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FROM : Amembassy RIO DE JANEIRO

SUBJECT : Moderate Northeast Bishops Adopt More Progressive Posture

REF :

The attached memorandum from the Consulate in Recife examines the new moderate-progressive concensus among Northeastern Bishops resulting from the recent drift to the left of a large number of former moderates. The report should be considered in light of the documents approved by the IX CNBB Conference held in Rio July 16-20 and the Embassy's comments on it (Riotel 10168).

DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
BUREAU OF  
INTER-AMERICAN AFFAIRS  
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Recife Report No. 71  
dated July 10, 1968

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CONFIDENTIALRECIFE REPORT Nº 71  
July 10, 1968

TO: Amembassy Office BRASILIA  
 INFO: Amembassy RIO DE JANEIRO  
 FROM: Amconsul RECIFE  
 SUBJECT: Moderate Northeast Bishops Adopt More Progressive Posture

SUMMARY

Events of the past several months have witnessed a growing consensus among Northeast Bishops in favor of a more active role by the Church as a promoter of social change. There has been a perceptible shift to the left by moderate Bishops who have come increasingly to share the outlook of their more progressive colleagues. Uniform expressions of solidarity with student demonstrators are but the most recent case in point. Should this consensus endure, the Church in the Northeast can be expected to become a more significantly active advocate of reform. The CNBB General Assembly scheduled to open in Rio de Janeiro on July 16 should provide further indication as to the depth and durability of the incipient consensus, as well as providing the assembled Bishops with an opportunity to address some of the organizational shortcomings of the Brazilian Church which recent events in the Northeast have only served to emphasize.

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The past several months have witnessed a growing consensus among Northeast Bishops in favor of an increasingly more active role by the Church as a promoter of social change. The advanced positions assumed by the region's leading prelates during the recent round of student demonstrations is but the latest indication of a perceptible "shift to the left" in the outlook of Northeast Churchmen.

This report examines the changing Church in the Northeast on the eve of the Ninth General Assembly of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), which will open in Rio de Janeiro on July 16.

CHURCH ORGANIZATION IN THE NORTHEAST: For the purposes of pastoral activity, the Church in the Northeast is divided into three regions: Northeast I, including the states of Maranhão, Piauí, and Ceará; Northeast II, including Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, and Alagoas; and Northeast III, including the remaining states of Bahia and Sergipe. <sup>1/</sup>

<sup>1/</sup> This report will concern itself principally with developments in the six-state area of the Recife consular district (Piauí, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, and Alagoas).

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The six states of the Recife consular district include 28 individual dioceses or archdioceses directed by 6 Archbishops and 22 Bishops, with the aid of 4 Auxiliary Bishops.

NORTHEAST BISHOPS -- PROGRESSIVES AND MODERATES: For the purpose of this analysis, the Bishops of the region may be divided into two general categories: (1) the progressive, reform-minded, and (2) the moderate, conservatively-inclined. The "progressives" advocate revolutionary, albeit non-violent, social change. The "moderates," on the other hand, favor a measured, evolutionary approach to effect the transformation sought by all. 2/

With the foregoing definitions in mind, the leading Bishops of the region may be classified in the following manner:

THE PROGRESSIVES:

- Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara, Archbishop of Olinda and Recife

Dom Hélder is the best known spokesman of Church progressives in the Northeast, if not in all of Brazil. His fiery oratory and outspoken advocacy of structural change are well known. Since his arrival in Recife in March 1964, immediately following the revolution, he has firmly established himself as the unofficial spokesman of the rural and urban poor, and the other "have-nots" of society. His often barbed criticism of public authorities has earned him the enmity of the region's establishment. He was one of the architects of the CNBB as well as being that organization's first Secretary General. He is currently CNBB Social Action Secretary. Among progressive churchmen he wields considerable influence both in Brazil and abroad. Church moderates nevertheless regard his words and deeds with considerable skepticism.

