celebrate the feast of their patroness, Saint Lucy. After the celebration the clergy met and again I experienced great promise and great solidarity. I want to express here publicly the gratitude of that parish and the whole Archdiocese to our beloved Bishop Chávez y González who has retired with the satisfaction of saying: *mission fulfilled!* May God bless you, Bishop, and hopefully the Lord will continue to bless your years. May the Lord also continue to make you a beautiful example of priestly fidelity to ministry, to the hierarchy and to the people of God!

In Tacachico we celebrated the patronal feast of Saint Paul and the Immaculate Conception. This is a beautiful, enthusiastic, joyful and welcoming community. I want to congratulate the pastor and the young man Jorge Salinas for the balanced way in which they are developing the ministry in that parish. Yesterday, Saturday, we brought the Passionist Sisters to San José Villanueva. I am happy to see the spirit of commitment with which these Sisters have undertaken this ministry and I am filled with joy because of the generous and kind welcome that the people of this community have extended to the Sisters. Yesterday afternoon we extended our hands to Father Agustín Grisseri who celebrated in El Calvario fifty years of priestly life. May God bless you!

My sisters and brothers, I will conclude this section with three announcements. The first announcement is that tomorrow at 9:00am we are going to celebrate in Quezaltepeque, in El Colegio San José, their patronal feast of Saint Joseph. Various communities will be present at this parish celebration in the spacious locale of the Sisters's school, El Colegio San José in Quezaltepeque. The second announcement is that on Christmas Eve, here in the Cathedral, we are going to celebrate Mass at 7:00pm. Because of the circumstances we have changed the time and we want you to be aware of this change. Therefore, I invite everyone to gather here in the Cathedral on the 24th at 7:00pm. We hope that this Mass will be transmitted by radio.

At the conclusion of the Mass, the mothers, wives and family members of those who have disappeared will gather together as a family for a Christmas meal. We call upon all those homes who have suffered the separation of a loved one to gather together here in the crypt of the Cathedral for a purely human and religious end. As these families come together to share a Christmas meal and though they are anxious because of the disappearance of a loved one, we ask the Lord that those who have disappeared might return to the homes of their loves and that with the arrival of the new year their homes might experience greater joy on this Christmas Day. My sisters and brothers, the Church would be greatly pleased if our Ambassador of El Salvador were able to tell the Pope that our government, as a gesture of benevolence, had decreed during this Christmas season a wide reaching amnesty. This would bring joy and comfort to so many homes. Finally I want to announce that the celebration of the World Day of Peace will have a great echo here in El Salvador. On the 4th, 5th and 6th of January there will be conferences given here by distinguished persons. Archbishop McGrath from Panama has confirmed his presence as well as other presenters. I invite everyone to pray during these days and to pray in solidarity with the desires of Pope so that there might be a true peace in the world.

My sisters and brothers, in this environment Christmas arrives. The Word of God cries out on this Sunday that God comes to save us. I want to place before you three ideas so that we might reflect profoundly on these ideas during the coming week: 1) there is a plan of God to save the world; 2) the Church is charged with prolonging this plan of God in history; 3) the reaction of humanity --- what God expects in order to save the world.

There is a plan of God to save the world

My first thought is that there is a plan of God to save the world. The Apostle Saint Paul has described this to us in powerful words. (c) Saint Paul says that he was *set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised previously through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received the grace and this mission to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles and among the people of the whole world.*

What does this mean? It means that God is not improvising. When God foresaw the fall of humanity and the rupture of the dialogue that had been established at the beginning of history, he also foresaw a redemption --- a redemption in which his Son would personally come to earth. Here in the gospel of Saint Matthew the Word of God says that this eternal plan of God was not a utopia. In the first reading we saw that King Ahaz was afflicted because two neighboring kings (the king of Israel, that is, the northern part of Israel and the king of Damascus, Syria) had plotted to remove him from the throne. So King Ahaz looked for support from the powerful king of Assyria whom he hoped would come and defend him. Through the prophet Isaiah, God spoke to the king and told him not to trust in men but to trust in the promise of God, the promise of an offspring of David --- Ahaz is a descendent of David and very soon was to have a son, Hezekiah, who would succeed him as king. God's promise, however, is not just focused on the fertile wife of Ahaz but looks back to the promise that God made to David when he said that an extraordinary woman would be the sign of God's power because this woman, being a virgin and remaining a virgin, would become the mother of a child who would be called Emmanuel, God-with-us (d).

