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THE SINGLE MASS

End of the Novena for Father Rafael Palacios

30 June 1979

Dear fellow priests and beloved faithful, this single Mass in the diocese is an extraordinary sign of our church communion. We all feel the need for solidarity in these times of sorrow. But we also have times of joy because the church is first of all communion; she is what the Council calls «a sacrament of our intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race» (LG 1). We are «making» church, and we are living the reality of this communion. That is why I want to thank all of you, dear sisters and brothers here present, fellow priests, communities represented here, and all who haven't been able to come for reasons beyond your control. Your gesture of solidarity and communion is in itself a denunciation of the contrary sign presented by those who are culpably or deliberately absent. May God grant that they not be opposed to us.

You are performing here a marvelous church gesture. This cathedral overflowing with the faithful, the churches of the diocese without Mass on this day, the presence here of our beloved priests with their communities—all these constitute a sign revealing something very great. What is the content of this sign of solidarity motivated by the brutal death of our beloved Father Rafael Palacios? We have been summoned here by his spirit and by our memory of him as a man of the church, as a priest of our apostolate, as a Christian of our community. This single Mass of our diocese seems to me to contain three themes of great significance: first, the divine value of the Eucharist; second, the divine greatness of the priesthood; and third, the human and divine eloquence of the people of God.

The divine value of the Eucharist

Yes, above all, we are proclaiming here the divine greatness of our Eucharist, the Mass, the Blessed Sacrament. The Council calls the Eucharist the goal and the font of all Christian life (LG 11). We can say with great assurance that the church is created in the Eucharist. When the Eucharist is concelebrated with all the priests, as we are doing now, it expresses marvelously the unique sacrifice that each Mass re-presents. We do not multiply the sacrifice of Christ when we celebrate the Mass; rather, we make it present in the circumstances where each Mass is being celebrated. And when all the priests converge toward a single altar, it is an eloquent sign that the Mass is just one sacrifice, that of Christ our Lord. It is the presence of God's love, which in Christ becomes redemption, mercy, forgiveness, and the liberating force of the people.

That is why we want to congratulate and encourage our beloved priests, whose pastoral efforts seek to imbue the Mass with its true divine value. We know that there are parishes where they have stopped offering Masses for particular intentions, and instead they have a single Mass for deceased persons on a given day or anniversary. My hope, sisters and brothers, is that today's concelebration will strengthen in us the wonderful vision of Christ when he left us the Eucharist as a memorial of his passion and death. Let us esteem the Mass

and put all our confidence in it. We have undervalued the Mass, and this single Mass restores the value inherent in every Mass.

There are many sins against the Mass, against the Eucharist. The first of these is the absence of God, for the Eucharist is the presence of the merciful love that redeems the sinful world in Christ. When I say «sinful», I want to include the whole situation of crime and violence and murder and injustice. All that is the absence of God. We won't go to the extreme of saying that the Eucharist should not be celebrated as long as sin is enthroned in the world because, thanks be to God, even when surrounded by paganism and profanation, small Christian communities have always been the seedbed of hope and redemption. The Mass should be celebrated as the presence of light, light that is beginning to disperse the dense clouds of darkness. I believe that a people that claims to be Christian but has enthroned sin does not deserve the Mass. If the Mass is to be a light of redemption among the nations, then it must banish sin. The sign we see today, the lack of Mass in many towns of the archdiocese, indicates precisely that: it exposes the absence that we provoke in this God of love who desires to be with us and whom we reject by our attitudes of violence and injustice.

The presence of the Eucharist in the world is the light of redemption that Saint Paul tells us about when he refers to nature groaning under the weight of sin (Rom 8:22). The atrocities of injustice and disorder that we commit bind God's creation with the chains of sin—this creation that was so beautiful, that God saw as good (Gen 1:31). Nature groans with birth pains and awaits the hour of a new world, a fresh creation that becomes once again the marvelous dwelling place of God with humankind. The absence of Masses in the diocese also signifies this, and the single Mass in the cathedral seeks to be a torch which illumines the Christian communities so that they become conscious again of the beauty of their Masses when they are well celebrated and are experienced as an impulse toward holiness and redemption for us and for everyone.

The presence of this single Mass in the cathedral is also a condemnation of the many abuses that we commit against the holy Eucharist even within our church. The abuse may derive from selfishness, as when the Mass is subjected to people's convenience: «This is my Mass, suited to my convenience». That's what happens when Mass is selfishly sought after, as if God were a servant of the family or the place where the Mass is wanted, just to satisfy the whims of certain people.

