

## MASS FOR TEACHERS OF EL SALVADOR

June 22, 1977

\*...the Church holds your work in great esteem because you teach in the same way that Jesus taught. I have great admiration for all of you who are teachers, not only those of the capital here of San Salvador, but also those teachers of the humble towns and villages, for there you live an uncomfortable village life and yet patiently instruct the children of the area. Such teachers receive expressions of gratitude that are perhaps only possible in the rural environment that so sincerely and warmly receives you. But you know all of this better than I do and I am not going to be a teacher of teachers in an area where you are so competent. I simply say again that I have great admiration for you.

We have called you here to congratulate you and also to extend our hand to you in friendship. My dear teachers, I want to tell you that together with you, I want to feel this profound rumbling that is heard throughout our nation and in so many parts of our continent. It is one of the signs of our times. It is the universal cry that shouts out: Liberty everywhere! The bishops gathered in Medellin heard this cry and said: *The Church is unable to remain deaf to these cries!* (Medellin Documents, *Poverty of the Church*, #2). It is a liberation that cries out from the margins of society and has diverse meanings. We believe that you understand this idea of the marginalization of culture. How many children are without schools! How many schools do not provide that liberating education that our continent demands!

As I extend my hand to you in friendship, I want you to feel the support of the Church and to understand that we never view you as suspect. I give you my friendship and hope that you feel that the school is the appropriate place to respond to the needs of the continent and the nation and the towns and thus provide an education that, as pointed out by the bishops in Medellin, is a *liberating education* (Medellin Documents, *On Education*, #8). This liberating education must be seen as a proclamation of the dignity of the human person. Thus children, from an early age, are able to come to an awareness that they are not puppets who are directed by some outside forces nor are they simply part of a *mass* of people. Rather this liberating education should help students recognize their great personal dignity and the many abilities that God has placed in their hearts that enable them to educate --- *educere* --- to recognize the potential within themselves, to create their own destiny, to live their proper vocation, namely, to live with pride as children of God. This vocation, more than making them equal, allows them to write their own distinct verses about life, dignity, liberty, justice and righteousness.

Teaching children about the richness of our way of life as the people of El Salvador will enable them to become part of the pluralistic society of Latin America. No two are exactly alike and therefore individual potentiality must be respected. Individuals must be made to feel that they are subjects and that one day, with voice and vote, they can participate in the construction of the common good of the nation. They should not feel marginalized for they have a right to participate in society. This kind of education is not subversive, but simply an echo of the words of the Creator, who has placed in the hands of all teachers the task of perfecting his marvelous work: making people worthy of the name *image of God* (Genesis 1:27)!

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\* Translator's Note: it appears that the beginning of this homily was not recorded since it begins in the middle of a sentence.

How beautiful the school where children, even the humblest child, reflect this image of God! Blessed are the teachers, who with faith, see that the children before them are not to be molded according to their [the teachers'] own desires but are to be formed as children of God who bear the image that God has placed within them. This reality demands that the potential of each child be developed so that they become our future citizens and create a better future.

As the Second Vatican Council came to a conclusion, the Council Fathers spoke to the youth of the world: *It is you who, receiving the best of the example of the teaching of your parents and your teachers, are to form the society of tomorrow* (Pope Paul VI, *Closing Messages of the Second Vatican Council*, To youth [read by Gregorio Cardinal Agagianian of the Roman curia, assisted by Joseph Cardinal Ritter of St. Louis and Valerian Cardinal Gracias of Bombay]). Beloved teachers, the best of the example of your teaching is being received by the students in our primary and secondary schools and other educational institutes.

We speak to you, dear teachers, the same words that the Council Fathers spoke on December 8, 1965: your example and teaching is to be prolonged into the future, a future that perhaps you yourselves will not see. This example, however, will be carried in the hearts of your disciples who will remember the teacher who taught them to read, the teacher who taught them some simple ideas. Then, with a future technology that we cannot even imagine --- for technology is rapidly accelerating --- these same students will take a part of their teachers into the future that we hope is a better future. A better future not only because it will be more technically precise but also because human dignity will have been planted in the hearts of these future men and women. In this way future generations will hopefully not repeat the horrendous situations that we are living today, situations that allow human dignity to be trampled under foot because a simple but profound reality has been forgotten, namely, men and women are the image of God.

