

Homily of the Mass in Managua, Nicaragua
4 March 1983

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
beloved brothers and sisters:

1. We are gathered here around the altar of the Lord. What a joy to be among you, my dear priests, religious men and women, seminarians and lay people – gathered around your Pastors – of this beloved land of Nicaragua, so tried, so heroic in the face of the natural calamities that have struck it; so vigorous and active in responding to the challenges of history and seeking to build a society that is in tune with the material needs and transcendent dimension of man!

I greet first of all, with sincere affection and esteem, the Pastor and Archbishop of this city of Managua, the other bishops, each and every one of you, old and young, rich and poor, workers and businessmen, because in all of you is present Jesus Christ, “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29); “You were clothed” in Baptism (cf. Gal 3:27); thus “you are all one in Christ Jesus” (cf. Gal 3:28).

2. The biblical texts that have just been proclaimed in this Eucharist speak to us of unity.

This is, above all, about the unity of the Church, of the People of God, of the “flock” of the one Shepherd. But also, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, about the “unity of the whole human race”, of which, as of the “intimate union” of every man “with God”, the one Church is “like a sacrament or sign” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1).

The sad legacy of division among men, caused by the sin of pride (cf. Gen 4:4, 9), endures throughout the centuries. The consequences are wars, oppression, persecution of one another, hatred, conflicts of all kinds.

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, came to re-establish the lost unity, so that there would be “one flock” and “one shepherd” (Gv 10, 16); a shepherd whose voice the sheep “know” but do not know that of strangers (Gv 10, 4-5); He who is the only “door” through which one must enter (Gv 10, 1).

Unity is so much the motive of Jesus’ ministry that he came to die “to gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (Gv 11, 52). This is what the Evangelist Saint John teaches us, who shows us Jesus praying to the Father for the unity of the community that he entrusted to his apostles (Gv 17, 11-12).

Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, and by the gift of his Spirit, has restored unity among men, has given it to his Church and has made the latter, as the Council says, “a sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1).

3. The Church is the family of God (cf. Puebla, 238-249). As in a family unity must reign in order, so also in the Church. In her, no one has more right of citizenship than another: neither Jews, nor Greeks, nor slaves, nor free, neither men, nor women, neither the poor, nor the rich, because all “are one in Christ Jesus” (cf. Gal 3:28).

This unity is based on “one Lord, one faith, one God and Father who is over all, through all and in all,” as the text of the Letter to the Ephesians that we have just heard says (Eph 4:5-6), and as you usually sing in your celebrations.

We must appreciate the depth and solidity of the foundations of the unity that we enjoy in the universal Church, in the Church of all Central America, and to which this local Church of Nicaragua must strive unwaveringly. Precisely for this reason we must also rightly value the dangers that threaten it, and the need to maintain and deepen this unity, a gift from God in Jesus Christ.

For, as I said in my letter to the bishops of Nicaragua last June (cf. Letter to the Episcopate of Nicaragua, June 29, 1982: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, V/3 [1982] 172 ff.), this “gift” is perhaps more precious precisely because it is “fragile” and “threatened.”

4 Indeed, the unity of the Church is called into question when the powerful factors that constitute and maintain it - the faith itself, the revealed Word, the sacraments, obedience to the bishops and the Pope, the sense of a common vocation and responsibility in the task of Christ in the world - are put before earthly considerations, unacceptable ideological commitments, temporal options, even conceptions of the Church that supplant the true one.

Yes, my dear Central American and Nicaraguan brothers: when Christians, whatever their condition, prefer any other doctrine or ideology to the teaching of the Apostles and the Church; when these doctrines are made the criterion of our vocation; when there is an attempt to reinterpret catechesis, religious teaching, preaching according to their categories; When “parallel magisteriums” are established, as I said in my inaugural address at the Puebla Conference (Address at the Inauguration of the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, Puebla, 28 January 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II [1979] 188 ff.), then the unity of the Church is weakened, and the exercise of her mission of being a “sacrament of unity” for all men becomes more difficult.

The unity of the Church means and demands of us the radical overcoming of all these tendencies toward dissociation; it means and demands the revision of our scale of values. It means and demands that we submit our doctrinal conceptions and our pastoral projects to the magisterium of the Church, represented by the Pope and the bishops. This also applies in the field of the social teaching of the Church, elaborated by my predecessors and by myself.

No Christian, and even less any person with a title of special consecration in the Church, can be held responsible for breaking this unity by acting outside or against the will of the bishops “whom the Holy Spirit has placed to guide the Church of God” (Acts 20:28).

This is valid in every situation and country, and no process of development or social elevation undertaken can legitimately compromise the identity and religious freedom of a people, the transcendent dimension of the human person and the sacred character of the mission of the Church and of its ministers.

