

May 8, 1986

MEMORANDUM

TO: Bishop James W. Malone, President NCCB/USCC
FROM: Archbishop John L. May, Vice-President, NCCB.USCC
SUBJECT: Visit to Honduras and Guatemala, April 28-May 3, 1986

At your request I headed a delegation of bishops and staff of our conference on a visit with the episcopal conferences of Honduras and Guatemala and with representatives of the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America (SEDAC). The other members of the delegation were Bishop Rene Gracida of Corpus Christi and Bishop Sean O'Malley, OFM, Cap., of St. Thomas, accompanied by Father William Lewers and Mr. Thomas Quigley of the USCC Justice and Peace Office and Father David Gallivan of the NCCB Secretariat for Latin America.

This report is in three parts: 1) a chronological listing of meetings and principal contacts in each of the two countries, 2) a listing of major impressions and observations from each of the countries, and 3) a resume of the SEDAC meeting.

I. Chronology. Our arrival in Honduras was delayed by a day due to cancellation of flights on Sunday, April 27. We were met at the airport on Monday (4/28) by Bishop Oscar Rodriguez, Secretary of the Honduran Episcopal Conference (CEH) and Father Dionisio Potvin, permanent secretary to the Conference. After clearing customs and visiting our lodgings (Holiday Inn and a private home for the bishops, the Salesian Colegio San Miguel for the staff) we lunched with Archbishop Santos at the Arzobispado together with Bishop Raul Corriveau, of Choluteca, Bishop Rodriguez and Father Potvin. These three bishops form the CEH Permanent Committee and were the only bishops we met with in Honduras.

Following lunch we met in formal session with the Permanent Committee at the CEH headquarters. That evening some of us met at the Colegio San Miguel with Patrick Ahern, CRS representative in Honduras.

Tuesday morning (4/29) we visited the refugee camp of Teupasenti where some 2700 Nicaraguan Ladinos are cared for by the Honduras Red Cross and Caritas (with financial aid from CRS). In the afternoon we met with the U.S. Ambassador to Honduras John Ferch. We then went to the National Inter-diocesan Seminary where we concelebrated Mass and had dinner with the faculty and student body. A final wrap-up session with the CEH Permanent Committee concluded the day.

On Wednesday morning (4/30) we flew to Guatemala where we were met by Bishop Victor Hugo Martinez and Bishop Juan Girardi, President and Secretary of the Guatemalan Conference (CEG) and taken to the Maryknoll Regional Center, our base for the rest of the visit.

We were guests of Archbishop Oriano Quilici for lunch at the Nunciature together with the Permanent Committee of the CEG, Archbishop Prospero Penados and Bishops Martinez and Gerardi. Following lunch we went to the recently acquired CEG headquarters for an extended meeting with almost all of Guatemala's thirteen bishops.

Most of Thursday (5/11) was spent in meetings at the Maryknoll Center with over 40 U.S. religious personnel working in Guatemala, and in other visits which each of us arranged individually. Later that evening Archbishops McGrath and Rivera and Bishop Rosa Chavez arrived for the SEDAC meeting, offering the opportunity for a pleasant exchange before the meeting.

On Friday (5/2) we had breakfast at the U.S. Embassy with Ambassador Carlos Martines Piedra, his deputy chief of mission, Mayor Arzu of Guatemala City and the rector of the Salesian seminary. The afternoon and evening was spent in discussions with the representatives of SEDAC able to come, Archbishops Rivera and McGrath (President and Vice President), Bishop Rosa Chavez (Secretary), and Bishop Gerardi, representing the CEG. Each of us left for various parts early the following morning.

II. Impressions and Observations. Following are some of the main impressions we took away from the visits, gathered under five thematic headings for each of the two countries. Virtually everything we saw and heard can be fitted into one of these five categories.

A. Honduras

1. National Situation

Second poorest country in the Americas. Rapid changes from mule-travel to jet age in short time. Great social and moral dislocation, exacerbated by U.S. military and contra presence and the economic crisis.

Military fully professionalized only in recent years of military rule; Air Force now the largest in Central America. Army behavior very harsh, especially in early '80s when Salvadorean insurgents operated in Honduras, but less harsh than militaries of Guatemala and El Salvador. The military today are the new rich.

In late '60s many students had scholarships to Cuba or Bloc countries, resulting, e.g., in high proportion of Cuban-trained doctors today.

Historic 19th century political division between Liberals and Conservatives still intense, carried throughout all aspects of national life, including the Church.

Low state of media, journalistic tradition and presenting the best news that money can buy.

The more than 40,000 foreign refugees registered by UNHCR (plus many not registered in camps) continues a major issue, although the Colomoncagua camp relocation is no longer in prospect. Embassy maintains the camp is run by and for the FMLN guerrillas, serving their tactical interests (R & R, treating wounded, fabricating equipment and medicines, etc.); even charges of FMLN-sanctioned executions in the camps. The bishops remain totally sceptical of all this, citing the near impossibility of unauthorized personnel entering or leaving these virtual "concentration camps," and the testimony of the Caritas, CRS and other international workers in the camps.