- Dom Antônio Batista Fragoso, Bishop of Crateús

Dom Fragoso holds many views in common with Dom Hélder and, if anything, is more willing to speak out on controversial subjects. He was one of eight Brazilian Bishops who signed the controversial "Message from some Bishops of the Third World" issued in August 1967. It will also be recalled that during a Bishops' conference in Natal the following month, Dom Fragoso praised Cuba as "an example of courage for Latin America ...." He is a frequent critic of the Costa e Silva Administration which he alleges "lacks sufficient courage and independence to free itself from the confines of economic and cultural imperialism." His outspokenness may, in part, explain his assignment to Crateús in the interior of Ceará, far from the region's principal communications media. His impetuosity notwithstanding, Dom Fragoso is well regarded in Church circles.

2/ A third group of out-and-out conservatives, who favor no perceptible modification of the existing order, might also be mentioned. But, in the Northeast at least, Bishops holding such views make little effort to publicly articulate them.

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- Dom José María Pires, Archbishop of Paraíba

Dom José María is a firm advocate of social reform. He believes the Church can and should exercise decisive influence in support of necessary structural changes. He is an avowed critic of the status quo with which he frequently links "capitalism," foreign assistance and U.S. policy. The Church's proper role, as he sees it, is that of identifying with and defending the legitimate aspirations of the people. Dom José María is one of the few mulattos who has risen to high rank in the Brazilian hierarchy.

(See Recife Report N° 2, December 26, 1967, and Memcon dated February 14, 1968, for further elaboration of Dom José María's views.)

THE MODERATES:

- Dom Avelar Brandão Vilela, Archbishop of Teresina

Although often employing progressive rhetoric and publicly advocating an expanded role of the Church in pastoral activities, Dom Avelar is at heart a traditional churchman. He is a firm believer in the evolutionary approach. The administration of his archdiocese is strongly hierarchical. The power of decision on all matters rests with the Archbishop. Within the Brazilian Church he is a man of considerable influence, as evidenced by the fact that he is currently president of CELAM (Conference of Latin American Bishops), as well as having held various important posts within the CNBB. His location in isolated Teresina, nevertheless, tends to limit his influence both regionally and nationally.

(See Recife Report N° 24 of April 17, 1968, for further elaboration of Dom Avelar's views.)

- Dom José de Madeiros Delgado, Archbishop of Fortaleza

A native of the Northeast, Dom Delgado is highly regarded in Church circles where he is considered an intelligent and learned theologian, as well as a dynamic yet cautious social reformer. Usually circumspect in word and deed, in recent months he has increasingly felt compelled to speak out on events of the day, particularly in the student and labor field. He retains a keen sense of the dignity of the Church and is quick to respond when he believes its dignity has been offended. He has become a valuable indicator of the trend of opinion among Church moderates.

(See Recife Report N° 25, April 15, 1968, for further elaboration of Dom Delgado's views.)

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## - Dom Nivaldo Monte, Archbishop of Natal

A native of Rio Grande do Norte, Dom Nivaldo was named Auxiliary Bishop of Natal in 1965, replacing the dynamic and highly respected Dom Eugenio Sales, now Apostolic Administrator in Salvador. Dom Nivaldo became Archbishop last year upon the death of Dom Marcolino Esmeraldo de Souza Dantes. Dom Nivaldo is known in church circles as a moderate with conservative tendencies, particularly with regard to financial matters. A thoughtful individual, he has a natural tendency toward caution and, perhaps as a result, is less heard from than some of his less qualified colleagues.

(See Recife Report Nº 63 of June 19, 1968, for further elaboration of Dom Nivaldo's views.)

## - Dom Adelmo Machado Cavalcanti - Archbishop of Maceió

A native of Alagoas, Dom Adelmo has served as Archbishop in Maceió for the past five years. Conservatively inclined, but by no means reactionary, he adheres to a philosophy of "making haste with prudence." His activities have been hampered by a serious heart condition which earlier this year led to the appointment of an Auxiliary Bishop to assist in the administration of the affairs of the archdiocese.

(See Recife Report Nº 15 of March 27, 1968, for further elaboration of Dom Adelmo's views.)

THE MOVE TOWARD CONSENSUS: Although significant differences still separate progressive Bishops from their moderate colleagues, the recent round of student demonstrations nevertheless witnessed unprecedented Church solidarity in the Northeast in support of student demands. Without exception, the aforementioned Bishops, both moderate and progressive alike, publicly supported what they described as legitimate student demands. In both Fortaleza and Recife, where the only significant student demonstrations in the region took place, priests, with the consent of the hierarchy, went into the streets to join student demonstrators. While expressions of solidarity differed in degree and intensity, a definite consensus was achieved. (The role of the Church in the recent student demonstrations in the Northeast will be examined in greater detail in a separate report.)

