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THE ONE MASS¹

Fourth Sunday of Lent
20 March 1977

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

My dear sisters and brothers.

Welcome to this ancestral home of the diocese. As the lowliest member of the whole church family, but chosen by God to be the sign of unity, this bishop thanks you warmly for joining him in giving the awaiting world the church's word. This word of the church not only comes from our lips but is proclaimed by our presence here at the only Mass that is celebrated in the archdiocese today.

Through this celebration we want to give great value to the Masses that are celebrated in all our parishes, in all our chapels—the value that the Mass has when a family in mourning asks that it be celebrated for a relative who is about to be buried or when a family gathers to give thanks to God on the fifteenth birthday of a daughter or to bless the marriage of two people who promise to love one another until death. At this time the Mass is recovering all its value. Perhaps because it is celebrated so frequently, it is often seen as an adornment and does not possess the greatness that it is reaching at this moment.

I believe that you who are participating here in this single Sunday Mass will truly feel what the Mass really is. You are welcome, sisters and brothers, and I also welcome those who have no faith in the Mass but are still present here. We know that there are many people here who do not believe in the Mass, but they are seeking something that the church is offering. And the church is happy to be able to offer that which people are seeking, even though they don't realize that they have it close at hand, in every Mass that is celebrated. In every Mass that is celebrated there are two banquets, the banquet of the Word that evangelizes and the banquet of the Eucharist, the Bread of Life that nourishes humankind. This is what we are doing now as a pilgrim church, dressed in violet, in repentance, journeying toward Easter, toward the Christ who is risen because he died for us. The Mass is Christ. You who do not believe in the Mass, hear this once and for all: what you have found today is Christ.

¹ After several meetings with his priests, Archbishop Romero decided to suspend the Sunday Masses on 20 March throughout the diocese and celebrate one Mass in the cathedral as a sign of unity and an expression of grief and protest for the assassination of Father Rutilio Grande and the persecution against the church. See «Information Bulletin of the Archdiocese, No. 6», ECA 341 (1977) 256-257.

The Mass is Christ who evangelizes and gives his Body and Blood for the life of the world

I want to compare this great gathering to today's first reading. The people who had been delivered from slavery in Egypt arrived in the Promised Land and celebrated the Passover. That is what the Mass is: an encounter with the Promised Land, a breath of hope, or better still, the prodigal son in the gospel that was just read. The prodigal son is each one of us; he is the people; he is the one who often goes astray in search of false freedoms. He is the one searching for happiness—because God has created us for happiness—but not finding it, he leaves his father's house like a foolish child and seeks it in the world, living in luxury, vanity, disorder, and debauchery. And in the end he finds only emptiness. What a great image of someone who seeks happiness apart from God! The only work he can find is that of caring for pigs (Luke 15:15). There are so many people like that, caring for pigs, worshiping false idols, unable to satisfy their hearts with the things of this world.

I hope that this Mass, in which we have heard the Lenten gospel of the Prodigal Son proclaimed, sets many people thinking. Perhaps they come to this single Mass attracted by a sense of calling: «We do not find happiness in the world. Let us go and see if in this Mass, in this church, we are offered something that truly responds to our longing for happiness». We say to you, sisters and brothers, if you have faith, you will find the answer here. The Mass is Christ who evangelizes. The Mass is Christ who offers his Body and Blood for the life of the world. These two realities are the Mass. At this moment we are in the first part of the Mass, the word of God; only in this word is to be found the solution to all our problems: political, economic, and social. These problems cannot be solved with human ideologies or worldly utopias or narrow Marxisms or atheisms that exclude the one force that can save: Jesus, who speaks to us of true liberation.

The healthy balance of evangelization

With gratitude I remind you of the words of Paul VI when he spoke two years ago to the bishops of Latin America as they gathered in Rome: «My dear brother bishops of Latin America, you have sought earnestly for the right language to evangelize this admirable continent, this continent so full of hope. The Gospel of Christ is the answer».² The pope spoke about how the bishops are restlessly seeking adequate language for communicating Jesus' message and about how the Gospel is taking on new dimensions which are radiations that illuminate human activity on earth. The pope said, «Do not desist from that desire to evangelize the men and women of today with all of their concerns. Do not be held back by those who are insensitive to the world's problems, and do not lend yourself to the tactics of those who want to introduce into the Gospel of Christ solutions that are not Christian».³ Here in the pope's words we find the healthy balance of evangelization. Let no one hold us back in this language that the church speaks; let no one tell people that there is no hope in the church. But also, let no one abuse our language and attempt to use the Gospel to justify doctrines that are not those of Christ.

