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INFO : RIO DE JANEIRO

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RS/AN
ANALYSIS BRANCH

FROM : AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

DATE: June 15, 1970

SUBJECT : 11th General Assembly of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), Brasilia, May 17/27, 1970

REF : Brasilia's 166, Rio's 3625, Brasilia's 173 repeated to Washington as Rio's 3739 and [redacted]

Summary

FOIA(b)(1) State

The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil met in Brasilia for eleven days in May. Although the main subjects on the agenda concerned liturgical matters, education of the clergy, and internal reforms, public interest was focused on the question of torture. After much debate among the bishops and lobbying by the government against a critical statement, the CNBB overwhelmingly approved the "Pastoral of Brasilia." The document, which condemns violence and torture in any form, is carefully worded to balance critical statements with explanations and with praise for the government in certain areas. The government's reaction to the "Pastoral" was to encourage favorable comment on its positive aspects and to make little or no comment on its critical sections. The conference and the resulting document indicate a desire on the part of the Church and the government for dialogue and cooperation. The conference ended with the Church seemingly united, although criticism by liberal elements may revive if the GOR does not take positive measures to prevent torture.

The Pastoral Letter

1. The publication of the Pastoral Letter of Brasilia at the end of the bishops' conference has generated considerable comment and discussion. Although the document, approved at the conference by a vote of 159 to 21 with two abstentions, deals mainly with matters directly related to ecclesiastical questions, it is the last section, "Aspects of National Life," that has drawn major attention in the press and Group 3 - Downgraded at 12-year intervals not automatically declassified

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government circles. This part focuses on torture, violence, genocide, political prisoners, economic development, and human values.

2. The carefully worded document represents an effort on the part of the bishops to put together a statement acceptable to a majority in which they speak out on questions which clearly concern them without unduly offending the government with strong attacks and criticisms. They clearly wished to avoid any step which would foreclose dialogue with the government. The Pastoral is also an effort to deal with various church matters, which were the major focus of the conference, and to play down the political questions, which were important but not primary.

Ecclesiastical Questions

3. Discussions during the assembly revolved in large part around internal reforms and liturgical matters. Certain liturgical questions, such as the baptismal ritual and the mass, were considered important items in the conference's agenda, as the Vatican had left decisions in these matters to each country's church. The modifications approved in the CNBB Statutes represent the second major reform of the Statutes since the CNBB's founding in 1952. The first revisions were in 1964, immediately following the Vatican II Council. Besides allowing laymen greater participation in church affairs, the revisions will decentralize the church a bit by giving greater importance and autonomy to the fourteen Pastoral regions of Brazil. The purpose is to make the church more responsive to the particular circumstances that prevail in any one region.

4. After the discussion of the role of the laity had been closed, a group of 200 laymen from various parts of the country presented the CNBB with a document demanding that the church make a public statement on certain problems, such as "abusive experiments with the liturgy" and, especially, Marxist influences within the church. Cardinal Agnelo Rossi stated that, although the document had arrived too late for consideration at the assembly, it would be sent to the proper organ for study and reply. Considerable time was spent also on the education and formation of priests in consequence of guidelines received from the Vatican.

5. Actual decisions on all these matters were made by voting through multiple-choice questionnaires which all participants received. The objective of these discussions and decisions seemed to be an attempt to up-date the church and to make it more effective within the conditions that exist in Brazil today. In the beginning of the Pastoral Letter the bishops mention that the church has been going through a crisis in the last few years but must not be left behind by the changes taking place in the world. The church must also change. There are aspects, however, that are not subject to transformation, as they are an integral part of what the church stands for.

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