2. U.S. Policy

Ambassador Ferch presented thoroughly positive view of politico-military situation, and of popular acceptance of U.S. military presence. Flatly denied widespread allegations of U.S. troop abuses against civilians, including children, and of rumored introduction of AIDS.

Less sanguine about Peace Corps, largest in the world (up from 40-odd a couple years ago to well over 300). Some church concern about P.C. activities and possibly hostile

attitude toward Church; ambassador's concern more that the receiving Honduran structures are inadequate to the number of volunteers.

Strong impression of Ambassador's preoccupation with the "success" of U.S. policy vis a vis Sandinistas, almost to exclusion of concern about Honduras as such.

3. Church Situation

Extremely poor, heavily dependent on foreign clergy (four of the seven active bishops are foreign-born). Possibly the most anti-clerical of Central American countries with strong masonic influence. No Catholic universities. One major seminary (60 students) and four minor. Of 200 plus priests, 70% still foreign.

Little apparent impact on public policy issues; strong presence among Salvadorean and Nicaraguan refugees (and thus some influence on this policy area) and among youth through Catholic schools and vocational training programs.

Episcopal leadership style seems highly cautious, centered in the Metropolitan and not particularly collegial.

4. Ecumenical Issues

Problem of the sects dominant here as everywhere in Central America.

Unification Church issue less today than in 1983 when CEH issued strong denunciation of CAUSA and a related Honduran group, APROH. (Present head of CAUSA-USA, Phillip Sanchez, is former U.S. ambassador to Honduras.) People today "are ashamed to belong to APROH."

Full Gospel movement worrisome to some bishops; growing rapidly among middle-class. Not as anti-Catholic as most fundamentalist sects; rather propagates kind of non-church "religion in general."

Extensive radio programming by sects.

5. U.S. Church Relations

Principal issue of increased financial support; specifically aid in helping construction of chapels and in developing more effective use of radio. Expressed need for Catholic edition of Bible; while otherwise acceptable versions are readily available through, e.g., American Bible Society, the Catholic edition notes are seen as essential in this climate of fundamentalist use of scriptures.

The Bishops would like copies of the Spanish edition of "The Challenge of Peace."

B. Guatemala

1. National Situation

CEG's "cautious optimism" about new government. (U.S. missionaries suggest people more cautious than optimistic.) Cerezo is "plunking at the piano," no harmony yet; military continues its traditional, dominant role.

External debt servicing and IMF conditions work against the needed economic and social progress. Guatemala a rich country but all wealth concentrated in hands of very few. Majority poor not benefitted by transition to civilian presidency, still inclined to oppose government. People are still dying of hunger in Guatemala; a destabilizing factor.

General economic deterioration; lack of spare parts. e.g., for transport; thus long lines for buses. Combination of increasing economic pressure and attempts by some to take advantage of new political opening could cause popular explosion followed by much harsher repression.

Disappearances and other major human rights violations diminished but still continue. Military thoroughly unresponsive to efforts by Archbishop and human rights groups to make accounting. Mutual Support Group (GAM), organization of relatives of disappeared, presses Cerezo but even he can't get access to military source. GAM has become radicalized; they and many others in the country with no experience of democracy want democratic politics and social changes effected immediately.

Legacy of years of unrepresentative governments, repression of labor, church and political parties; justice system (tribunals) not functioning, only a military justice.

Civil Patrols (a kind of home guard involving impressed service and militarization of peasant communities) still a great problem; some half million in the patrols which blanket the country: "an insufferable attack on the most defenceless part of the population." Un-constitutional, but still continues.

Army is an occupying force in certain zones; "what is needed is a demilitarization of the country." New resettlement villages ("polos de desarrollo") are virtual concentration camps, gathering presumed guerrilla sympathizers, kept under permanent surveillance; effect of "systematic destruction of local culture." Drug traffic is also in the hands of the military.

Guerrillas have not disappeared. Some Cuban and Nicaraguan influence. Guatemalan peasant is very pacific, even passive, but without land or work is susceptible to guerrilla promises to destroy oppression of both the Army and the capitalist system, and to provide land and work. Basically the people simply want a better future.

Guerrillas depend on Army repression for their appeal; the Army needs the guerrilla threat to maintain its own power -- an unholy dialectic. There is said to be some rivalry among different military groups for access to lands.

2. U.S. Policy

CEG not share U.S. Embassy optimism about economic aid in light of new government; little new aid is expanded; only government to government, not to the church which is better able to distribute it. View that Guatemala is seen by U.S. principally in relation to overall Central American policy with its focus on Nicaragua.

Any proposed military aid must be absolutely rejected; would be "totally anti-evangelical." Guatemala military guided by doctrine of national security; it is "impossible to be Christian in the military today"; it is impossible for the Church to dialogue with the military.

The U.S. Ambassador, while not addressing these issues directly, seems personally more committed to welfare of Guatemala than his counterpart seemed about Honduras.

