

HOUSE SUB-COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL  
ORGANIZATIONS

TESTIMONY BY:

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Mr. Chairman, my name is Thomas Quigley. I am adviser for Latin American Affairs in the Office of International Justice and Peace of the United States Catholic Conference. I am grateful for the opportunity of joining with other colleagues this afternoon in presenting testimony on the condition of human rights in El Salvador, with particular reference to the persecution of the church.

Two weeks ago, the President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a strongly worded statement of solidarity with the persecuted church and people of El Salvador. Archbishop Bernardin's statement briefly sketched the source of the present turmoil and the basis for the Church's role within that highly conflicted situation.

In simplest form, there are two distinct realities, two sets of historic factors which must be understood. One is the nature of Salvadorean society, especially during the past decade: the

smallest of the small Central American republics with the highest population density; a heavily agricultural economy in which the great majority of the rural people have no land of their own and a few wealthy families control vast areas of the arable land.

El Salvador, designated to be one of the showcases of the Alliance for Progress, did experience economic growth during the 60's but because this growth was not accompanied by significant increase in the distribution of wealth among the various sectors and failed particularly to achieve an essential land reform, the lot of the vast majority has continued to deteriorate.

The other reality that must be understood, however schematically, is that of the Catholic Church in today's Latin America. No student of the area is unaware of the historic assembly of Latin American bishops at Medellin, Colombia in the Fall of 1968. Medellin symbolizes the renewed commitment of the Latin American church to the essentially evangelical task of preaching the Good News of liberation, of salvation, to the poor. The Gospel is not to be preached in a vacuum but within the concrete context of people's lives. At Medellin the bishops analyzed the situation of their continent and concluded that what most needed to be addressed were the "structures of domination" that kept millions of people in virtual servitude, the systemic injustices that the bishops characterized as "institutionalized violence" and "situations of sin."

The effects of Medellin were profoundly felt in virtually every country of Latin America and while El Salvador did not experience some of the more dramatic expressions of this renewal such as the various priests movements arising in other countries, the whole church of El Salvador gradually underwent a profound conscientization. Priests, religious and teams of lay catechists called Delegates of the Word of God carried on programs of prayer, study and reflection throughout the rural areas as well as in the cities.

These church personnel, contrary to allegations by the government and the landowners, neither incited nor led the campesinos in their struggles. Instances abound of attempts by the parish priests, including the martyred Jesuit, Father Rutilio Grande, to contain the justifiable anger and frustration of the peasants, to help them press for their rights in as non-violent a fashion as possible. The campesinos are their own leaders; the priests, including especially the Jesuits, served principally to help the people to reflect on and articulate their needs.

But confrontation with the authorities, aligned as they are with a traditionalist oligarchy determined to retain its privileged position, was inevitable. In 1974, for example, the bishops strongly protested the killing of several campesinos by the national guard in San Vicente. When a few months later in the same area the local pastor was arrested, beaten and tortured, the bishop invoked the penalty of excommunication on all responsible. Further killings occurred in July of that year (1975), bringing about stronger protests from the church and accusations

by the government that the church was a haven for communists and that priests were encouraging demonstrations such as those protesting the Miss Universe contest.

By July of last year, however, the scene was set for a more intense and systematic confrontation. It was just a year ago that the government announced a very modest land reform program, the Transformacion Agraria. This program was so reformist and minimalist that parts of the campesino movements refused to support it, but the Jesuits at the Catholic University and through their influential journal, Estudios Centroamericanos, lent their full support; if skeptical of the government's intention, they could at least praise the hoped-for results.

They had little opportunity to do so. The oligarchy organized such strong opposition to the Transformacion Agraria that by October the government backed down and cancelled the program. Among those siding with the landowners against the government was the government's official (PCN) presidential candidate, Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero, now president.

The accusations especially against the Jesuits and the Archbishop began increasing around the end of the year so that the past six or seven months in El Salvador have been a time of such vicious, sustained, cowardly and systematic attacks upon the church itself as to be probably unparalled in recent times.

You have heard today in the testimony of others and can read in the documentation we are asking to be received for the record the dramatic litany of these attacks: the arrests and expulsions,

the bombings and threats, the beatings and killings of scores, some say hundreds, of campesinos.

These are attacks against the Church, and against religion as such, in at least two distinct ways. The first is the obvious attack against the institutions of the Church and its personnel: the beatings, arrests, expulsions and killings of priests; the printed attacks against the Archbishop of San Salvador and the episcopal conference; the bombings of the Catholic University and the archdiocesan printing house; the threatened assassination of the entire Jesuit community.

The second, less obvious but no less insidious, is the denial not only of the social doctrine of the church but of the freedom of Christians to exercise their faith in accordance with that doctrine. Under the guise of defending a supposed Christian civilization, those in power in El Salvador both reject the church's authoritative teaching and prohibit others from living out their faith in everyday life.

On Sunday, June 12, together with several thousand others I participated in a solemn mass of reparation in the metropolitan cathedral in San Salvador. The service of reparation, not the first of its kind, was held to atone for the sacrileges committed by the security forces when they raided Aguilares May 19 and 20, broke open the tabernacle of the church and strewed consecrated hosts over the floor. While the obvious focus of the reparation service, held on one of the church's principal eucharistic feasts,

Corpus Christi, was this wanton desecration of the sacrament in Aguilares, the prayers and the archbishop's sermon made it abundantly clear that the "Santissimo" that had been violated was also the sacredness of the human person, the men, women and children of Aguilares.

That the church is defending the rights of the campesinos as sacred rights; or that the bishops can say as they did in their message of May 20 that "the fate of these campesino compatriots of ours, the poorest of the poor, concerns us as much as or more than the injustice suffered by the expelled priests" is apparently too difficult for the wealthy and powerful to understand.

But they will have to understand that the church in El Salvador is profoundly united and fully committed to its evangelical mission which includes, as Pope Paul has expressed it, "the duty of proclaiming the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are her own children--the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete."

And they will have to understand too that the church in the United States as well as in many other countries is committed to doing everything possible to ensure the freedom, the peace and the well-being of our fellow Christians in El Salvador.

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