

Angry Argentine Priests Quit Special Mass When Priests Talk of Torture, Repression

By Mary Thornton
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Nearly 350 Argentinean officials and sympathizers attending a Mass yesterday angrily stormed out of St. Matthew's Cathedral when references were made during the sermon to the repression and torture going on under the government of President Jorge Videla.

The morning Mass was held in honor of the country's national day.

The dignitaries, many of them dressed in military uniforms, were met by a group of about 40 protesters opposing the activities of the Argentinean government and the policy of the Washington Archdiocese in allowing such a Mass.

The group of demonstrators, which included many Catholic priests and nuns,

was led by the Rev. Patrick Rice, who strode to the front of the church as the Mass was about to begin and addressed the congregation.

Rice himself has been tortured at the hands of the Argentinean government and has several friends in the priesthood who have disappeared there.

Rice said yesterday that he was able to deliver about three sentences to the assembled Argentinean dignitaries before officials of the cathedral pulled the cord on his microphone.

"I said good mornin' and I told them I had worked several years in Argentina and had experienced the suffering first hand and that what was needed was a gesture of reconciliation. And then before I

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could say any more, they pulled the cord and the organ music started up and I was asked to leave," he said in an interview.

The Rev. Peter Hinde said that protesters, holding a banner and wearing hoods to symbolize the 13,000 people who have disappeared under the Videla government, appeared in the rear of the church. He said one of the protesters was attacked by an Argentinian security man who ripped off the hood.

The D.C. police were then called and the demonstrators moved to the street.

The Argentineans settled down in their seats, believing the trouble was over, only to be confronted with the sermon of the Rev. Sean O'Malley, head of the Spanish Secretariat of the Archdiocese of Washington. O'Malley appeared in purple vestments, which worn during the Lenten season symbolize mourning, death and penance.

In his sermon, O'Malley quoted statements by Pope John Paul II and the bishops of Latin America earlier this year referring to the repression, torture and disappearances in Latin America and how governments use the argument of national security to justify their activities.

As O'Malley began to focus on the people who have disappeared under the Videla regime and quoted a Bible passage from the slaughter of the innocents at the time of Christ's birth, the Argentineans got up and walked out of the church.

The priest continued his sermon to the handful of demonstrators left in the nearly empty church for another 15 minutes.

Rice, who was outside on the sidewalk, said that as the Argentineans left the church, they began to shout at the demonstrators and to tear up leaflets that were being handed out.

He added that a man in a general's uniform had accused him of not actually being a priest. "First he said I was really Jewish," he said. "Then he said that if I go back to Argentina, he would have me sent to heaven."

Following the incident at the church, the Argentineans returned to the embassy for a reception to celebrate the takeover by Videla. No one at the embassy would comment on what had happened.

O'Malley said in an interview later that he "had reservations about [the Mass] but it was an opportunity to present the church's teachings to these people. I knew it was a strong statement I was making, but it was based entirely on the teachings of the Holy Father."

The Rev. Maurice Fox, director of Communications for the Archdiocese of Washington, said it is unlikely the church will change its standing policy of providing special Masses for other countries for their independence day celebrations.

"We have these Masses for the people of the country, not the government," he said.

Fox said he had no objection to the way the sermon was handled by O'Malley. "We hope our priests are teaching the truth," he said. "Whether what they say is offensive and bothers the conscience of some people should not be the issue. The issue should be whether it is the truth."