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**The Cry of the People**

**The Sisters of the Holy Cross in Brazil, 1947-1980**

**by**

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### The Sisters of the Holy Cross in Brazil, 1947-1980

The Sisters of the Holy Cross arrived in Brazil October 13, 1947. Under the patronage of the Archbishop of Sao Paulo, they went to work at once, first with a sort of finishing school for young ladies. This lasted only a year, during which time the Sisters learned enough Portuguese to attempt a regular grade school. While this was growing and prospering, they also took over, in 1960, an already-existing school with 700 children in grades one to four. The apostolate was doing very well.

But the world grew nervous by 1960. The United States and the countries of western Europe were terrified by the specter of approaching Communism, especially since it had made a very definite appearance in Cuba. In August 1961 the President of Brazil was forced to resign, and was succeeded by his Vice-President, Joao Goulart. Career military officers pushed through the Brazilian Congress a change from a strong presidential system to a parliamentary one, where the Congress would control the government and the military would control Congress. Goulart regained his power through a plebiscite January 1, 1963. The middle and upper classes feared a proletarian revolution. For the next several years, Brazil became a battleground. Goulart fled the country in April 1964.

Gradually the Sisters became involved in the resistance which now formed to the repressive government. More and more they heard reports that the poor, who had always been exploited, were now being tortured and murdered. And more and more, as the principles of Medellin percolated through the clergy, religious and laity, the Church, including the Sisters of the Holy Cross, became involved in the struggle.

One of the earliest manifestations of this spread of grace took place at a church called Candelaria. The church is in Rio, so none of the Sisters of the Holy Cross were present, but it serves as a fine example of what was "becoming" in the country.

It was 1968, four years into the military dictatorship. A student activist had been killed by the military police, and the Mass offered for him by Bishop Jose Castro Pinto attracted thousands. Once the people were in the church the army arrived, setting up "machine gun nests. . . armored cars, barbed wire entanglements, and aerial patrols."<sup>1</sup> The church occupied, (and still does) a plaza which was really an unprotected island, so there were no side streets for the people to duck into as they came out.

At the end of the Mass, however, one of the priests announced that nobody -- absolutely nobody -- was to leave the church ahead of the clergy. Then the Bishop walked out into the plaza, followed by fifteen

priests in albs and stoles, deploying to either side of the Bishop and holding hands.

They formed a line to confront the drawn sabers of a row of military police. Slowly, slowly, this strange procession forced the horses to fall back. The priests then moved down...to...the crossroads of downtown Rio, forming a protective arc around Candelaria until the last person had left. It was only then, in the crossroads, that the cavalry and soldiers lashed into the crowd with their batons, hurling tear-gas grenades, but at least there was somewhere to flee.<sup>2</sup>.....

One Brazilian journalist wrote of " . . .the massacre that had not taken place because a dozen priests offered themselves as the first victims. That afternoon the Church discovered a new dimension of grandeur." The Church would have need of it.

Another now-famous conflict of about the same time came closer to home. A group of young Dominican priests were arrested, imprisoned, and tortured. One of them, Father Tito de Alancar, who was one of Sister Maria Cecilia Nesteruik's teachers at Sao Paulo University, left a record of what happened to him. It starts with electric shocks, especially on the inside of his mouth, which left his whole mouth an open wound. Then there were further interrogations, insults, accusations that he was a guerilla and bank robber, more shocks, punches, kicks, beating with boards, and cigarettes extinguished on his skin. He was sent through the "Polish Corridor," a version of running

the gauntlet. Back in his cell, he concluded that the only thing to do was to kill himself, and began to sharpen an empty sardine can he had found among the trash on the floor. He felt that if he killed himself, public opinion would be aroused and his brother Dominicans would not be tortured. Between sessions of sharpening, he took a pocket New Testament and read the Passion of St. Matthew. "I fainted," he said, "full of pain and faith."

The next day he was told that he had only two more days to tell the torturers what they wanted to know. He was allowed to shave, but deliberately did it badly, then asked for a new razor. This he slashed deeply into his left wrist. He awoke in the prison hospital and was transformed to the military hospital with six guards from Operation Bandierantes, a military death squad. He was told that the Church had expelled him because of his suicide attempt. He was denied sleep.

