

FELIPE AND MERY BARREDA OF ESTELI. January 7, 1983.

Esteli, capital city of the department of the same name on Nicaragua's northern border, is a major center of support for the Sandinista revolution. It was one of the principal locations in Nicaragua for the innovative pastoral work which led to the spread of Christian base communities during the early 1970's, and many of its young men and women joined or supported the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in its struggle against the dictatorship of Somoza. A revolt against Somoza broke out there in September, 1978, and was brutally repressed by the National Guard. FSLN forces liberated the city briefly in April 1979, but were driven out by the Guard after a fierce battle. Esteli was once again the scene of bitter fighting in June and July of 1979 during the Sandinistas' final push to victory. As a result of this stubborn resistance, the city was bombed and shelled repeatedly and much of it was virtually razed by Somoza's armed forces. Of its 40,000 inhabitants, some 5,000 had been killed and another 20,000 were living elsewhere as refugees by the end of the insurrection. Esteli was finally liberated from nearly half a century of Somocista rule on July 16, 1979--just three days before the final triumph of the FSLN and the establishment of the revolutionary government in Managua.

On July 16, 1983, Comandante Bayardo Arce of the national directorate of the Frente Sandinista went to Esteli to preside over the celebration of the fourth anniversary of those events and to praise the accomplishments of four years of hard work in the program of reconstruction. On that occasion, he announced the sad news that the government had finally been able to confirm the assassination, early in January outside a contra camp in Honduras, of Felipe and Mery Barreda--popular Catholic lay leaders and Sandinista activists in Esteli, who had been kidnapped by the contras several months before. On that same day, Monsignor Ruben Lopez Ardon, Bishop of Esteli issued a communique expressing his sadness at the loss of Felipe and Mery, condemning their murder and recognizing the exemplary Christian witness of their lives and the lives of the many other Nicaraguan Christians who had died "so that a new Nicaragua may be born." He also expressed his concern at the prospect of a war between Nicaragua and its

neighbors.

This was a red-letter event because it was the first occasion on which a member of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church hierarchy, which has generally been stern in its disapproval of the Sandinista revolution and of the active participation in it of thousands of Christian lay people and religious, had given public expression to his opposition to the military and economic campaign against Nicaragua (or even to the systematic elimination of a portion of Nicaragua's Christian base community leadership which has characterized that campaign). Msgr. Lopez even went so far as to praise the efforts of the Sandinista government and others to achieve peace. His letter did not, however, signal a change of direction in the policies of Nicaragua's bishops towards the proceso of the revolutionary transformation of Nicaraguan society.

Felipe Barreda Rodriguez and his wife Maria Eugenia Garcia de Barreda have become revered martyrs of the Nicaraguan people's church and of the Sandinista revolution. Their pictures appear everywhere, and would probably be recognized immediately by most Nicaraguan Christians. A videotape on their lives has been produced and distributed, and when their names are called out in public gatherings, the crowd will respond with a resounding "Presente"-- a reminder that the couple's spirit remains alive among their people. North Americans can learn a good deal about the vital role of Christians and of Christian thinking in the Nicaraguan revolution by taking a close look at the way in which the Barredas lived, and the way they chose to die.

Felipe was born in Esteli in 1931 and Maria Eugenia in Managua in 1933, which meant that both lived virtually all of their lives under the regime of the Somoza family. Both were raised in the respectable Catholic middle class and received adequate high school educations. Neither seems to have had a direct personal or family experience of Somocista repression while they were growing up which would have prepared them for opposition to the government. They met and courted in Managua in the late 1940's, were married there in January 1952, and went to settle in Esteli. There they prospered as small business people--Felipe with a jewelry store and Mery with a beauty parlor--and raised their six children Felipe, Maria Victoria, Sandra, Indiana, Mario and Ana. By 1979 they

had numerous grandchildren and were popular and widely respected members of the church and the business and professional communities of Esteli. Old friends remember them in the 1950's and 1960's as a traditionally pious Catholic couple concerned above all with family and parish life and inclined to charity. Nothing about them, or about the social milieu in which they moved, so much as hinted at the possibility of their later involvement in the Nicaraguan revolution.

The Barredas' conversion to a new understanding of their responsibility as Christians to participate in the transformation of society toward a regime of social justice or shalom, seems to have begun with the Cursillos de Cristiandad. The Cursillos were the catalyst for an important process of renovation in the Nicaraguan Catholic Church during those years. Felipe went through a cursillo in June of 1968, and Maria Eugenia in January of 1969. From then on, family members and friends noted a great change in their behavior and in their understanding of the meaning and purpose of Christian life.

