

# Notes on Liberation Theology

El Salvador Alert! -Nov.-Dec. 1985

by Phillip Berryman

Latin American liberation theology arose in the 1960s. Vatican Council II (1962-65) had a startling impact on the Roman Catholic church: it accepted many things it had resisted since the Protestant reformation—worship in people's own language and much more emphasis on the bible. In a more general sense, the council marked a shift in attitude toward the modern world from one of hostility to one of acceptance.

Nevertheless, Vatican II's agenda had been set primarily in Europe. In its aftermath Latin American Catholics quickly saw

ed, "What must we believe?"; it asks rather "What must we do?" Modern theology in the U.S. or Europe has been concerned with the question, "How can Christianity make sense in a world of science and technology that seems to have no need for God?" Liberation theology asks, "How can Christian faith make sense to the poor in their struggle for justice and a decent world?"

Liberation theology is a *pastoral* theology. Ultimately it is intended for the poor, but the crucial link is the pastoral worker,

groups, involving up to four million people, between 1% and 2% of the population. Elsewhere the percentage is considerably less. In El Salvador base communities provided the soil out of which sprang the popular organizations, especially the Federation of Christian Peasants of El Salvador (FECCAS) and the Union of Rural Workers (UTC) during the 1970s. The intimate connection between consciousness-raising through the base communities, repression and struggle is clearly seen in Manlio Argueta's novel, *One Day of Life*.

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a leader, leads them away from slavery in Egypt and toward a land of freedom. When Pharaoh changes his mind and comes after them, he is defeated and sunk in the Red Sea. In the desert the people are sometimes unfaithful, but are brought back to fidelity and their covenant with the Lord. All of this is a paradigm of the relation between God and the people, even today.

Another paradigm is taken from the creation accounts where human beings are made in "God's image," a notion that becomes "subversive" when peasants reflect that they too are God's image—and hence have rights. Moreover, in discussing the fact that the Lord gives the earth to humankind to have dominion over it, they reflect on their own labor, and on the fact that the earth is shared unequally—not by God's will but by human doing. A third strand from the Hebrew scriptures, is that of the prophets, who denounce injustices and the corruption of rulers and religious authorities.

This reading runs counter to many traditional ideas: human beings do not simply accept the state of things as "God's will"; rather the God who led the Israelites out of Egypt also calls them to seek liberation. (Note that little or no attention is paid to questions like the bible and science. The creation account is taken to be poetic rather than scientific, and the effort is to get at its religious meaning.)

Similarly, in the Christian scriptures (New Testament) the emphasis moves away from traditional images of the meek and mild Jesus who ends in a gruesome crucifixion—images that can reinforce the people's sense that their oppression is divinely willed. Instead, the emphasis is on the connection between Jesus' message about the Kingdom, centered on the poor and outcast, a message that arouses opposition and eventually brings about his execution at the hands of both religious and state authorities; the resurrection is God's vindication of his life and message. People today take this paradigm as meaning that life will ultimately triumph over death. Archbishop Romero of San Salvador said, "If I die, I will rise in the Salvadoran people."

The church in the New Testament is made up of small communities, where peo-

(continued on page 11)



A popular mass in rebel-controlled Chalatenango province, El Salvador.

that the situation of their continent was different, especially in the need to find a way out of massive poverty. There was a growing conviction that present models of development would never change the basic situation; rather structural change, both internally and internationally, was necessary—not "development" but "liberation." Similarly, church people came to the conclusion that they could not simply import ideas from Europe, but that they needed their own Latin American form of pastoral work and their own theology. Much of this came to a head in the Latin American bishops meeting at Medellin, Colombia in 1968. The first formal writings in liberation theology appeared around this time.

Liberation theology is *theology*—that is, a systematic reflection on Christian faith. It is concerned with some of the same questions that theologians (such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther) have always dealt with. Latin American theologians seek to understand the scriptures, classical doctrines, and Christian ethics. This point needs to be emphasized since the media stereotype gives the impression that the theologians are only propagating thinly-disguised Marxism. In fact, there is relatively little direct discussion of Marx in the major writings.

What makes liberation theology distinctive is its method, its starting point, its concerns.

"What must we do?"

Liberation theology's starting point is the poor—poor people as individuals and as a "people." Liberation theology seeks to respond to their needs, and in particular to overcome poverty. In this sense liberation theology clearly differs from classical theology, whose basic question might be phras-

ed the priest, sister or layperson working at the grassroots level. Parallel to liberation theology "base communities" have grown up, lay-led village or barrio-level groups, where people meet to pray, discuss the bible, and to work together for common goals. In Brazil, there are an estimated 80,000 such

## Kingdom of the Poor

Liberation theologians, in conjunction with grassroots groups and pastoral workers, have worked out a new way of reading the bible. The Exodus account, for example, is a basic text: God hears the cry of his people, comes down to them, raises up Moses to be

# U.S. Dirty Tricks in Costa Rica

by James Black

SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA—Two North American journalists based in San Jose recently released a report here charging the CIA and the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) with plotting and financing the bombing of contra leader Eden Pastora's press conference on May 30, 1984.

The bombing, which took place at a contra camp in La Penca, Nicaragua near the Costa Rican border, killed three reporters and wounded 20 other people, including Pastora.

The reporters—Tony Avirgan, who was wounded in the explosion, and Martha Honey—released their findings after a 16-month investigation that took them to Europe, South America and the U.S. The study was funded in part by the American Newspaper Guild, the World Press Freedom Committee and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The report also alleges that the La Penca bombing was not an isolated act but the result of a "dirty tricks" unit formed within the FDN. The motive behind the assassination attempt on Pastora was to facilitate the implementation of FDN bases in Costa Rica where Pastora's ARDE forces operate. According to the report, the objectives of the dirty tricks unit are to create conflicts be-



Contra leader Eden Pastora.

tween Honduras and Nicaragua and Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and to carry out attacks against U.S. installations and personnel, including U.S. embassies in Tegucigalpa and San Jose. Blaming the Sandinistas would then serve to increase support for Nicaraguan contras and induce direct U.S. military action against Nicaragua.