One of the auxiliary bishops of Sao Paulo managed to visit him. The doctors allowed the bishop to see both the suicide marks and the torture marks. A few days later he was transferred back to his original prison. Eventually he and the other Dominicans were released.

But Father Tito was too broken in mind and body to survive. The last part of his document is addressed to the official Church. "The Church must not protect itself," he wrote. "If the Church does not speak

up in a case like this, who will? Or is it necessary that I die for something to be done?"

He apparently thought the answer to the last question was yes; he managed to hang himself.

Father Tito's document probably joined the pile of evidence which was being secretly collected in Brazil. Some of the material it contained was condensed and published in France under the title, Dossier Noir de la Torture (Black Book of Torture). Dom Helder Camara sent a copy of this to Pope Paul VI, who responded, "The Church will no longer tolerate the commission of atrocities and torture in a country that calls itself Christian." But the Christians in Brazil got very little help from those in Rome. The World Council of Churches also saw the Black Book, but challenged by theologian Ivan Illich to respond, its spokesman replied, "In order to continue the admittedly meager relief program, we have to maintain a relationship with the government of Brazil that is to me abhorrent." So no hope there either.

Although Cardinal Arns, Archbishop of Sao Paulo, had been defending the rights of prisoners energetically since 1970, it was the attack on a fellow bishop which brought him into the fight with all his strength of character, force of personality, and influence.

Dom Pedro Casaldaliga, a native of Spain, had become bishop of Sao Felix, Mato Grosso, when he and one other priest constituted the



entire ecclesiastical structure of the 58,000 square mile prelature with its 100,000 widely outspread people.<sup>3</sup> By objecting to the land system, to the exploitation of the poor, to the prevalence of disease and vice, to the way everything in the area served the interests of the rich (mostly cattle barons), the bishop soon made powerful enemies. They objected to his penniless life style, to a document he had written on white slavery even before he became a bishop, and to another document on the land system which brought him his first jail sentence. This treatment of their brother inspired the Brazilian hierarchy to write, "I Have Heard the Cry of My People," the first of a series of papers which called attention to things Casaldaliga's enemies preferred to have go unmentioned.

In February 1972 one of his priests (he now had more than one) became involved in a struggle to save a clinic. In the priest's absence farmers with shotguns stood off thirty military police with machine guns; eight were wounded, some on each side. When the French-born priest was about to be first imprisoned and then deported, Bishop Casaldaliga announced not just his full support, but his own assumption of full responsibility for the episode. He further proclaimed that

". . . if there are any 'consequences' to be suffered, I state publicly that I will not seek any intervention on my behalf by the Brazilian Conference of Bishops or the papal nuncio. When I was consecrated a bishop, I was not invested with any superior order of

privilege. I gave myself, through the merciful choice of Our Lord Jesus, to a life of total sacrifice."<sup>4</sup>

The entire area was flooded with police under the command of a Colonel Euro Barbosa. Every house was searched, an Indian mission was raided, the bishop's staff of three and the entire staff of a Catholic school were questioned, and the bishop was slapped in the face when he protested. The bishop and four priests were arrested and tortured. The bishop was not cowed. He later said,

"No matter how much we are lied about or condemned, we will continue our work of consciousness-raising and evangelization, which for the Church of Christ means a total concern for man and not just for spiritual matters, contrary to the opinion of that presumed theologian, Colonel Euro Barbosa."<sup>5</sup>

This fearless jibe at one of his chief torturers is both delightful and terrifying. The Bishop of Sao Felix had proclaimed that the Church has taken note, and he now called on his hearers to take note, that the Church (represented in this area chiefly by him) would express and live out its "total concern" for its people, and "not just in spiritual matters," where it had been willing to confine itself for hundreds of years.

The hierarchy and the local people responded with cheers and support, but the landed interests increased their attacks many times over. Bishop Casaldaliga was called Communist and rebel and his



deportation was demanded at once. He responded by withdrawing permission for his priests to offer Mass on the great cattle ranches which comprised most of the area, saying that, "There is no longer any sense in saying Mass on the same estates where peons, Indians, and *posseiros* are mistreated."