The Mass can also become subject to the idolatry of wealth and power, such as when it is used to bless sinful situations or to convince people that no differences exist with the church. In such cases what matters least is the Mass; what's important is what comes out in the papers, so that purely political convenience is served. How often we have profaned the Mass by using it that way! That Mass should not be used. The Mass is light, and it brings light and illumination to all human activities. It is we humans who must submit with love and gratitude, with adoration and humility, to the divine gesture of Christ, who seeks 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 of the Mass a business. It seems incredible that Masses are multiplied just to earn money. That's like Judas's selling out the Lord (Matt 26:15); against such an act the Lord would be right to take up again the lash he used in the temple and say, «My house is a house of prayer, and you have made it a den of thieves» (Matt 21:23).

This single Mass seeks to recover all the greatness due the Eucharist, and it seeks to tell the Lord of the Eucharist, «Forgive us, Lord, because they have taken away from us a priest who could celebrate and multiply the presence of your love on earth». Let us realize the worth of something good by experiencing its absence. Let us not play around with the Eucharist. Let us take seriously the Mass of our parish, our community, or our sector, giving it the full importance it deserves as a way of sharing love with the Lord and with our sisters and brothers. Let us go to Mass in order to build the church and create community, as Father Palacios tried to do. He always celebrated his Eucharist with a sense of community, and he never allowed the Mass to be profaned by those unworthy ends I just denounced.

The divine greatness of the priesthood

My second reflection, then, is this: in this single Mass we are proclaiming the divine greatness of the priesthood. I want to thank our beloved priests here present for the great good that they do by celebrating Mass in their parishes and by offering the sacrament of the altar as a vital force to help the difficult situation of all of our people.

Dear fellow priests, by our vocation we have been anointed in a priestly ordination that is the twin sacrament of the Eucharist. Like the Eucharist, the priesthood is a sacrament of love which simply by its presence preaches the mercy of the Lord and the redeeming power of God in the world. As Masses are multiplied on the altars of our diocese by the gestures of consecration, the Lord is telling us how much he loves us and how much he wants to share his love with us. The priest gives the community a Eucharist meaning. In the sign of the bread and the wine the priest's hands offer to God the hopes, the worries, the joys, the sorrows, and the fruits of the labor of all humankind. A community is in a sense decapitated when it has no priest to celebrate Mass and divinize all that the people produce by their ingenuity, their labor, and their creative power. That is why the priest is necessary in every community.

On Holy Thursday Pope John Paul II recalled what happens in his native country in the places where there is no priest. A stole is laid on the altar, and the whole Mass is read, but when the moment arrives to pronounce the words of consecration, the people keep silence; no one can speak those words for the priest is not there. The silences, said the pope, are interrupted by the people's sighs and weeping as they nostalgically think of the absent priest (NI 10). I believe that is the case today as well, when our churches are without Mass and without a priest. By this gesture we want to make it clear how much we need priests and how much we miss Father Rafael Palacios and the other four priests who were murdered. We all feel deeply the absence of Father Palacios among the priests who are concelebrating here today.

Killing him was a crime not just a homicide. It was a sacrilege because it has touched the person of Christ whom the priest represents. Not only was it a crime and a sacrilege, but it was an assault on the people. The people are left without priests while the criminals claim they have no need of them. The penalty of excommunication that the church places on those who kill or violently maltreat a priest is not a meaningless gesture; it is the expression of a people who repudiate those who have raised their hands and snatched away the life of one of their priests.

This attack on the community is the reason for your presence here, dear sisters and brothers, and I thank you profoundly, along with my fellow priests. Your presence here proclaims your faith in this sacrament which deposits in human beings the power of Christ to forgive sins, to share his divine Body and Blood, to accompany pilgrims on their last journey toward eternity, to preach the divine word, and to teach peace and love to the nations. That's why it is unjust, in this time of irrational retaliation, to confuse the death of a preacher of peace with the death of those who are violent. In this whirlwind of vendettas, the death of a priest is extremely significant. There are five dead already, as we were reminded just now by the notice read at the beginning of Mass. No other diocese in Latin America can offer to the Lord five such hosts from among its priests. Will this redound to our glory? Or rather to the shame of a people who has no esteem for priests? What is certain is that your presence here in the cathedral and the lack of Masses in the rest of the archdiocese have the aim of affirming the value of priests for those of us who form the Christian community as well as for those who hate us and persecute us. Whether hated or loved, the priest is the minister of love and forgiveness. Whether they love priests or distort their words, whether they defame them or kill them, the priests will always remain as a presence of Christ who was also killed. In our archdiocese the priesthood can be stamped with this seal of Jesus: «If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you» (John 15:20). I believe this characteristic is a mark of the authenticity of our church's preaching. Of Rafael Palacios it can be said—by myself and by the communities that knew him firsthand—that he was always far from provoking violence or sowing hatred. He did not deserve to die as he did. A man of much reflection, he preached love and tried to create communities; he always believed more in the power of love than in the power of violence. His ideal was to create communities inspired in the love of Jesus Christ.

