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RECIFE REPORT Nº 59
June 21, 1968

TO: **Ambassy Office BRASILIA**
INFO: **Ambassy RIO DE JANEIRO**
FROM: **Asconsul RECIFE**
SUBJECT: **Allegedly Subversive Study Prepared by Belgian Priest
Generates Controversy in Northeast**
REF:

EO50x1

SUMMARY

The unauthorized publication of the contents of a confidential Church study judged by many to be subversive has led to calls for the expulsion of the document's author, Father Joseph Comblin, and for the transfer of Recife Archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara, under whose auspices the Belgian priest and sociologist is in Brazil. The controversial study analyzes the causes for Latin American underdevelopment and concludes that only a regime of force can bring about the social revolution essential for development. The inflammatory nature of the Comblin thesis of political development has disturbed many responsible Northeasterners, and the prestige of reform-minded Churchmen has suffered as a result.

The premature publication of a confidential study concerning the Church and Latin American development has resulted in calls for the expulsion of the document's author, a Belgian priest, and the transfer of Recife Archbishop, Dom Hélder Câmara, under whose auspices the priest is in Brazil. The study analyzes the causes for underdevelopment in Latin America and concludes that only a regime of force can achieve the social revolution which is a pre-condition to development in the region. In light of these conclusions, it calls for basic reform in Church attitudes and organization. (The Portuguese text and an informal English summary of the document are attached.) The document which generated the controversy was prepared by Father Joseph Comblin, a visiting professor at the Theological Institute of Recife, and is a commentary on a "basic text" circulated among Church leaders who will participate in the CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council) meetings to be held in Medellín, Colombia in August.

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RECIFE REPORT Nº 59

2

The controversy was announced to the public on June 10 by Recife City Councilman Wanderley Wanderley, a long-time antagonist of Dom Hélder. In an address before the Recife Municipal Council, Wanderley denounced what he termed "the most subversive document I have seen in my entire life." Wanderley, who promised to make public the text of the paper after it had been brought to the attention of the proper authorities, claimed that disclosure of its contents would dispel all doubts as to the collaboration of some priests with communism.

The document, he pointed out, made no reference to oppression in the Soviet Union and warmly praised the Cuban revolution while criticizing the governments of Portugal, Spain, and the United States. In short, Wanderley concluded, the document opposed all those who combat communism. "Those of us who still believe in God," he told his fellow councilmen, "must react."

The called for reaction came almost immediately. The June 11 edition of Recife's Diário de Pernambuco carried excerpts of the increasingly controversial study. A local attorney and political crony of Wanderley, presented a legal action calling for formal presentation of the allegedly subversive document as a prelude to possible subsequent criminal action against its author for unspecified offenses against national security.

The judicial action was reinforced by a formal motion introduced in the Recife Municipal Assembly the same day by Wanderley calling for the transfer of Dom Hélder and the expulsion of Father Comblin.

Interviewed by a Recife journalist concerning allegations made as to the content of the Comblin document, Dom Hélder, who at first had preferred to remain silent, was quoted as stating:

"In spite of not agreeing entirely with all of the declarations which it contains, the document sent to me by Father Comblin of the Recife Institute of Theology is perfectly valid within the context of being a personal study of the CELAM basic text."

The Archbishop pointed out that the paper was only one of several he had received and that Father Comblin, as a theologian and sociologist, had every right to express his opinions.

The Director of the Institute of Theology of Recife, Monsenher Marcelo Carvalheira, defensively added that Father Comblin was a man adverse to violence, who opposed guerrillas, and was a firm advocate of the principles of universal brotherhood.

The controversy continued to mount the following day with the publication by the Diário de Pernambuco of the text of the Comblin paper (see Enclosure 2).

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RECIFE REPORT Nº 59

3

Almost simultaneously, the first move toward de-escalation occurred when the legal motion filed against Comblin was summarily rejected as being without justification in law. An appeal was nevertheless filed, and local criticism of the Comblin thesis continued to find public expression. Wanderley at this point characteristically told the press that if he were Police Delegate in Pernambuco (a position he did in fact at one time occupy), Dom Helder would already be behind bars.

Dom Helder responded only with expressions of concern for the effect the mounting campaign might have on Father Comblin who, he noted, was absorbing the brunt of public criticism.

Wanderley and company found an unexpected ally the following day when the Jornal do Commercio editorially attacked the content of the Comblin paper. The Jornal found the lines of political action suggested by the priest "really frightening." It conceded the author's sincerity, but noted that Hitler was also sincere in his misguided desire to establish dictatorial rule against the will of the majority. The editorial found Dom Helder's comments on the subject overly discreet given the document's inflammatory content. It concluded by asking rhetorically, "Up to what point must the state permit such attacks?"