How beautiful is the image of Mary, our Lady. Mary cannot be absent from our Christmas hope. A Christmas without Mary would be a Christmas without tenderness. A promise of salvation without a beautiful woman, the Virgin, enchanting and holy, would not be a human redemption because God wants to give his graces to men and women through the tenderness of a mother. My sisters and brothers, during these days of preparation for Christmas may our hearts grow in love for the Virgin Mary, the mother of Emmanuel, God-with-us!

King Ahaz did not want a sign but trusted in the king of Assyria. Isaiah responds to him and says: *Is it not enough for you to weary men, must you also weary my God?* (e).

We heard proclaimed in the gospel of Saint Matthew that when the fullness of time had arrived the promise that had been made seven centuries before was fulfilled, the promise made by Isaiah. The angel greeted a virgin and said: *you shall conceive in your womb and bear a son ... and he shall save his people from their sins.* According to the reading today, when Joseph became concerned about the pregnancy of this woman who through the miracle of the Spirit of God was to have a virginal offspring, he also was given this promise: *you are*

to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (f). This is the God who saves us: Emmanuel.

In the second reading today Saint Paul begins a theology that throughout the centuries became a theme for theologians and even today this theology is still being studied and is actually in vogue: Christology, the treatise on Christ. Saint Paul lays the foundation for an authentic theology, for a Christology, for a treatise on Christ because he says that on the one hand, this Christ is according to the flesh a descendant of David, this Christ is man, is in the lineage of a kingly dynasty.(g) God had promised this and Jesus as man belongs to our history. He suffered like every other human person; he carried in his human heart the anguish of the whole world; he is human. My sisters and brothers, how beautiful it is to think that Emmanuel, God-with-us, is a man, a human person who understands us, who accompanies us, who comforts us, and who illuminates us. On the other hand, Saint Paul says that according to the Spirit of God, this Jesus, anointed by the Holy Spirit and anointed in the womb of the blessed woman who would bear him, is the Son of God.(h)

One day, this Christ anointed by the Holy Spirit is born in Bethlehem. He was not the fruit of the marital union of a man and woman, but was miraculously and virginally conceived and virginally born. He will bring this immaculate flesh to be immolated on the cross for the salvation of all people. Then, three days after his death, he is raised up to new life. That flesh that was born of the Virgin, that flesh that became Jesus, goes as the Son of God to be seated at the right hand of God, the Father. There he lives. The son of David according to the flesh, made Son of God by the Spirit, lives eternally. From heaven he sent his divine Spirit and here is the plan of salvation for all people. This divine Spirit, engendered by the son of David who through the resurrection becomes the Son of God, this Spirit can take possession of all people who wish to allow themselves to be overwhelmed by this power of redemption. Do not forget that Saint Paul is writing to the Romans who were non-believers and non-Jewish. He says to them: *I, who have been chosen to preach this redemption to the Gentiles and not to the Jews, am happy to come to you, the people of Rome. I am going to bring you the redemption that Christ also brought to you because you are also the people of God* (i).

This is what I also want to say to you, my sisters and brothers and beloved radio audience --- I want to say to you what Saint Paul said to the Romans: *All of you whom God loves and whom God has called to form part of his holy people, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (j). This means that the redemption planned by God is arriving for everyone without exception. All those who experience themselves as sinners, those who feel that their sins cannot be forgiven --- who knows if the one whose hands are bloodied with Father Grande's murder or the one who shot Father Navarro, who knows if those who have killed and tortured and done so much evil, who knows if they are listening to me? Listen, there in your criminal hideout, perhaps already repentant, you too are called to forgiveness. When I have cried out against violence I have always spoken of the need for repentance because it is this that makes one a child of God. Paul preached to the Romans, a non-believing people where crime and injustice abounded and he told them that they were also called to participate in this redemption of Christ --- this Christ whom the Virgin brought into the world.