² PAUL VI, Homily in the Mass concelebrated with the members of the Fifteenth General Assembly of CELAM (3 November 1974) in *L'Osservatore Romano* (10 November 1974).

³ Ibid.

We are experiencing this balance right now, dear sisters and brothers, and so I want to thank all of these beloved priests publicly, before the whole archdiocese, as we gather here in unity around the one and only Gospel. Many of them risk danger and even the greatest sacrifice, the one which Father Grande made. [Applause] Thank you. That applause ratifies the profound joy that I feel in my heart as I take possession of this archdiocese. I feel that my own weaknesses and my own inabilities find their complement, their power, and their courage in this united priesthood. Beloved priests, let us remain united in the authentic truth of the Gospel. This is another way for me to say, as Christ's humble successor and representative here in the archdiocese, that anyone who attacks one of my priests, attacks me. [Applause].

Be assured, my sisters and brothers, that the evangelical line that the archdiocese follows is authentic. All those religious and lay people who collaborate with our beloved priests are secure in their positions as long as they remain in communion with their bishop. Indeed, this is the meaning of today's celebration. It is an authorization of the bishop as authentic teacher of the faith, who assures all those who are in communion with him that they are preaching a doctrine that is in communion with the pope and is therefore also the true doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ. [Applause].

Evangelization is incomplete without the sacraments

My dear brothers and sisters, the reasons for following the true orientations of the pope, the Vicar of Christ, are explained to us in his latest document, which is a Magna Carta of evangelization. The document states that the process of evangelization remains incomplete without the sacraments, just as this Mass would be incomplete if it ended with the word and no Eucharist. Evangelization is complete only when the sacrament of the church is celebrated, only when the church is experienced as a sign of Christ's presence in obedience to the hierarchy and with the concrete signs of the sacraments (EN 47). After the word, we enter into the second part of the Mass where Christ becomes our food, where Christ becomes the host, where Christ repeats his offering of Holy Thursday evening: «Take and eat; this is my body; this is my blood, which will be shed for you» (Luke 22:19). Evangelization that consisted only of words without sacraments would not build up the true church. Evangelization that was only Bible and words—excuse me for saying this, dear separated sisters and brothers—would leave our Catholic doctrine mutilated, as happens when the sacraments are left aside. We priests preach the word, and we give that Word made life in Communion. What a precious sign we have here, as the priests gather around the altar where the hosts have been prepared to be consecrated into the Body of the Lord and then distributed to the people as nourishment for their life. Baptism and the other sacraments, like matrimony, are signs of the Christ who sanctifies life. And this is what the church does.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, the priests have this power which they have received from Christ, but which they exercise in communion with the bishop. This concelebration is a beautiful sign, for it shows that the priests consider the bishop as the center of their liturgy and the center of their sacramental life. They are the channels, together with the bishop, that bring the word of Christ and the life of Christ to the people who are waiting for them.

We also want to bear witness to the people who are left without Mass today so that they understand what the persecution of a priest means. What would it be like if one day this small group of priests were taken from the people? How would people be without Mass? How would the parishes be without baptisms? My sisters and brothers, I believe everyone has understood the meaning of our celebrating just one Mass today. There is nothing of demagoguery in this action. The church is not being manipulated by some political party. She is not raising a protest in a merely human manner. She is simply stating what the Mass means, whether it is celebrated by the pope in the Vatican, by the bishop in his cathedral, or by the humble pastor in the humblest village of the diocese.

And we want to urge you all to value the Mass, dear sisters and brothers. I began by welcoming you, and now I am happy to have had the opportunity to explain to you, with simple words, the meaning of the Mass. I hope that those who did not previously believe in the Mass will now become followers of that Christ who becomes present in the Mass of every Sunday and in the Mass of every human circumstance. Thank you very much for helping us give this sign that the church wants to give. [Applause].