The report identifies the bomber of the La Penca press conference as Amac Galil, a rightwing Libyan who was recruited in Chile by the CIA and paid \$50,000 to carry out the operation. He was considered ideal for the job because, it was reasoned, if he

(continued on page 11)

## Liberation Theology

(continued from page 5)

ple even share their wealth. This image is used to reinforce the legitimacy of today's base communities, which, according to the Brazilian, Leonardo Boff, are "reinventing the church."

It is out of such a religious vision that liberation theology develops a critique of present society. For example, it judges that a situation where some live in opulence while a majority are on the brink of starvation to be radically un-Christian. At this point it seeks to go beyond simply moralistic views and utilizes the critique developed by Latin American social scientists that underdevelopment is structural and calls for structural change: Latin American economies must be reoriented to serve the basic needs of the majority. That would entail changes in power relationships both internally and internationally. In effect, they tend to advocate a "Latin American socialism," though it is not defined too precisely.



El Salvador's Archbishop Romero.

## Costa Rica

(continued from page 5)

were killed, captured or otherwise identified, it would be assumed that he was acting on orders from Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi.

Galil posed as a photo-journalist and, using a stolen Danish passport issued to Per Anker Hansen, carried the bomb to the press conference in a large metal camera case which he later detonated by a remote-control device. Galil vanished within 24 hours after the bombing with the help of persons inside Costa Rica. The report also claims that certain Costa Rican officials and ex-officials had prior knowledge of the plot and tried to impede the investigation.

Two of those named as conspirators in the bombing are Col. Rodrigo Paniagua and John Hull, a North American citrus grower who owns properties in nor-

thern Costa Rica, has long been linked with aiding contra forces operating out of Costa Rica and working with the CIA.

The investigation of Avirgan and Honey brought them in contact with a young Nicaraguan contra identified as "David" who was seeking to escape from what he described as a "rightwing terrorist ring operating in Central America." According to David, the group is composed of Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, Cuban exiles and North Americans, all forming the "dirty tricks" unit within the FDN. He further alleged that its members were making fortunes trafficking drugs and arms.

David has since disappeared. Costa Rican officials told the investigative news team that they had learned from an informant that David had been captured, tortured



A popular Nicaraguan slogan: "There is no contradiction between Christianity and the revolution."

There are many varieties of Marxisms and Marxists. For some, Marxism supplies an infallible answer for every question; for others Marxism is more of a *method* than a "catechism," and it helps focus issues and questions more sharply. In any case, liberation theologians do not see Marxism as an all-encompassing philosophy. Rather they see it primarily as a set of tools for analyzing their society. They do not utilize Marxism uncritically.

Much of what is central in liberation theology has become officially endorsed. At the Latin American bishops meeting in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, there was a strong endorsement of the "option for the poor." Nevertheless, there is serious internal conflict in the Catholic church. A document issued by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (modern successor to the Inquisition and the Holy Office) published a critique of liberation theology in September 1984. It accused liberation theologians of becoming partisan and undermining the very nature of truth and of ethics, of reducing Christianity to class struggle, etc. It rejected the possibility of using some elements of Marxism, which it viewed as a total system. It further stated that by defending the idea of a "people's church" liberation theologians were challenging the "sacramental and hierarchical nature of the church."

The Uruguayan Jesuit Juan Luis Segundo has met the document of the Congregation of the Faith head on. To quote: "Even if Marxism did not exist—and today many of the more famous theologians in Latin America have no more than a polite relationship with it—liberation theology would still be condemned as a humanistic, earthly and secular reduction of the Gospel of salvation." His primary assertion is that the Con-

gregation's document, with its dualistic and spiritualistic approach, amounts to a reversal of the understanding of the faith that emerged in Vatican II.

## Sanctuary Trial Begins

by Martha Upton

The Tucson sanctuary trial is scheduled to begin Nov. 1, after a controversial jury selection process in which defense attorneys called for a mistrial on the basis of Judge Earl Carroll's public insinuation that the sanctuary movement is "for the birds."

During the questioning a potential juror said, "I thought the sanctuary movement was for the birds or something." The judge responded, "There is a comment there but I won't pick it up." The judge refused to order a mistrial, and demanded that defense attorneys drop the matter. Defense attorneys had earlier objected to Judge Carroll's briefing of the jury panel, in which he described the case as a smuggling case.

Following the public outrage which met news of the government's infiltration of churches, government attorneys have announced that they will not use the tapes gathered through church infiltration as evidence in the case. The defense is currently deciding whether or not they will use the tapes.

As they did during Jack Elder's last trial, the government has offered a deal to sanctuary defendants under which they can receive suspended sentences for pleading guilty to lesser charges. One of the defendants, a resident of Washington, D.C., decided to accept the deal due to family commitments, saying that she would continue her sanctuary work in Washington.

In the past year the sanctuary movement has grown from 150 to 275 religious institutions, with more planning to declare sanctuary during the trial.

To stay up to date on the trial as it proceeds, call 1-800-538-1933 for the recorded message provided by the sanctuary media office. The telephone number is a biblical reference, Leviticus 19:33 (LEV is 538), which reads "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong."

## SOLIDARITY THAT WORKS

Volunteer Work Brigades will be harvesting coffee and cotton in Nicaragua from November 30 through March 8. For information contact the Nicaragua Exchange, 239 Centre Street, New York, NY 10013, (212) 219-8620.

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