

Testimony of  
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for the  
United States Catholic Conference

before the  
FOREIGN OPERATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE  
of the  
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

on  
U.S. POLICY TOWARD EL SALVADOR

February 25, 1981

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I testify today in the name of the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC), the agency which represents the Catholic Bishops of the United States on issues of public policy. I wish at the outset, Mr. Chairman, to express the appreciation of the USCC for the opportunity to present our views on U.S. policy in El Salvador. This is a topic on which very strong feelings are held in the Catholic community here and in El Salvador.

I. The Perspective of the Church in El Salvador

In coming before this Subcommittee on one of the most controverted foreign policy issues of the day, I wish to specify the principal focus of my remarks. The bishops in the United States take their perspective on the conflict in El Salvador from the viewpoint of the church there.

We accept the testimony of the church in El Salvador about the conflict because the Christian community there has proven its fidelity to the vision of the Gospel by the witness of its life. The prophetic Archbishop Oscar Romero symbolizes for Catholics in the United States the many other servants of the Gospel, lay and religious, who comprise the church in El Salvador.

The distinguishing characteristic of the El Salvadoran church is a pastoral ministry based on "the option for the poor". This was the theme enunciated by all the bishops of Latin America in their meeting with Pope John Paul II at Puebla, Mexico in 1979. The church of El Salvador has fulfilled this ministry by an explicit choice to accompany the people, especially the poor and the oppressed,

in their daily struggle and suffering. In the midst of a civil war the church of El Salvador has accepted the prophetic vocation of the Scriptures and it has paid the prophet's price in the lives of Oscar Romero, eleven priests martyred in four years, and countless campesinos deprived of livelihood and life itself because of fidelity to the Gospel vision of justice. The same sacrifice of life itself was made by the four U.S. missionaries who were murdered in December.

The church of El Salvador has taught us to see the civil war through the eyes of the people it serves. For the church in the United States this has been a valuable lesson for we do not find that perspective of the conflict reflected often in press reports, even less so in the public debate. We have been led by the Salvadoran church, and by American missionaries working there, to see the struggle of the last three years as a quest for social justice by the majority of the population who have too long been denied the fruit of their labor; to see the conflict as one rooted in historical patterns of inequity, in the concentration of political, economic and social power in the hands of very few, while the majority lived in conditions marked by poverty and violence.

It is the life of this majority - their struggles, their suffering, their hope for themselves and their children, their faith and long-suffering patience - which I wish to put before this Subcommittee. The questions of the church are: how are they affected by the present conflict? what does a massive increase in U.S. military aid say to them and what will it do to them? These are not the only questions before the Congress but these are the ones which the USCC will stress because they are in danger of being lost

in the altered definition of the situation which now dominates the public debate in the United States.

## II. The Position of the Church in the United States

It is the recent redefinition of the El Salvador conflict which the USCC finds deeply troubling. To place our comments on the present policy in perspective, it is necessary to say that throughout 1980 we had a specific disagreement with U.S. policy concerning military assistance. The USCC has consistently opposed military assistance to the Junta in El Salvador. In doing this we have been following the guidance of the late Archbishop Romero who wrote to President Carter a year ago (17 February 1980) seeking the prohibition of military assistance and of any form of U.S. intervention in the local struggle in El Salvador. This position has been repeatedly affirmed by Bishop Rivera y Damas, the present Apostolic Administrator of San Salvador.

During the course of 1980 we found in discussions with Administration officials that some common ground existed between their view of the conflict and the perspective we were receiving from the church in El Salvador. The common ground was the recognition that the basic causes of the struggle were indigenous to El Salvador. They were the long-standing patterns of social injustice and the denial of basic human rights afflicting most of the population. Our disagreement with U.S. policy during 1980 concerned two questions. First, whether the Junta as presently constituted could bring about basic reforms without an increasing degree of repression? Second, whether U.S. military aid did anything except to increase the

political stature and improve the repressive capacity of the security forces?