My sisters and brothers, this redemption is a redemption from sin. The angel told Saint Joseph: *You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins* (k). This forgiveness of sins is the beginning of Christian liberation. When we struggle for human

rights, for freedom and for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the Church to concern ourselves for those who are hungry, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin and the Church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The Church knows that she is saving the world when she undertakes to speak also of such things.

The Pope gathered together the echoes of the bishops who had participated in the Synod of 1974. We have heard, the Pope said, the cries of millions of people, cries that were brought to Rome by the bishops of the world, cries that are asking for the Church's help in obtaining their liberation. The Church cannot be deaf to these cries and so she is concerned about promoting this liberation from sin and all its consequences. When the Pope wrote *Evangelii Nuntiandi* he used this beautiful phrase: *The Church strives always to insert the Christian struggle for liberation into the universal plan of salvation which she herself proclaims* (1).

What does this mean? The Church continues to realize the saving plan of God and she has not withdrawn herself from this task. When she sees in people, in the people of the Americas, this desire for liberation, she incorporates into her mission this desire and struggle for Christian liberation. She says to all who work for this liberation: a liberation without faith, a liberation without Christ, a liberation without hope, a liberation of violence and revolution --- all of these are not effective or authentic. Liberation must begin with the redemption of Christ, the redemption from sin. Laws and structures are meaningless as long as people do not renew themselves interiorly and repent of their sin and try to live more justly.

The Church is charged with prolonging this plan of God in history

This is the plan of God and for this reason I present to you my second idea that this plan of God is communicated through the Church. The Church today in 1977 and in a few days in 1978 is doing nothing more than that which was proclaimed by Saint Paul: *proclaiming the gospel of God, the plan of God to save the world in Jesus Christ* (m).

Therefore the Church is pained when her mission becomes suspect and the Church is saddened when people want to place themselves in a position to judge her method of preaching. The Church has received this mission from God and the Pope has just told the Ambassador of El Salvador to the Holy See that no obstacles should be placed in the way of the Church's evangelizing mission or her preaching or this saving plan of God that the Church has to develop in El Salvador. This is the freedom that the Church always affirms and that she will not allow to be chained even when she has to become silent.

My sisters and brothers, the Church is not the bishop and the priests, but rather the Church is all of you, you who have been baptized, you as Christian families, professionals, students, workers, and *campesinos*. When I say here that the Church is prolonging this saving plan of Christ, I want to call upon all of you, my sisters and brothers, and I ask you who are baptized to be enlivened and enflamed with enthusiasm for this plan of God, this plan that no one can detain, a plan that must be realized because God wants to save humanity in Christ. God wants to make Christ known through the Virgin Mary who gave birth to the Son of God, to Emmanuel, to God-with-us. This is a great and holy obligation of all Christians.

The reaction of humanity. What God expects in order to save the world

Lastly, my sisters and brothers, let us look at the reaction of women and men to this plan of God that continues to be the plan of the Church. We find here some interesting figures.

In the first place we find a king who under the pretext of a false religiosity says: *I will not ask for a sign! I will not tempt the Lord* (n). The prophet reprimands the king and says: *It is not that you do not want to tempt God but rather you want to follow your own human plans. You have more trust in the power of your armaments and the king of Assyria than in the plans of God.* It was sad to see this rejection of God's promise because only a few years later the King, whom Ahaz had called upon to help him, would invade Judah and lead the people into exile.

This is a way in which the plan of God is rejected and is one way of reacting to God's plan --- rejection is a very sad reaction. At this time how many people in El Salvador are rejecting the preaching of the Church, slandering and discrediting her! Jesus can speak to these people the same words that he spoke to the Pharisees: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the kingdom of heaven before human beings. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter* (o). My sisters and brothers, I appeal to your mature judgment and I ask you not to allow yourselves to be seduced and do not become involved in the false religiosity of King Ahaz. In this way you will be able to accept the simple word of the gospel that asks for sacrifice, renunciation, equality and love.

