

A SINGLE MASS

Conclusion of Novena for Fr Rafael Palacios June 30, 1979

My dear brother priests and beloved faithful.

A single Mass in the Diocese is an extraordinary sign of communion and Church. We all experience the need for this solidarity at the time of sorrow, as well as at the time of joy. The Church is, above all, a communion and the Council defines the Church with the following words: *the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race* (1). We are doing Church and we are living the reality of this communion. Therefore I want to thank all of you, my dear sisters and brothers, who are present here: the priests, the communities that are represented here and those who have not been able to come here for reasons outside of their control. This gesture of solidarity and communion by itself denounces the contrary sign of culpable and voluntary absences. God does not want us to be opposed to him or the Church.

As you gather here you become a wonderful gesture of the Church. This Cathedral is filled with faithful women and men and the churches of the diocese are empty and without the celebration of the Mass today. The presence of our beloved priests with their communities --- all of this is a revealing sign of something that is going to be great. What is the content of this sign of solidarity motivated by the assassination and death of our beloved Father Rafael Palacios? His spirit, his memory, a man of the Church, a priest of our presbyters, a Christian of our community, has called us together and here at this one Mass it seems to me that there are three ideas behind the rich meaning of the one Mass in our Diocese: First, the divine value of the Eucharist; Second, the divine greatness of the priesthood; Third, the human-divine eloquence of the People of God.

The divine value of the Eucharist

Above all else, we are here proclaiming the divine greatness of the Eucharist. The Mass, the most holy sacrament is referred to by the Council with the following words: *from the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way* (2). With complete certainty it is stated that in the Eucharist we become Church. The Eucharist, when it is concelebrated, like now, with all the priests --- this expresses the wonderful unity of the one sacrifice that each Mass represents. We do not multiply the sacrifice of Christ when we celebrate the Mass but we make Christ present in the circumstances in which that Mass is being celebrated. When all the priests come together around one altar it is an eloquent sign that the Mass is just one sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ, our Lord. The Mass is the presence of the love of God that in Christ becomes redemption, mercy, forgiveness, and the liberating strength of the people.

For this reason we want to greet and encourage the beloved priests to make every pastoral effort to give the Mass its true divine value. We know that there are parishes where the multiplication of Masses has been eliminated for particular reasons and that now, for example, there is just one Mass for the deceased on said afternoon or for said novena. I believe my sisters and brothers that this concelebration stimulates us to reflect on the great mystery that Christ left us as a memorial of his

passion and death, the Eucharist. Let us venerate this mystery and place all our trust in it, especially if we have not understood the value of the Mass. This one single Mass restores value to the Mass.

There are many sins against the Mass, against the Eucharist. The first of these is the absence of God. If the Eucharist is the presence of the merciful love that in Christ redeems the world, then sin is the absence of God and here, when I say sin, I refer to the situation of crime and violence and assassination and injustice --- all of this is an absence of God. Let us not, however, go to the other extreme and say that the Mass should not be celebrated as long as sin is enthroned in the world because, thanks to God, even in the environment of paganism and profanation, the small Christian community is the seed of hope and redemption. The Mass should be celebrated as the presence of light that begins to disperse the dense clouds of darkness. I believe that a people that calls itself Christian and has enthroned sin is not worthy of the Mass. If the Mass has to be a light of redemption in the midst of people then it also has to banish sin. The sign today, the fact that the Mass is not celebrated in many towns of the Archdiocese, wants to be the following: a denunciation of the absence of God provoked by those people who do not understand the God of love who desires to be with us and yet because of attitudes of violence and injustice people have rejected this love.

The presence of the Eucharist in the world is a light of the redemption that Saint Paul speaks to us about when he refers to nature groaning under the weight of sin (3). Injustice, disorder, and abuse have placed the creation of God in the chains of sin and yet the creation of God is so beautiful that God saw that everything was good (4). Nature groans and with birth pains awaits the hour of a new world, a creation that can once again become the wonderful dwelling place of God with humanity. The absence of the Mass in the diocese wants to reflect the same reality. The celebration of this single Mass in the Cathedral is meant to be a torch that enlightens the Christian community so that people might learn to experience the beauty of their Masses, consciously celebrated, experienced as an impulse of holiness and redemption for ourselves and others.

Another sin against the Eucharist is seen in the abuse of the Eucharist. This single celebration of the Mass in the Cathedral denounces the multiple abuses of the Eucharist, abuses that occur even within our Church. At times this abuse occurs because of selfishness, that is, when the Mass becomes subject to one's convenience: my Mass that is accommodated to my convenience; the Mass that is selfishly looked for as though God were a servant of the family or of the social class that wants the Mass accommodated to the conveniences of their selfish whims.