3. Church Situation

We devoted far less attention to the general condition and role of the Church in Guatemala during this visit than in the August 1983 visit (Rios Montt era).

The hierarchy, by far the largest and most activist in the region, continue to issue relatively frequent and strong statements on matters of public interest. The large national seminary, serving both diocesan and religious candidates, is full. There is indigenous seminary in Solola under the direction of Opus Dei; the new ordinary (former coadjutor) is also Opus. The diocese of Quiche, under an apostolic administrator since Bishop Gerardi left with the entire pastoral team in 1980, is about to receive a bishop ordinary.

4. Ecumenical Issues

Conflicts caused by fundamentalist groups probably as great here as anywhere. Very extensive outreach with TV and radio; building churches all over the country; seemingly

limitless funds. Some are suspected of having U.S. government support; accuse the Catholic Church of being pro-communist; generally preach highly individualistic ethic with exclusive emphasis on personal sin and salvation.

Some (World Vision was mentioned) are said to proselytize in school programs funded by U.S.AID, or arrange to have local leaders brought to the U.S. for training sponsored by our government.

Caution sounded by U.S. missionaries against lumping all non-Catholic groups together. Relations with the historic churches and especially with the Quakers and Mennonites said to be good.

The need is not for a polemical apologetics but for fuller evangelization and true ecumenism where possible.

5. U.S. Church Relations

Much discussion with CEG about need for greater financial aid from U.S. Church with fewer restrictions. Objection to supposed excessive "paper work" required by U.S. donors and the "counter-productive" favoring of assistential programs over evangelization.

Missionaries focused this discussion more on CRS; contradictory impressions. Food programs should continue and increase, but development programs are preferable to handouts; both are necessary. CRS water projects are very important. All programs should be viewed in terms of their effect on the existing culture (e.g., potential destruction of the corn culture through introduction of other grains/food).

Problem of CRS ties with AID; but also problem of CRS ties with Caritas which makes unfulfilled promises, requires lists and information people are reluctant to give, and still nothing happens. But also need for greater CRS consultation and collaboration with Caritas and the bishops. A previous CRS country director was praised by some for giving money directly, circumventing Caritas, not requiring "paper"; the same man was criticized by others for his ties to the Embassy.

Technical competence of CRS generally praised; need for local pastoral workers to avail themselves of CRS technical advice (such as for water projects).

III. Meeting with SEDAC Presidents. The meeting was regrettably limited by the absence of the archbishops of Managua, San Jose and Tegucigalpa; Bishop Gerardi substituted for Archbishop Penados who was out of the city. In essence, we met with the executive committee of the Council of Presidents:

Archbishops Rivera and McGrath (SEDAC Pres. and V.P.) and Bishop Rosa (Sect.).

Each delegation offered a proposed agenda, only parts of which were picked up. Our delegation suggested: 1) Strengthening communication among our conferences in general, touching such specific matters as visits by bishops, interchange of documents, use of TELEX, provision by U.S. bishops of requested information dealing, e.g. with aspects of U.S. policy, U.S. religious groups, etc.; 2) Exchange of views on USCC positions on Central America policy; and 3) Miscellaneous issues such as CRS and U.S. missionaries, financial aid, fundamentalist sects, refugees in U.S.

The SEDAC bishops suggested: 1) illegal immigration and deportations, 2) bishops visiting White House without checking with USCC, 3) aerial war in El Salvador, 4) U.S. aid tied to demographic policy, 5) U.S. policy toward Central America, 6) U.S. missionaries, 7) visits of U.S. clergy and religious to Central America, 8) functioning of USCC on foreign policy questions.

Some of the principal observations:

Family planning. The SEDAC bishops would like to understand better U.S. policy on family planning in the Third World.

Salvador air war. While the armed forces do not bomb civilian zones they do bomb zones in which there are civilians

Salvador refugees. Archbishop Rivera would modify but not retract his November 1985 letter to U.S. Congress noting that conditions less dangerous today should refugees choose to return. No specific persecution against returned refugees but he strongly supports provision of extended voluntary departure

U.S. religious visitors. Some U.S. delegations to El Salvador seen as either naive or committed to radical perspective. Cited recent San Francisco group and a report from Canadian Development and Peace.

Sects. McGrath insistence that the problem must be addressed by more intense evangelization efforts and adoption of ecumenical approach.

Dialogue. Must be pursued at three levels: internal, regional, and geopolitical (involving both U.S. and USSR).

Episcopal style. While statements of U.S. bishops often deal with concrete facts, the C.A. bishops generally confine themselves to statements of principles.

Inter-conference communication. Determination to send to USCC, through the nuncio, communication on problems touching U.S. policy, role of U.S. church groups, etc.

Christian-Marxist issues. Serious questions needing more adequate addressing: seeming inversion of roles of "Church" and "Kingdom of God"; whereas we say the church is sign of the Kingdom, others say that the partial expression of the Kingdom (feeding the hungry, struggle for justice) is a sign of the Church.