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Catholic Radicals in the Northeast

Recife A-31 of Sept. 13, 1966; A-85 of April 24, 1967;
 A-79 of April 12, 1967

Measures of the influence of the Catholic reform movement in Northeastern Brazil, since the Church is one of the few forces actively seeking to remove structural obstacles to economic, social and political advances. The enclosed memocon indicating a decline in the standing of Dom Hélder Câmara, the best known symbol of the movement, is therefore significant.

THE ARCHBISHOP'S STOCK -- UP OR DOWN?

Signs pointing in the same direction could be seen in the restraint reportedly shown in Dom Hélder's behavior at the May meeting of bishops in Aparecida do Norte (S. Paulo) or in his statement that he would be feeling his way during his June visit to Brasilia before deciding on future initiatives (memocon of June 14, 1967). A Brazilian priest in Western Pernambuco at the end of June also told the Deputy Principal Officer that Dom Hélder's extremism had discredited him as a major force.

Some of these signs may only show that opposition to his views persists, or that his opponents are thinking wishfully. This interpretation is easily placed on the press item of July 23 quoting General Rafael Souza Aguiar, Commander, IV Army, thus (according to AFP correspondent):

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"Brazil is a veritable paradise. Don't talk to me of misery and unemployment like Archbishop Hélder Câmara. If anyone is not working it is because he doesn't want to." (Jornal do Comercio)

These views are not as surprising as the alleged source - a reputedly non-political general and long-time acquaintance of Dom Hélder's named to his present post last year after an open Church-Army clash which Dom Hélder won through intervention of President Castello Branco. (It is too early to say whether the death of the ex-President may require a re-match.)

Contrary signs suggesting Dom Hélder's ascendancy have also appeared. After returning from a US visit, he claimed to have the Latin American bishops in the hollow of his hand (memoir of March 8, 1967). He later spoke casually of his audience with the Pope noting that he had "made bishop" before His Holiness had. Since his last visit south, his statements (as reported from Brasilia and Goiás) have been stronger, touching for the first time publicly on the anti-American subjects of birth control and the MEC-USAID Agreement.

Finally, it was reported July 23 that Dom Hélder has a book in manuscript form and circulating for comment among a few friends. Mainly on "underdevelopment" in Latin America, it is said to repeat his thoughts about US capitalism and preferences for aid over trade. In addition, it seeks to point constructive paths in the task of development for the Brazilian Armed Forces. (Diariode Pernambuco).

One can hardly yet conclude that Dom Hélder's influence is waning. If his recent confidence should prove to be born more of desperation than success, he would still retain a heavy nuisance value, both in Brazil and internationally. This distinction was put more delicately, in a recent press interview in Natal, by the Bishop of Aracaju, Dom José Távora, who called Dom Hélder "a prophet and charismatic of our times" who will only be understood as times change. No one finds doctrinal difficulty in him, the Bishop said, "there are only those who disagree with his language." (Jornal do Comercio)

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It might be speculated that, lacking a flow of novel ideas or initiatives, it is only Dom Hélder's extreme views which make him a force and that, unless he turns to outright sanction of violence, he may begin to seem conservative by being repetitious.

DISSECTING THE CATHOLIC LEFT

The ConGen is attempting, as part of a regular reporting program, to identify and evaluate the Church forces in the region relevant to development. In doing so, it will bear in mind that each faction, including Dom Hélder's, has at least two faces. Perhaps the divisions will be clarified somewhat in the next meeting of Catholic bishops of the Northeast, planned for Natal September 13-23, or in the series of "encontros" they are sponsoring on live issues in coming weeks in various cities.

The so-called Catholic Left is opposed by the traditional clergy which may be either rabidly anti-modernist or simply indifferent to social action. Dom José Távora divided the Brazilian bishops into conservatives and reformists, saying there had been excesses in applying reforms of the Vatican Council but that there were also omissions in the necessary task of altering structures. As the attached memo states, even the non-conservatives can be divided into the Christian activists (moderates) and the radicals (like Dom Hélder). The moderate group may include some who could validly be accused of paternalism or of favoring reforms only as palliatives -- strategic retreat from untenable positions. Also included, however, are constructive reformers who believe in action more than talk. The Northeast has many of these, led by Archbishop Eugênio Sales (formerly of Natal, now Salvador) and exemplified by the labor priests such as Padre Crespo of Jaboaçu, Padre Antonio Melo of Cabo and Frei Marcelino of Catolé de Rocha (Pb.).