The Mass is also abused when it becomes subject to the idolatry of money and power, used to condone sinful situations, used to suggest to the public that there are no differences with the Church or that the Mass has the least importance and what matters most is to appear in the newspapers and to make some political advantage prevail. How often we have profaned the Mass in this sense of using it! The Mass should not be used. The Mass is light that gives light and illuminates all the different activities of women and men. The people should submit themselves lovingly and graciously to this light. They should submit themselves with reverence and humility to the divine gesture of Christ who wants to multiply the presence of his sacrifice in our midst.

The Mass is also prostituted within our Church when it is celebrated out of greed, when we make the Mass a business. It seems incredible that Masses should be multiplied just to make money. It is like the act of Judas selling out his Lord (5), and it would be right for the Lord to take up the lash that he used in the temple, saying, *My house is a house of prayer and you have made it a den of thieves* (6).

In this single Mass we want the Mass to recover its greatness and we also want to say to the Lord of the Eucharist: *forgive us Lord because they have taken away from us a priest who was able to celebrate and multiply your presence of love on earth.* In the absence of that which is good, we experience the value of that good. Let us not play with the Eucharist. Let us give great importance to the parish Mass or the Mass that is celebrated in our community or area. Let us participate in the Mass and share our love with the Lord and with our sisters and brothers. Let us go to Mass to do Church, to create a community like Father Palacios wanted because he always celebrated the Eucharist with a sense of community and never allowed the Mass to be profaned by these shameful objectives that we have just denounced.

The divine greatness of the priesthood

In this single Mass we are proclaiming the divine greatness of the priesthood. I want to thank the beloved priests who are present here for the great good that you do when celebrating Mass in your parishes because through this sacrament, you bring to the altar the lives of the people and animate the situations of all of our people.

My dear brother priests, because of our vocation and through the priestly anointing, we have a special responsibility with regard to the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrament of love. Like the Eucharist, the priesthood with one single presence proclaims to the world the mercy of the Lord and the redeeming power of God. Through the gesture of consecration the priest multiplies the Mass on the altars of our Diocese and is telling people how much God loves them and how God desires to share with them his love. The priest gives the community a Eucharistic meaning. In the sign of the bread and the wine the priestly hands offer the fruits of people's labor, the hope, anguish, joys and sorrows of humanity. It is as if a community were decapitated when it has no priest to celebrate the Mass and make divine all that humanity produces with their ingenuity, their hands and their creative power. It is for this reason that the priest is necessary in every community.

On Holy Thursday, John Paul II remembered (7) that in his native country there are places where there is no priest and so a layperson places a stole on the altar and reads the prayers of the Mass but when it is time to pronounce the words of institution, there is silence among the people and no one says a word --- the priest is missing. The silence is interrupted by mourning and weeping as people are nostalgically reminded of the absence of the priest. I believe that today the same reality is experienced in our churches where there is no Mass or priest. In this gesture of a single Mass we want to be mindful of the absence of Father Rafael Palacio and the other four priests who have been assassinated. We want to be mindful of the need that we have for priests. Therefore we are mindful of the fact that the absence of Father Palacios among the priests that concelebrate today affects us all.

His assassination is a crime. Not only is it a homicide but it is also a sacrilege because Christ, the person whom the priest represents, has been affected. His assassination is not only a crime and a sacrilege but is also an attack against the people. Even though criminals might feel that they do not need a priest, the people do feel that need and now have had their priest taken away from them. The penalty of excommunication that the Church places on those who have killed or violently put their hands on a priest is not a meaningless gesture but is an expression of the people who repudiate those persons who have raised their hands and taken the life of one of their priests.

My beloved sisters and brothers, the gesture of your presence here is a repudiation of this trampling upon our community. Your presence here proclaims the faith that you have in this sacrament that gives a human person the ability of Christ to forgive, to offer his Body and Blood, to

accompany the pilgrims on the final journey to eternity, to preach the divine Word and to teach love and peace to people. I, together with my brother priests, thank you for your presence here today. Therefore it is unjust that at this time of irrational vengeance the death of a preacher of peace should be confused with those who are violent. In this wave of vengeance the death of a priest is highly significant. At the beginning of the Mass we were reminded in the manifest that was read¹ that five priests have been assassinated. No other diocese in Latin America has had to offer to the Lord five hosts of its presbyterate. Will this redound to our glory or will it become an expression of shame for a people that did not esteem their priests? It is certain that your presence here in the Cathedral and the fact that no other Masses are being celebrated in the rest of the Archdiocese is a clear sign on the part of those who are part of this Christian community, a sign to those who hate us and persecute us, that you value the priests. They are loved and they are hated --- this is the mystery of love and forgiveness. They are loved and at the same time their message is distorted, they are slandered and defamed and assassinated. The priest will always be a sign of the presence of Christ who was also assassinated. The priesthood in our Archdiocese can bear this seal of Jesus: *if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*(8) I believe that we stand before a characteristic mark of the authenticity of our Church's preaching. Of Rafael Palacios I can say with the communities that knew him at first hand that he was far from provoking violence, from sowing hatred and he did not deserve to die as he did. He preached love; a man of deep meditation, he always believed more in the power of love than in the power of violence and he tried to create communities. His ideal was to create communities inspired in the love of Jesus Christ.