The drift to the left by Church moderates in the Northeast has been underway for some time. There were, for instance, clear indications that the Church in the Northeast was moving toward closer identification with student activists in the wake of the student demonstrations of early April (see Recife Report Nº 46 of May 29, 1968). The current Church consensus in support of student demands should not then be viewed as an isolated event but rather as another manifestation of a trend which has been underway for some time.

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There is, in addition, other recent evidence indicating that the moderates are moving toward closer identification with the progressive point of view in areas outside the student sector. The controversy surrounding the study on the Church and Latin American development, prepared by Belgian priest and sociologist Father Joseph Comblin is a case in point. The inflammatory nature of the Comblin thesis of political development with its implicit rationalization of the use of force to effect social change is anathema to most moderates and to many progressives as well (see Recife Report Nº 59, dated June 21, 1968). Nevertheless, the moderates soon found themselves in the position of siding with their progressive colleagues in the controversy which developed following premature disclosure of the contents of the Comblin paper. Heavy-handed attempts by right-wing politicians to use the study to discredit Church progressives in general and Dom Hélder in particular, succeeded only in driving moderate and progressive Bishops closer together.

The prestige of Church progressives recently received another important boost as a result of the controversy surrounding the so-called priests' revolt in São Paulo diocese of Botucatu. <sup>2/</sup> The compromise settlement reached providing for the naming of an Apostolic Administrator in addition to the Archbishop has been interpreted in Church circles here as a victory of great significance for the Church progressives. The Botucatu solution is being cited, rightly or wrongly, as concrete evidence of a definite shift in the balance of power within the Brazilian Church in favor of the progressives. Northeast Bishops have yet to demonstrate they are completely immune from the effects of band-wagon psychology.

To the foregoing should be added the impressions which the reporting officer has gathered during recent talks with Church moderates. The general tenor of these talks has also indicated a trend toward more progressive points of view.

HOW CONSENSUS WAS ACHIEVED: Clearly the harmony of viewpoint which has become increasingly evident among Northeast churchmen results from no conscious design. In part it may be explained by the natural tendency of the institutional Church to close ranks when it or one of its members comes under attack (i.e., the Comblin episode). More significantly, however, it results largely from the exigencies of the times which favor action rather than deliberation. Increasingly in recent months, Northeast Bishops have been called upon to take an immediate stand. Guidance from recognized leaders within the national hierarchy in the South has been

<sup>3/</sup> The controversy arose when some 23 "progressive" priests of the diocese made public a manifesto declaring they would leave their posts rather than accept the presence of the designated Archbishop, who they claimed was an arch-conservative.

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largely conspicuous by its absence. (The voice of Dom Agnelo Rossi, Cardinal-Archbishop of São Paulo and President of the CNBB was particularly missed.) <sup>4/</sup> Lacking firm policy guidelines, Northeast Bishops have tended to revert to the traditional pattern dominant in the pre-CNBB era. Sovereign bishops, after taking their own counsel, have handed down sovereign decisions. The mechanisms elaborately constructed by the CNBB in an attempt to coordinate Church policy on such matters has proven unequal to the task.

IMPLICATIONS: Should the moderate-progressive consensus endure and prosper, the Church in the Northeast is likely in the months ahead to become a significantly more active force in support of change. Agrarian reform, wages and salaries, health and welfare, housing, and education are all areas in which increased Church concern might find expression.

While the incipient moderate-progressive consensus is, of course, in itself significant, perhaps of equal importance is the manner in which it was achieved. For in the final analysis, the new consensus results not from the deliberative process established by the CNBB but was achieved largely in spite of it.

The activities of the Northeast Bishops at the CNBB conference should provide further indication as to the depth and durability of the moderate-progressive consensus. It will also be interesting to see to what extent the assembled Bishops address the serious organizational shortcomings which recent events in the Northeast have only served to emphasize.

<sup>4/</sup> Reports quoting CNBB Secretary General Dom José Gonçalves da Costa as stating that an extensive report was being prepared on the "Brazilian reality," which would attempt to establish guidelines for the clergy concerning the "rights and revindication of the people," have only recently reached Recife.

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