Dom Helder could however take considerable personal solace on another front as even before the paper carrying the editorial hit the streets, the Pernambuco State Assembly overwhelmingly approved a motion expressing solidarity with the Archbishop. (Out of total membership of 65 deputies, 42 votes were recorded in favor and none against.) Similar solidarity motions are being considered in other legislatures in the region.

As week's end approached however, it was clear from the many expressions of concern (most of which were not expressed publicly) that the study had made considerable impact. Perhaps in recognition of this, Dom Helder, himself, moved to calm the situation by revealing the content of a cable he had received from Father Comblin in São Paulo. According to the message, the Belgian priest regretted the "erroneous interpretations" and "confusion" to which publication of his paper had given rise. Comblin promised to rewrite the text to eliminate misunderstandings as to its meaning.

Although the Jornal do Commercio returned to the attack on June 16 with another editorial condemning the "new inquisition" allegedly advocated by Father Comblin and the indefatigable Wanderley promised to continue his defense of "democratic principles," the Comblin statement read by Dom Helder and the Assembly's vote of solidarity, temporarily at least, deflated the issue. Additional ground was cut from under Wanderley when his fellow Municipal Councilmen, over his vocal protests, approved a motion of solidarity for Dom Helder's pastoral activities, while at the same time condemning the content of the Comblin paper.

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RECIFE REPORT NO 59
4

INFORMAL SUMMARY-TRANSLATION OF STUDY PREPARED BY FATHER COMBLIN

(The English paper has prepared as a preliminary to a "white book" completed using Latin American Catholics who will participate in the CELAM meeting which will take place in August in Medellin, Colombia.)

THE PORTUGUESE SITUATION IS EO50x1

Latin America is characterized by being a highly heterogeneous society, "one of the most heterogeneous ever existing in the history of civilization." A Latin heterogeneity, which has accumulated all peoples, all customs and all cultures, exists side by side with a class of semi-slaves. In such circumstances, social evolution requires a wider social revolution which will do away with the existent heterogeneity. Such a revolution should not be confused with development but is only an essential precondition for development. There are two possible and distinct means to achieve the required social revolution.

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FALZONES

- Enclosures: (Unclassified)
1. Informal Summary-Translation of Study Prepared by Father Comblin
 2. Portuguese Text, as printed in Diario de Pernambuco, June 12, 1968

cc: ARA/LA/EE
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RECITE REPORT N° 59
Enclosure N° 1

INFORMAL SUMMARY-TRANSLATION OF STUDY PREPARED BY FATHER COMBLIN

(The Comblin paper was prepared as a commentary on a "basic text" circulated among Latin American Churchmen who will participate in the CELAM meeting which will take place in August in Medellin, Colombia.)

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION IN LATIN AMERICA:

Latin America is characterized by being a highly aristocratic society, "one of the most aristocratic ever existing in the history of civilization." A White aristocracy, which has accumulated all power, all wealth and all culture, exists side by side with a class of semi-slaves. In such circumstances, overall evolution requires a prior social revolution which will do away with the dominant aristocracy. Such a revolution should not be confused with development but is only an essential precondition for development. There are both peaceful and violent means to achieve the required social revolution.

THE CHURCH AND ITS RESPONSIBILITY:

The Church has been and continues to be a bulwark of underdevelopment. Any action to achieve development ought to begin with ecclesiastical reform. To serve as an example for the future, the Church must first free itself from its past. The following are some of the elements which characterize the Church's underdevelopment:

1. Lack of attention to the needs of the masses.
2. Solidarity with the ruling class: With regard to social problems, the Church often adopts the viewpoint of the dominant class.
3. Organizational incapacity: Given the present dispersion of Church power, no unified plan of action can be considered.
4. Colonialism: Given the example of colonialism which it presents as a large recipient of foreign assistance, the Church will find it difficult to preach the necessary nationalism.
5. Poor administration of property: Much Church property remains completely unproductive.
6. Welfarism: The welfare structures which the Church has created are practically indestructible.

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RECIFE REPORT N° 59
Enclosure 1 -- p. 2

7. Classical instruction: Traditional Catholic instruction perhaps bears the greatest responsibility for the maintenance of the traditional class structure.
8. Treatment of employees: The Church often treats its employees exactly as does the dominant class.
9. Bureaucracy: New Church organization typifies administrative underdevelopment.
10. Flight of technicians: Today's Latin American priest seeks every opportunity to desert to Europe.
11. Primitive religion: The religion taught the people has no relevance to the development process.
12. Closed structures: In many instances Church organization remains closed to laymen, particularly to those from the lower class.

An effective pastoral program must attend to these twelve items. The Church should not seek to impose any developmental formula. The Church's social doctrine should, however, correct, if possible, errors and confusion among Christians and others who heed its word. It should attempt to clear the road to development by helping to eliminate preconceptions.