Among the radicals there are also two tendencies, often embodied in one person. Dom Hélder is, on the one hand, the xenophobe. Seeing certain faults in foreign assistance, he would also discard the benefits (which he concedes). As he is reported to say in his book, "Large countries like the US do not really put themselves out in helping

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their brothers in misery. They only think of profit, capital employed and interest, in a form of capitalism condemned by Populorum Progressio." Although he criticizes Brazilians more than foreigners, he sees foreign aid and advice not only as demeaning, but also as failing to alter the injustices which he condemns. This is the destructive side of the radical Church movement, which could lend itself to cynical mass-manipulations of the pre-1964 varieties.

The other side of Dom Helder serves a potentially useful purpose, in that he dramatizes the protest against existing conditions. He is, in fact, almost all protest and no movement, because he quite evidently feels deeply that the problems will not yield to calm or cautious treatment. Provided he is being complemented by more practical workers, Dom Helder could be a rallying point for an otherwise apathetic Brazilian public. But, at present, he is still mainly calling upon them to protest. (His latest project of "operation Hope" in Recife is novel, in collecting old paid electricity bills, on which Electrobras is paying small rebates, to finance low-cost housing.) He only vaguely links this to action, through pressure on the government. With all its internal differences, the Church in the Northeast remains a powerful force for development. How successful it will be cannot yet be foreseen. Much will depend upon a) the success of others' efforts to work constructively in practical ways to change what Dom Helder detests, and b) the will and support of Brazilian authorities, especially in the Northeast, in bringing about such change.

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DATE: July 26, 1967

Memorandum of Conversation

PARTICIPANTS: Father Thomas Gier,
Catholic Relief Services Representative
William P. Kelly, Political Officer

SUBJECT: Dom Helder Camera - Attitudes and Influence

1. Father Gier is an American priest who represents the activities of Catholic Relief Services in Recife. His position puts him in daily contact with the Brazilian hierarchy and clergy.
2. From his conversations with Brazilian priests and bishops, Father Gier has the impression that Dom Helder Camera is rapidly losing both respect and influence within the Brazilian Church. Many churchmen disapprove of what they regard as Helder's xenophobic attitudes and publicity-seeking tactics. No longer is Dom Helder considered a dynamic and progressive bishop. His carping criticism of living conditions (without offering solutions), his willingness to blindly embrace most anti-GOB causes and his frequent attacks against U.S. policies in Brazil have all cost him support within the Church. In short, Dom Helder is increasingly being regarded as more demagogue than prelate.
3. Despite this, Helder still retains the support of a sizeable group within the Church. But Father Gier believes that the majority of priests and bishops have opted for a middle ground between the old line, arch-conservative clergy and the "Catholic left" represented by Dom Helder Camera. In practice, this means a kind of Christian activism with sincere concern for Brazil's economic and social ills and with the Church assuming a dynamic role in the developmental process. Most importantly, this new trend means seeking not controversy and publicity but viable solutions to the country's and the Church's problems.

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4. One example of Dom Helder's extreme nationalism occurred during his recent visit to the U.S. Helder approached Catholic Relief Services officials in Washington and unsuccessfully tried to get them to cancel their programs in Brazil. Father Gier believes that the Archbishop objects to CRS mainly because it is an American organization but that Helder doesn't want to condemn it publicly. Had CRS pulled out, Dom Helder could have blamed the American clergy for refusing to help while, at the same time, getting exactly what he wanted. Regarding Catholic Relief Services in Recife, Fr. Gier said that Dom Helder and archdiocesan officials have been somewhat hostile and CRS has been prevented from doing the kind of work it carries out in other cities.

5. In other example, Fr. Gier spoke of a recent CARITAS meeting held at Teresina, Flau. During the conference, a Padre Monteiro (national CARITAS director) read excerpts from the Ação Católica Operária manifesto (NORTHEAST: DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT JUSTICE) and took exception to some of the document's language, particularly the criticism of Food For Peace. Monteiro expressed his concern that the FFP role was so poorly understood and misrepresented.

6. COMMENT. Dom Helder Gamara actively supported the Catholic Action Manifesto which discussed working conditions in the Brazilian Northeast and called the Food For Peace program "official almsgiving...which destroys the capacity of fighting for human advancement".

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