A fellow bishop, Tomas Balduino, took alarm when he heard that professional killers had been hired to get rid of Casaldaliga. He contacted Cardinal Arns, who put together a meaty report of Casaldaliga's troubles and personally took it to Pope Paul. The day after his meeting with Arns, the Pope issued a succinct statement: "Whatever is done to the Bishop of Sao Felix is done to the Pope." The very same day (how did the word reach them so fast?) the government sactimoniously denied it ever had the slightest intention of expelling (or worse) the bishop. The French priest, in spite of all efforts, was imprisoned for a year, then sent home by his ecclesiastical superiors to rest for a year and a half. He then returned to Brazil, but was soon picked up again by security police and sent back to France.

It was inevitable that sooner or later events like these would affect the lives of the Sisters. Since nothing anti-government could be written down at the time, the archives are innocent (and dull) recitals of school, visitors, religious observance, study, vacations, etc. The following accounts come from the Sisters' memories, at a remove of 20 or 25

years. Some details may falter, but the basic stories are well vouched for.

Sister Ruth Evelyn Mauch remembers the following episode as starting with the torture of the Dominican priests. Cardinal Arns (Dom Paulo) was in Paranagua, about 270 miles southwest of Sao Paulo, attending his dying mother. Having heard reports of what was happening in the prison, various persons called meetings of parts of the Human Rights Commission. Sister Ruth Evelyn attended one of the meetings in a "dark room under a church," at which it was decided that Dom Paulo must be sent for. A Father Juliani offered to make the trip. The group decided it would be better if one or two women went along, as cars were frequently stopped and searched. So Sister Ruth Evelyn and Sister Ana Maria joined Father Juliani, hoping they looked like a family group on vacation. They left Sao Paulo at 4 a.m. and drove nine hours, arriving just past noon. Hard as it was for him to do, the Cardinal agreed to return. The three messengers turned around and drove back, the Cardinal following some miles behind them. He went directly to the jail and demanded to see the prisoners. He thus made a mortal enemy of the infamous Sergio Fleury, "police commissioner and narcotics kingpin, [who] ran a chain of horror houses, including the rat-infested Tiradentes prison."<sup>6</sup> Fleury was eventually excommunicated by Arns. Senhora Arns died without the comfort of her son's presence.

Another episode which was never committed to paper was the attendance of several Sisters at Cardinal Arns' memorial Mass for Alexander Vanucci Leme, a geology student at the University of Sao Paulo who was arrested and tortured to death in 1972. The military hastily buried the body and then declared that no one had claimed it. When his parents protested that they had not even been informed of his death, the police replied that they were "busy with other investigations." They refused to allow the body to be exhumed.

Word got around that the Cardinal would offer Mass for the young man. He was joined by another bishop and 24 priests. This was the Mass that several of the Sisters attended.

The Mass was scheduled for 6:30 p.m. but by midafternoon downtown Sao Paulo was occupied by armed police and shock troops, while the university was surrounded by military police. Nevertheless, three thousand students managed to enter the cathedral. [The Sisters remember that the police were filming the crowd.] The first song on the service sheet. . . was no hymn but a work written by a Brazilian exile and prohibited by the Brazilian censors. . . . Cardinal Arns, in the first words of his sermon, pointed out that "even Christ after his death was returned to his family and friends. . . Roman power was able to do that much justice."<sup>7</sup>

The Sisters also recall that many people declined to go up to Communion for fear of showing their faces.

North American readers of *Time* magazine got occasional glimpses of the Brazilian troubles on its pages, often with praise for Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda, and former auxiliary bishop of Rio, to whom the Brazilian conservatives constantly referred as "the red bishop." In March 1974 *Time* noted:

The junta has run Brazil with efficiency and cold chill. It has imposed strict censorship on the press and the arts and has imprisoned and tortured Catholic priests and lay workers who have been organizing among the poor. [Except for Dom Helder] opponents of the regime have been cowed or brutalized into silence.<sup>8</sup>

The following June an article stated that Dom Helder was "trying to prick the conscience of the first world for its complicity in the third world's troubles," calling attention to the greed of the multinational corporations and the injustice of international trade policies.<sup>9</sup>

Five months after that, *Time* published an account of an American Methodist missionary and *Time* stringer who underwent torture in Brazil for sending the magazine articles about Dom Helder.