Our differences on these two points were never resolved. Indeed, when the Administration decided, in January 1981, to restore military aid and expand its composition from the ambiguous category of "nonlethal" to the explicit category of lethal, our opposition to the policy intensified. All this is history.

Yet, its value lies in the fact that our past differences with U.S. policy have now assumed a new proportion as we confront the definition of the El Salvador problem being offered to support an intensified U.S. policy toward El Salvador. The redefinition, as we understand it, involves two steps.

First, it describes the conflict in El Salvador with an international dimension which includes a test of superpower will and capability. In the idiom of the moment El Salvador has been transformed into an "East-West" conflict as well as a question of "North-South" relations for U.S. policy. This internationalization of the conflict concentrates attention, at the level of policy and public opinion, not on the fate and future of the people of El Salvador, but on the role of the Soviet Union in the Caribbean and our response to it. Second, not only has El Salvador become a test of U.S.-Soviet relations in the hemisphere, it seems to have assumed the role of a model of how the U.S. will resist Soviet adventurism in the developing world.

I offer two comments on this recasting of the El Salvador problem. First, the involvement of the Soviet Union (and other

Eastern bloc nations), on its own or through Cuban cooperation, in the internal struggles of Central America is unwarranted, unhelpful and ultimately unacceptable behavior on the part of a superpower. In rejecting superpower intervention, either by the Soviet Union or by the United States, in the El Salvadoran conflict, the USCC is once again simply reiterating the voice of the church in El Salvador. An example of this voice is the recent homily of Bishop Rivera y Damas which rejected military intervention by either superpower as detrimental to the self-determination of the El Salvadoran people. It is the position of this testimony, therefore, that Soviet or Cuban involvement in the conflict is inadmissible on political, legal and moral grounds. The problem with present U.S. policy, in our view, is not the opposition to Soviet involvement, but the priority given this issue, to the detriment of more fundamental questions, and the issue of which means are appropriate to resist Soviet or Cuban activity.

Hence, my second comment is to argue, on the basis of both political and moral grounds, for giving priority to the internal problem of El Salvador. If we simply lift this whole conflict out of context and make it an East-West face-off, we lose sight of the essence of the problem. Outside agitation, influence, even weapons, would not be sown in such fertile soil if rampant injustice and fundamental inequities did not exist today as they have for decades in El Salvador. If we move toward emphasizing the international dimensions of the El Salvador case to the detriment of focusing upon the internal injustices afflicting its population, we will misdefine the problem we face.

The problem with what appears to us as a shifting definition of the El Salvador case is that it changes the face of the El Salvador issue for American policy and public opinion. Because of the perspective of the problem we have been given by trustworthy sources in El Salvador, we resist the new definition of the question. It risks missing precisely the lives of the people for whom the Salvadoran church has made its "option for the poor".

On policy grounds alone, the USCC believes that the long-term interest of the United States in Central America will hardly be served if the majority of the people there believe we have chosen to subordinate their quest for justice to a geopolitical policy of hemispheric security which is one step removed from their daily lives. One can be rightfully concerned to work out stable patterns of superpower behavior, but not at the price of rendering an entire population simply an instrument in a larger strategy.

Since the USCC has fundamental problems with the prevailing definition of the Salvador situation, our policy recommendations run counter to present tendencies, even more directly counter than our recommendations of the past year.

### III. The Church and U.S. Policy

We believe one of the most useful contributions we can make to the public debate is to interpret the views of our brother bishops in Latin America. They resist and reject, as we do in this testimony, any form of Soviet encroachment in Latin America. But they also consistently affirm that the primary threat to human dignity, peace and justice in their countries is rooted in the social

system which condemns the majority of the population to a marginal existence. In this regard their pastoral judgement has been confirmed by John Paul II who said last year in Brazil:

Anyone who reflects on the reality of Latin America, as it presents itself at this moment, is led to agree with the statement that the realization of justice on this continent faces a clear dilemma: Either it will come through profound and courageous reforms, according to principles that express the supremacy of the dignity of man, or it will come - but without lasting result and without benefit for man, of this I am convinced - through the forces of violence.