What are the problems of takeoff? Both subjective and objective conditions for development have been defined. Principal among the objective conditions is the existence of a power capable of promoting both reform and the indispensable social revolution. Subjective conditions include the creation of the necessary technical and scientific mentality.

THE PROBLEM OF POWER OR THE POLITICAL PROBLEM

No one can believe that the fundamental reforms which development requires can be promoted through normal political evolution within the principles which govern Western society. The force of the state will be required to eliminate privileges and establish new structures. This force will also be established by force, which gives rise to two problems: (1) the conquest of power by a group dedicated to reform; and (2) the exercise of either authoritarian or dictatorial power to impose the necessary reforms.

To proceed, we must dispense with false solutions such as the "foguismo," the doctrine of centers of insurrection developed by Che Guevara and Regis Debray. Such solutions are pure romanticism and are not applicable to countries such as Brazil.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

RECIFE REPORT N° 59
Enclosure 1 -- p. 3

THE CONQUEST OF POWER:

This presupposes the formation of a united and coherent group capable of unified action, probably with charismatic leadership. This group must exert pressure to bring down the government and to establish itself in power. It would be a mistake to think in terms of military insurrection. Military action is useful only when the armed forces are already demoralized and no longer have the ability to resist.

It would similarly be a mistake to believe that "the Church" or "morals" condemn acts of force to obtain power. Can those capable of exercising power assume it when the ruler shows himself incapable of governing? The Pope has responded in the affirmative. Any group more capable or more determined can legitimately take power if it is able. Not only can but must take power.

When a political grouping capable of assuming power develops, the Church must not necessarily neutralize it if it cannot control it. Such action would not respect the autonomy of the temporal world and would force peoples to miss historical opportunities which, at times, are not repeated.

Today we need to return to certain traditional positions concerning the primacy of political service. The political vocation is really the highest calling.

THE EXERCISE OF POWER:

Legitimate power is force at the service of law -- the true and just law. It does not suffice to make laws. It is necessary to impose them by force. To achieve takeoff, power will be authoritarian and dictatorial. Radical reforms cannot be made consulting the majority.

Power must count upon force. At times it can rely upon the armed forces, at other times it is necessary to dissolve them. At times it will be necessary to distribute arms to the people. In every case it will be necessary to establish a repressive system.

Only such power can carry out the social revolution and end the traditional privileges. Without it, development will remain reserved for a limited elite.

The Church is implicated in this process of exercise of power by its resistance to the establishment of a strong power.

THE PROBLEM OF DEVELOPMENT MENTALITY:

To the extent that technical and scientific functions develop, the role played by religion is diminishing. Men become more critical and more exacting. The role of religion also becomes more demanding. In many instances the

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RECIFE REPORT No 59
Enclosure 1 -- p. 4

clergy tends to reinforce the past and to impede evolution toward a more critical, scientific and developed mentality.

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIALIZATION:

Take-off presupposes the formulation of a conscience of national solidarity. A true development policy will place before the privileged the option of leaving the country or renouncing their exceptional situation. From the popular masses, socialization will require other efforts: work discipline; the renunciation of the ideal of the small property owner; and the acceptance of collective points. From all, the take-off requires the discipline of collaboration with a strong government. Unbridled individualism must be suppressed.

THE HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE:

If the Church does not awaken the conviction that things can and ought to change in this world and that promotion of change is included in the plans of God, it cannot become a factor in the development process.

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION:

As demonstrated during the New Delhi conference, the industrialized nations have decided to do nothing to accelerate the development of the rest of the world. Given this situation, there is no evidence of good will, the only solution is recourse to force. But what force? To think in terms of a generalized Vietnam would be madness. We need to discover other means of pressure which will not exclude military measures in extreme cases. However, without fear, the necessary concessions cannot be exacted from the rich peoples.

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES:

The following points should be considered:

1. Experience shows that acceleration of the process of change within the Church is best accomplished by groups freed from the traditional structures and responsible only to some form of centralized control.
2. The religious action of the Church before the masses is almost impossible because of the lack of appropriate structures.
3. The presence of laymen in the Church is still largely a dead letter.
4. Experience shows that the most flexible and effective Church government for our times is a centralized and collegial government. Decentralization in many dioceses and religious provinces makes any unified policy impossible.

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RECIFE REPORT No 59
Enclosure 1 -- p.5

5. In recent times the dependence of the Latin American Church has increased. The importation of priests as well as the acceptance of foreign assistance has created a series of dependent institutions.

6. A significant gesture on the part of the Church would be the immediate distribution to the poor of all unproductive Church property, such as uncultivated lands and insufficiently utilized buildings. Such an act would be only a gesture of justice.

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