

Statement on the Death of Francisco Mendes

[The following statement was issued today, January 9, 1989, by Msgr. Daniel F. Hoyer, General Secretary of the United States Catholic Conference, regarding the late Francisco "Chico" Mendes, murdered in Acre, Brazil on December 22, 1988]

In his recent Encyclical on Social Concerns--Sollicitudo Rei Socialis--Pope John Paul II singled out for special acknowledgment the generous commitment of those who seek to protect our threatened environment from ecological devastation. Among the categories of such persons, the Pope mentioned trade unionists, "many of them inspired by religious faith--who at no small personal sacrifice try to resolve the world's ills and who give of themselves in every way so as to ensure that an ever increasing number of people may enjoy the benefits of peace and a quality of life worthy of the name." (SRC #26)

These words well describe the life and work of Francisco Mendes Filho, the courageous and dedicated leader of the Brazilian union of rubber tappers who was murdered almost on the eve of Christmas. The movement that Mr. Mendes led sought not only to defend the rights and livelihood of the rural workers in western Brazil; it had also sought to provide a needed brake on the wholesale destruction of the Brazilian rainforests, a matter of increasing concern to the entire world.

There are those--apparently including those who plotted and carried out this tragic killing--who seem prepared to risk damaging the interrelated, ordered system of our world for the sake of present gain. Natural resources are limited, the Holy Father reminds us in the same encyclical, and some are not renewable. "Using them as if they were inexhaustible, with absolute dominion, seriously endangers their availability not only for the present generation but for all generations to come." (SRC #34)

I pray that the sacrificial death of Francisco Mendes will encourage many to take up where he left off and that it will focus renewed attention on the ever-growing urgency of safeguarding the integrity of creation. I join with the bishops and the rest of the Church in Brazil in offering condolences to Mrs. Mendes and her three children.

Msgr. Daniel F. Hoyer
General Secretary
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