The "profound and courageous reforms" of which John Paul II spoke are the daily pastoral concern of the church in Latin America. The bishops know there is risk in change, but they are convinced the greater risk is not to change for that condemns another generation to poverty and misery. The policy of the United States, in its political, economic and military aspects, has historically been the most influential outside force touching Latin America. The spirit of the moment there, in the church and in the wider society, is to overcome past patterns of dominance. But even in this quest for authentic liberation, perceptive observers know that interdependence of some type with the United States will be a fact of life.

If U.S. policy sees the risk of change in Latin America as so threatening that it appears to support almost any sitting government which flouts its anti-communist credentials, we place ourselves against the best insights of the church in Latin America. In El Salvador and throughout the continent conditions cry out for "profound and courageous reforms". The first recommendation of this testimony, a reflection of Pope John Paul's recent statement

in Manila, is that the United States should not place itself on the side of those who say "security" requires postponement of justice and suppression of human rights.

Our second recommendation is to repeat here the call of Bishop Rivera y Damas for both of the major powers to stop their intervention, particularly the sale and supply of armaments, in an already violent conflict. This means that the USCC wishes to reaffirm here its basic policy position against any U.S. military assistance to El Salvador. It also means that we recognize that the threat to the integrity of El Salvador comes also from other powers taking advantage of the plight of El Salvador at this moment. We have no doubt of the need to halt the supply of arms from such sources to El Salvador. It is our conviction that this would best be accomplished by some regionally or internationally agreed upon strategy.

Our third recommendation is to encourage support by the United States for beginning a process of political dialogue within El Salvador which could at least stop the killing, and prepare for the negotiations needed to reconcile and rebuild the nation.

Our fourth recommendation is an extension of our opposition to military assistance. In spite of our efforts and those of other groups the policy of military assistance is in place and is being expanded. Without assenting to what we have not been able to change, we acknowledge the reality of the policy and seek to limit its inevitably destructive potential. We speak against a policy of ever more lethal and mechanized instruments of warfare which are usually included today in counter-insurgency programs. We are against all military aid, but especially those instruments of

massive firepower which are readily available in the U.S. arsenal and undoubtedly will be requested by the Junta.

As pastors, we wish to warn, with the utmost urgency, that a grave prospect lies ahead if U.S. military assistance and advisers are substantially increased. We know how deeply and pervasively the church in El Salvador is involved with the poorest of the poor, how committed it is to the desire of the poor for change. It is the poor who have borne the brunt of the violence thus far in El Salvador, and there is no reason to believe this will change if the tempo of the war escalates. There is a very high possibility, therefore, that American military equipment will be used against whole communities of Christians, and very likely against officially designated church personnel. The murder of the four American missionaries catalyzed an outpouring of revulsion in the church in our country. This will undoubtedly be repeated if the prospect we portray here comes to pass. Before U.S. policy moves toward more aid and advisers, this truly tragic possibility ought to be clearly faced.

Our fifth recommendation is to request that U.S. efforts be directed toward the humanitarian relief and reconstruction program which El Salvador so desperately needs. In the present context of widespread conflict, the good offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross should be utilized.

Mr. Chairman these are the best insights which we draw from our acquaintance with the church in El Salvador and our assessment of the present policy debate in the United States. Our position

on this issue in the past year has had, we believe, substantial support in the Catholic community and in the wider public debate.

We have not been successful in changing major aspects of U.S. policy and we offer this testimony today knowing it stands at variance with the mood of the moment. But the moment is a critical one; the path the United States follows will be decisive for our country and for the people of El Salvador. In the name of both we respectfully but urgently ask for reconsideration of our present course.

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