By this time the Church was in open opposition to the government of Brazil. The Conference of Brazilian Bishops published "Christian Requirements of a Political Order" in 1977, and in December 1978 the Archdiocese of Sao Paulo celebrated Human Rights Week. Sister Michael Mary was among the organizers. Gustavo Gutierrez and other

leading proponents of liberation theology made up the speaking team. Special meetings were held for theologians, pastoral agents, and the general public. The Indiana Province of Priests of Holy Cross and the Human Rights Center at Notre Dame contributed to the funding.

Sister Ruth Evelyn met Santos Dios da Silva when both were involved in the preparation of the Workers' Pastoral. Santos was a labor leader working hard for the rights of the underpaid labor force in Sao Paulo. His wife worked at coordinating the activities of several women's clubs (workers' wives) in the southern area of Sao Paulo. They had a daughter, then thirteen, and a son, eleven.

The steelworkers of Sao Paulo called a strike in October 1979. The news was leaked ahead of time to the police, who raided the union's headquarters and arrested some of the men. Da Silva, a recognized opposition leader and representative of the Workers' Pastoral to the National Council of Brazilian Bishops, went to the Sylvania factory and tried to mediate between the workers and the police. He left the discussion to make a phone call, and when he returned he found workers being forced into a police van. He intervened and was shot dead. Prisoners were taken, and there was much confusion in the streets.

Da Silva's body was taken to the Church of the Consolation, and, contrary to Brazilian custom, burial was deferred to the next day. The funeral Mass was offered by Cardinal Arns, with, said Sister Ruth,



"hundreds of priests and practically every worker in Sao Paulo." The memory of Santos Dias continues to be venerated among the workers in Brazil.

Men were being stuffed into the jails and prisons by the hundreds, and one way their families tried to locate them was to take clothing and other necessities from jail to jail, telling the guards, "This is for Pedro Gonzales." If the guards replied that there was no such person in that jail, they took their packages to the next one until they found him.

The Sisters helped in this process. One day Sister Ruth Evelyn and Sister Ana Maria went to a federal prison to try to locate a prisoner. Sister Ana Maria had the bad fortune to resemble a woman who was wanted by the federal police, and the two Sisters were separated while Sister Ana Maria was taken to a room with one-way glass to be viewed by persons who could identify the wanted woman. Since this group agreed that Sister Ana Maria was not the one they sought, she was allowed after a fairly long time to rejoin Sister Ruth.

Meanwhile Sister Ruth had heard that twelve Sisters of various communities (none of them Holy Cross) were being detained in that same prison. She drew herself up in her auburn-headed majesty and demanded that the Sisters be brought to her. "And who do you think you are?" asked the police investigators. "I," replied Sister Ruth, capitalizing on her position as coordinator of the Sisters' organization



for the southern region of the city, "am the Madre of all the Sisters in this Archdiocese, and if you don't believe me you can call the Cardinal!" The investigators went away. It is not known whether they called the Cardinal, but the Sisters think it likely they called somebody, possibly one of the auxiliary bishops. They came back with all twelve of the Sisters. Sister Ruth marched them out the door.

Later the metalworkers went on strike, and were sustained for over forty days by donations from small Christian communities, religious (including those of Holy Cross), and other sympathizers. Food, clothing and medicine were supplied and over-supplied. Tents were erected near Congonhas airport for living space. Mario Covas, mayor (later governor) of Sao Paulo, talked with the workers and with Cardinal Arns in an effort to mediate. After six or seven weeks the problem was solved and the workers returned to work.

Over the years the Sisters had attended endless study groups, lectures and workshops dedicated to consciousness-raising. Now their consciousness was being raised by actual participation, not just in planning and arranging, but at the street level. The mission in Brazil was taking on another whole dimension.

## Notes

1. Penny Lernoux, Cry of the People (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1980), 313.
2. Lernoux, 314
3. For clarification, this would be an area with about the same number of square miles as the state of Georgia (the largest state east of the Mississippi), with a population slightly less than that of South Bend.
4. Lernoux, 273-4
5. Lernoux, 274-5.
6. Lernoux, 324.
7. Lernoux, 328-9.
8. "Decade of Ditadura," *Time*, March 25, 1974, 41.
9. "Pastor of the Poor," *Time*, June 24, 1974, 61.