The human and divine eloquence of the people of God

Finally, then, sisters and brothers, I want to comment on how the death of these priests in solidarity with the people is united with the death of so many others. We can present the blood of our priests along with the blood of teachers, of workers, of *campesinos*. This is the communion of love. In a country where so many people are being murdered so horribly, it would be sad if we found no priests also among the victims. They are the testimony of a church incarnated in the problems of her people. Therefore we can say: this single Mass is not only in honor of Father Rafael Palacios, nor does it remind us only of the five murdered priests, but it is also our people's earnest entreaty on behalf of the blood of all our sacrificed sisters and brothers, Christian and non-Christian alike. Life is always sacred. The commandment of the Lord, «You shall not kill», makes all life sacred. Spilt blood, even that of sinners, always cries out to God, and those who kill are always murderers.

To conclude, then, I want to interpret the human and divine language of the people assembled here. I have said as much already, but I want to describe your presence in this single Mass as a voice of prayer above all. The people are praying. The church does not cry out for vengeance. The church rises up in prayer, and her main interest is in our new migrant to eternity. Father Palacios needs the prayer of people who say to the Lord, «He is our priest. Forgive him, Lord, the sins he committed. Give him light in that search for the truth that always guided him, for his life was marked by serious study. Give him rest in return for the work he did and the incomprehension he suffered». This is our posthumous prayer that accompanies the dead priest, but it also moves us to pray for peace for this people so badly in need of it.

Ours is a voice that denounces, as we've already said. It is a voice that calls for the conversion of all of us who are celebrating the Eucharist and of all those who have no understanding of the church and her message.

I want to end, sisters and brothers, by mentioning a wonderful coincidence. Today is the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the patrons of Rome. After celebrating the feast, Rome also celebrates that great multitude of men and women, priests and faithful, who followed in the footsteps of Peter and Paul by giving up their lives in Rome, especially during the reign of Nero and the various Roman persecutions. A Roman pontiff named Clement wrote a letter to the Corinthians referring to this celebration of Peter and Paul, and I want to cite his words as a fitting epilogue to the poor ideas I have expressed today. I do so because the words of the Roman Saint Clement sum up well the present situation of the archdiocese of San Salvador. Today we have left the church of the whole archdiocese devoid of worship as a sign of solidarity, and in celebrating this single cathedral Mass, we are seeking to live the great truth Saint Clement expressed in his letter: «We write these things not only to admonish you of your duty, but also to remind ourselves, for we are struggling in the same arena»¹.

We are fighting in the same stadium, sisters and brothers, we are living the same history, and we are running the same risks. We are all being confronted with the same challenge that God presented to Father Palacios and to which he responded heroically. The same challenge is being presented to all of us: bishops and priests, faithful and religious, communities here present. We live and move in the same arena, and the Lord is confronting us with the same demanding challenge. These times are perilous for all of us, so let us not be concerned about useless and superficial matters; let us rather abide by the glorious, venerable rule of our tradition. Let us consider how wonderfully pleasing and acceptable in the sight of the Creator is this blood that has been shed and that is now joined with the blood of Jesus Christ. And let us acknowledge how valuable that blood is in God's sight since it was shed for our liberation and obtained for the world the grace of repentance.

Let us pass, then, to the Eucharist, where the Body and the Blood of the Lord will give meaning to all the blood that has been shed so that it becomes divinized, ennobled, and purified of any stain it might have. Let us offer, along with the Lord's Blood in this Eucharist, our prayer for Father Palacios and for all the deceased whom we wish to remember. But let us also accept the challenge of the spirit of martyrdom which the Council recommends (LG 42), pledging ourselves to the Lord as that apostle did: «Let us go and, if need be, die with him!» (John 11:16). Let it be so. (Applause)

¹ CLEMENT OF ROME, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 7:1.