5. The unity of the Church is the work and gift of Jesus Christ. It is built by reference to Him and around Him. But Christ has entrusted to the bishops a very important ministry of unity in their local Churches (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 26). It is up to them, in communion with the Pope and

never without him (cf. Ivi 22), to promote the unity of the Church, and in this way to build in that unity the communities, groups, different tendencies and categories of people that exist in a local Church and in the great community of the universal Church. I support you in this unitary effort, which will be reinforced by your next ad Limina visit.

A proof of the unity of the Church in a given place is the respect for the pastoral guidelines given by the bishops to their clergy and faithful. This organic pastoral action is a powerful guarantee of ecclesial unity. A duty that weighs especially on priests, religious and other pastoral workers.

But the duty to build and maintain unity is also the responsibility of all the members of the Church, bound by a single baptism, in the same profession of faith, in obedience to their own bishop and faithful to the Successor of Peter.

Dear brothers: bear in mind that there are cases in which unity is only maintained when each person is able to renounce his own ideas, plans and commitments, even good ones - all the more so when they lack the necessary ecclesial reference! - for the greater good of communion with the bishop, with the Pope, with the whole Church.

A divided Church, in fact, as I said in my letter to your bishops, will not be able to fulfill its mission "as a sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of unity in the country." That is why I warned there about "how absurd and dangerous it is to imagine that alongside – if not against – the Church built around the bishop, another Church conceived only as "charismatic" and not institutional, "new" and not traditional, alternative and, as has been advocated lately, a "popular Church". I wish to reaffirm these words today, here before you.

The Church must remain united in order to counteract the various forms, direct or indirect, of materialism that its mission encounters in the world.

It must be united in order to announce the true message of the Gospel – according to the norms of Tradition and the Magisterium – and that it is free from deformations due to any human ideology or political program.

6. The Eucharist that we are celebrating is in itself a sign and cause of unity. We are all one, being many, "who partake of one bread" (1 Cor 10:17) which is the body of Christ. In the Eucharistic prayer that we will say in a few moments, we will ask the Father that, through the participation of the body and blood of Christ, he may make us "one body and one spirit" (Prex eucharistica III).

To achieve this, a serious and formal commitment is required to respect the fundamental character of the Eucharist as a sign of unity and a bond of charity.

The Eucharist, therefore, is not celebrated without the bishop – or the legitimate minister, that is, the priest who is in his diocese the born president of a Eucharistic celebration worthy of that name (cf. Sacrosanctum Concilium, 41). Nor is it properly celebrated when this ecclesial reference is lost or perverted because the liturgical structure of the celebration, as established by my predecessors and by myself, is not respected. The Eucharist that is placed at the service of one's own ideas and opinions or for purposes other than itself, is no longer a Eucharist of the Church. Instead of uniting, it divides.

May this Eucharist, which I myself, successor of St. Peter and "foundation of visible unity" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 18), preside over, and in which your bishops participate around the Pope, serve as a model and a renewed impetus for your behaviour as Christians.

Dear priests: in this way renew unity among yourselves and with your bishops, in order to preserve and increase it in your communities. And you religious, always be united to the person and the directives of your bishops. Let the service of all be for unity, a true pastoral service to the flock of Jesus Christ and in his name. And you, bishops, be very close to your priests.

7. In this context, true ecumenism must also be inserted, that is, the effort for unity among all Christians and all Christian communities. Once again, I tell you that this unity can be founded only on Jesus Christ, on the one baptism (cf. Eph 4:5) and on the common profession of faith. The task of rebuilding full communion among all Christians cannot have any other reference and criteria and must always use methods of loyal collaboration and research. It can only serve to bear witness to Jesus Christ "so that the world may believe" (cf. Jn 17:21).

Any other purpose or use of the ecumenical effort can only lead to creating illusory unities and, ultimately, to causing new divisions. How sad it would be if what should help to rebuild Christian unity and constitute one of the Church's pastoral priorities at this moment in history were to become, through human shortsightedness and erroneous criteria, a source of new and worse ruptures!

St. Paul therefore exhorts us, in the passage just read, to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). I repeat this exhortation to you and point out to you once again the foundations and goal of this unity. "There is one Body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6).

8. Beloved brothers: I have spoken to you from my heart to my heart. I have urged and entrusted to you this vocation and mission of ecclesial unity. I am certain that you, the people of Nicaragua, who have always been faithful to the Church, will continue to be so in the future.

The Pope, the Church, expect this of you. And I ask God for this with great affection and confidence. May the intercession of Mary, the Most Pure, as you call her by such a beautiful name, that she who is the Patroness of Nicaragua, help you to always be constant in this vocation of unity and ecclesial fidelity. So be it.