The human-divine eloquence of the People of God

Finally my sisters and brothers, I want to prevent the situation where the death of the priests, priests who expressed their solidarity with the people, becomes confused with the multiple deaths of persons of other more base categories. We can present, along with the blood of teacher and laborers and *campesinos*, the blood of our priests. This is communion in love. It would be sad, if in a country where murder is being committed so horribly, we were not to find priests among the victims. They are the testimony of a Church incarnated in the problems of her people. Therefore we can say that this single Mass is not only in honor of Father Rafael Palacios and we are not only mindful of the five priests who have died but rather we want to be the voice of the people who cry out on behalf of the blood that has been shed by all our Christian and non-Christian brothers and sisters. Life is always sacred. The commandment of the Lord: *you shall not kill* (9), makes all of life sacred, even the life of a sinner. Any blood that is shed always cries out to God and those who assassinate are always murders.

Therefore as I conclude I want to interpret the human-divine language of the people. I have already hinted at this but I want to make your presence in this single Mass concrete and above all I want your presence to be a voice of prayer. The people pray and the Church does not cry out for vengeance. The Church lifts up her voice in prayer and above all she is concerned about this new immigrant into eternity. Father Palacios needs the prayers of people who say to the Lord: *He is our priest. Forgive him Lord, forgive the sins he committed. Give him the light that shines in the search for the truth that always guided him. Father Palacios was characterized by a life of study. Give him rest from his work and from the misunderstandings that he suffered.* Our prayer accompanies our deceased priest but may our prayer also become a prayer of peace for this people that is so much in need of peace.

As we have already said, our prayer is a voice that denounces but it is also a voice that cries out for conversion. Our prayer is a voice that cries out for the conversion of all who are celebrating this Eucharist and all those who do not understand the message that the Church proclaims.

My sisters and brothers, I want to conclude by reminding you of a beautiful coincidence. Today, after the celebration of Saints Peter and Paul, the patrons of Rome, Rome celebrates the lives of all those women and men, priests and faithful, who following the example of Peter and Paul gave their lives in Rome, especially during the reign of Nero, but also during the various Roman persecutions. One of the Roman Popes, Clement of Rome, wrote a letter to the Corinthians and referred to this celebration. I want to use his words as an epilogue to my poor ideas which I expressed today because his words sum up what is occurring here in the Archdiocese of San Salvador as we gather in the Cathedral to celebrate this one single Mass as a sign of solidarity and have left all our churches empty and without the celebration of the Eucharist. Saint Clement wrote: *We write unto you, not merely to admonish you of your duty, but also to remind ourselves. For we are struggling on the same arena.*²

My sisters and brothers we are struggling in the same stadium, we live the same history and we run the same risks. The same challenge is placed before us, the same challenge that God gave to Father Palacios and which challenge he knew how to respond to so heroically. Yes, this same challenge is being placed before all of us: bishops and priests, faithful and women religious, communities here present ... we are struggling in the same arena and we move under the rule and the same challenge of the Lord. These times are difficult for everyone and therefore we should not allow ourselves to become concerned about vain and superficial realities. Let us come to the glorious and venerated rule of our tradition. Let us behold how beautiful and pleasing is this blood that is shed with the blood of Jesus Christ --- let us behold how beautiful and pleasing all of this is to the eyes of the Creator. Let us understand that the blood that gave the world the grace of penance was also the blood that was shed for our liberation and this blood is precious in the eyes of God.

Let us then move forward to the Eucharist where the Body and the Blood of the Lord gathers together the significance of so much blood that has been shed. The Lord makes this blood divine, ennoble it, and purifies it from any stain that it might have. Together with the Blood of the Lord we offer our prayer not only for Father Palacios and for those who are deceased and for whom we want to pray, but we also take up the spirit of the challenge of martyrdom which the Council speaks about (10) and we say to the Lord the same words as the apostle: *Let us also go that we might die with him* (11). So be it.*

¹ See Pronunciamiento del Arzobispado de San Salvador con ocasión de la muerte del Padre Rafael Palacios (27 June 1979), *Orientación*, 8 July 1979.

² Clement of Rome, *First letter to the Corinthians* 7,1.