Naturally this Word is painful and it is easy to reject it, but my sisters and brothers the reactions against God's plan is also shared by those who are good. We have before us a specific case and it would be good to meditate on this situation. Saint Joseph is upset (p): how is it possible that his wife who is such a good person is going to be a mother without any relationship with a man? This is a temptation, the bad faith of a holy and just husband about an equally holy wife. The virgin is also upset and says to the angel: *How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?* (q). My sisters and brothers, the plans of God are beyond human calculations. The angel responds to Mary and says: *Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing is impossible for God* (r). We then see the faith of the virgin when she says: *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word* (s). In today's gospel we also see the faith of Saint Joseph who awoke from his dream, accepted the word of the angel and with no doubt and great trust took Mary as his wife (t).

Saint Paul is also another example.(u) He was a persecutor because he believed that Christianity was a hindrance to his Jewish religion. The risen Christ knocked this persecutor from his horse in order to make him the apostle to the Gentiles. Look, my sisters and brothers, at this example because even with great faith one can still encounter difficult trials. Why does this happen? Why does God permit this? This cannot be of God! Is it not true that each one of us has on many occasions experienced this temptation in our hearts? This is the hour of trial, the hour in which the plan of God wants to assert itself --- not because women and men believe that this is possible but because God loves us and nothing is impossible for the love of God. Who would have believed that God would become a human being, would allow himself to be despised and put to death on a cross? This was very possible because without Christ there is no salvation.

Let us have faith my sisters and brothers because this is the reaction to the Nativity. We see this in the reaction of Elizabeth who says to Mary: *Blessed are you who believed* (v). We are invited to profess this same faith, a faith that is more necessary today than ever before. Faith... faith consists in accepting God without asking God to be accountable to us. Faith consists in reacting to God in the same way that Mary did: *I do not understand this but may it be done to me according to your word* (w).

May we pray: Lord, we know that Christmas is your drawing near to us, to this people of El Salvador. We know that our government, our collaborators and our Church are concerned about a better future. We know that no one wants bloodshed, violence or misfortune. Lord, show us the way even though we may not understand this. Give us a sign that you are with us because Emmanuel, God-with-us, is not a promise of the past. We know that God has remained with us and lives in our midst --- indeed, this is our great hope during this Christmas season of 1977. God is with us. God comes personally to save us --- even though we do not know how but yes God is coming to save us.

Let us have great hope, my sisters and brothers, and let us pray often. Let us make this a Christmas of prayer and a Christmas of supplication! Lord, we suffer greatly. Lord, this people is very troubled. Lord, you who save, you can rely on our good will. We want to be like Saint Paul and Saint Joseph and Mary. We do not want to doubt you like King Ahaz did. We want to be women and men of faith, committed to you, collaborators in the establishment of your Kingdom. My sisters and brothers, in our profession and in our work may each one of us collaborate with this God. May we be filled with peace, filled with optimism, filled with hope! The Lord will come to save us. So be it.

¹ Address of Paul VI to the new Ambassador of El Salvador to the Holy See, *Osservatore Romano*, 18 December 1977.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ A few days later, the Legislative Assembly approved this law under the title "Ley de Impuesto Territorial Agropecuario". See *Diario Oficial*, 22 December 1977.

Margin References (a) Lk 13,20-21: (b) Mt 5,13-14: (c) Rm 12-5: (d) Is 7,14: (e) Is 7,13: (f) Mt 1,21-23: (g) Rm 1,3: (h) Rm 1,4: (i) Rm 1,5-6: (j) Rm 1,7: (k) Mt 1,21: (l) EN 38: (m) Rm 1,1: (n) Is 7,12: (o) Mt 23,13: (p) Mt 1,19: (q) Lk 1,34: (r) Lk 1,36-37: (s) Lk 1,38: (t) Mt 1,24: (u) Ac 9,3-4: (v) Lk 1,45: (w) Lk 1,38.