My dear teachers, you are also the object of this liberation. Know that the Church fully supports your just demands. Let us walk together and assure that this complete development takes place in ourselves, our disciples, our students, and the followers of Christ who are in our churches. When I say that the Church and the schools promote the human person, I want to tell you, my beloved teachers, that the Church is united with all those liberation movements of the continent, but at the same time wants to communicate a unique and original message about liberation. My sisters and brothers, because of your baptism, you are members of this Church. Because of your baptismal commitment you have the obligation to develop these disciples that surround you, not simply economically, politically, and socially, but also spiritually, by bringing these students to a deeper awareness of the dignity that has been placed within them.

In this morning's gospel, Jesus speaks to you with words that he himself wanted to avoid: *Do not be called teacher* (Matthew 23:10). These words, however, are also words of exaltation: *You have but one teacher, the Messiah!* (Matthew 23:10). This Word of God tells us that teachers are great to the degree that they imitate the Divine Teacher. Jesus not only influenced his followers to become teachers but he himself, when he was nailed to the cross, became our teacher in redemption. He offers this gift of redemption to humankind because as the Divine Teacher, he carried his cross to Calvary and died there, and according to our faith and the prophet Isaiah: *he shall take away the sins of many and win pardon for their offenses*

(Isaiah 53:12). From this act arises our true liberation. How beautiful would our schools be, if together with the Church, we taught our children and young people that true liberation arises from the heart of each individual! How beautiful would schools be if we, ourselves, were convinced of this reality! As long as the heart is enslaved to sin, it cannot rejoice in liberation. The true liberators are those, who like Christ, struggle to root out from their hearts all those ignominious slaveries to their passions. Therefore, the way in which teachers make themselves holy and imitate Christ, (the only free man who was neither bound by sin nor by the earth), will determine their love for others, this holiness and effectiveness and the degree to which their teaching becomes rooted in the hearts of their students.

What, holy teachers! Throughout my priesthood I have known you and know that you are holy and that your holiness speaks to people today. I know that you fulfill your obligations and as we heard in the first reading, I know that you teach *with a simplicity that is characteristic of the ways of the righteous*.<sup>\*</sup> Yes, these words refer to you and I appeal to your own experience, for you have influenced us and left a mark on us precisely because you are Christ-like.

I would like all of us to be like this --- teachers who work for freedom, teachers who communicate by word and example that true freedom for our nation and continent has to arise from the heart of the human person. In this way we will have new men and new women. When Christ leaves the tomb, he is a new man, the model man, the risen one. He is no longer chained to the earth and he feels the joy of life, a joy that oozes from all his pores. He dies no more. Yes, these new men and women are the builders of true freedom.

It is useless to protest and denounce unjust structures, useless to desire new just structures as long as those who work within these structures or govern within these structures or dominate these structures have not changed their hearts. There would be a change of figureheads but the same situation of sin would remain. There would be a change in government officials but the same situation of terror, fear, torture and imprisonment would remain.

My sisters and brothers, this is not life. When I was coming here I spoke to the university officials and I said: Let us work for true freedom. Let us create in our country a calmer environment. Let us make our schools places that, according to God's plans, reflect the future society, places where the children of God feel at home, places where all strive *to be* more rather than *to have* more, and places where all are able to discover their own dignity and have that dignity respected by all.

My dear teachers, this is the simple message that I, in the name of this persecuted Church, want to share with you and that you have so wonderfully understood. Together with this profound act of thanksgiving you have expressed your solidarity with the Church, either here or on other occasions. Your enthusiastic presence here is an expression of that solidarity. I want to thank all the persons and institutions who organized this gathering, perhaps not perfectly because of a lack of time or experience, but I want to thank all of you because I know this was done with much love and good will.

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<sup>\*</sup> Translator's Note: The readings that were used for this celebration are not noted at the beginning of the homily and I was unable to find this Scripture passage in the Bible.

We offer this Mass for you and your families and we also remember those teachers who are now deceased. We pray that God will bring them to the Kingdom, to their merited reward, for as the Bible says: *the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever* (Daniel 12:3). Our deceased teachers are present with us --- they are here like shining stars for they worked with great love and gave us a wonderful example in the schools where they formed us. Let us pray then for all people: for the teachers of El Salvador, for those who suffer persecution, for those who are treated unjustly, for those who are happy and filled with the freedom of God, for all who have not found the true secret of freedom but have discovered a hint to this secret in the person of Christ made Redeemer.

My sisters and brothers, let us live this Eucharist. We are going to offer this celebration with my brother priests who have the ability to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, so that the sacrifice of the cross might become present in all the different circumstances of our life. How good it is to feel the presence of Christ! How good it is to feel his love as he offers himself to the Father for the sins of humankind. We offer this Eucharist in a special way for you, my beloved teachers of San Salvador.