During the early 1970's Felipe and Mery Barreda devoted increasing amounts of their time, talents and financial resources to Catholic social action of all kinds, including the organization of youth groups, cooperatives and Christian Family Movement retreats. They were particularly active (and continued until the end of their lives) as teachers in the Cursillo movement around the Diocese of Esteli. They brought to all of these activities in the community Felipe's ever-ready sense of humor and Mery's willingness to join in any kind of work alongside the poor. They were people who listened carefully to what poor people had to say to them, and little by little they came to a real understanding of the hardships of most Nicaraguan people and the depth of the injustice of the social and economic system that prevailed under the Somoza dictatorship. They became involved in building Christian base communities through catechetical work and as Delegates of the Word, and before long both of them had been made members of the Pastoral Council of the diocese.

In those years the utter moral bankruptcy of the Somoza regime became evident to the Barredas as well as to other middle-class Nicaraguans and church people in general. This was especially true after the terrible Managua earthquake of December 1972--when Anastacio Somoza and his friends made a lucrative business opportunity out of the international campaign for assistance to the quake's thousands of homeless victims.

In 1975, Felipe and Mery began to work closely with the clandestine FSLN in the struggle against Somoza. They served as couriers, and their home became one of the first Sandinista "safe houses" in Esteli. Many of the current principal leaders of the Frente Sandinista and government were acquainted with them in those days as affluent and "respectable" but fully committed companeros during the phase of preparations for the insurrection. It was a time when most business people were still very far from committing themselves fully to the struggle against the dictatorship.

The Barredas' children shared their convictions, and their eldest son, Felipe (now the "mayor" of nearby Ocotal), spent many months as a political prisoner in Somoza's jails for his own work in the movement. On that occasion, Mery joined with other mothers of prisoners to carry out a hunger strike demanding their release. Mery and Felipe were present at every demonstration against the government in Esteli; and they lent their names to the letters of protest against Somoza's excesses which were sent out all over the world.

During these years, however, their main efforts were devoted to helping to build neighborhood defense committees and Christian base communities in Esteli. Here they joined with other people in a process of reflection on their immediate condition in the light of the Gospel. The groups prepared to defend themselves if need be, and at the same time take responsibility in a participatory people's political system following the hoped-for Sandinista triumph. Once the insurrection itself had gotten underway in 1978-79, the Barredas went so far as to mortgage their house and commercial establishments to raise money for the FSLN.

Father Agustin Toranzos of Ocotal, a long-time friend and co-worker of the Barredas in the Cursillo movement, recalls that both Felipe and Mery were fervent Catholics--daily communicants whose attitudes as Christians toward the Sandinista revolution were nevertheless free of the "problems of conscience" which the bishops of Nicaragua have so frequently urged upon the people since 1979. For them, to be Christian was "to give life and to help the poorest and the most marginalized" of their sisters and brothers. Father Toranzos says that Felipe and Mery told him in 1978, following the September insurrection in Esteli, that finding the FSLN had been a great moment for them, because

in it they saw "the true Christian solution for Nicaragua." For them, the process of the 1970's in their country had been a lesson in the compatibility of Christian ideals with the humane ideals of a revolution; they stood ready to participate fully as Christians in the revolutionary reconstruction of Nicaragua after the dictator's fall. This attitude was to make them beloved by most people in Esteli and in the country as a whole. It would also make them persons despised by some Nicaraguans and others--as "traitors" to their class, their country and their church, and as prime candidates for extermination, as an example to others, by the enemies of Nicaragua's revolution.

Following the Sandinista triumph of July 19, 1979, Felipe and Mery joined wholeheartedly in the work of reconstruction. Mery was part of the first revolutionary City Council in Esteli, and Felipe continued his work as militante in the ranks of the Frente Sandinista (now transformed from a clandestine politico-military organization into a public and omnipresent political party in power). Friends remember that he used to thank God for "the opportunity to live during this important period in the history of my people." For the Barredas, life as believing and self-sacrificing Christians and life as Sandinistas was all of a piece. Far from losing their identity as Christians by working in the Sandinista revolution, they found continuing inspiration for their commitment to Sandinismo in their Christian faith itself.

A principal focus of Felipe's and Mery's work during the last months of their life was the poor barrio of Esteli named for Omar Torrijos, the late pro-Sandinista President of Panama (a hero to Central Americans for his independent attitude toward the United States, and for his contribution to the restoration of Panamanian sovereignty over the Canal Zone). The barrio was inhabited by refugees from the terrible floods of May, 1982--desperately poor country people, most of whom had received few benefits from the changes in either Church or government before arriving in the city as victims of a natural disaster. The Barredas worked hard there, promoting the literacy and public health programs. They helped organize a brick-making cooperative to meet the critical shortage of building materials so that the community might provide itself with housing. They worked to build neighborhood government, the Sandinista mass organizations for women and young people, and the self-defense militia. They also organized Christian base communities which met regularly for Biblical reflection and for discussions aimed at

action for community improvement. Both continued to place high priority on their work developing Catholic lay leadership through the Cursillos de Cristiandad. It was with the women of Omar Torrijos that Mery, in particular, lived out the "preferential option for the poor"--the direct, physical and spiritual casting of one's lot with the poor--which is so central to the vision and practice of the new post-Vatican II liberation Christianity of Latin America and the rest of the ex-colonial world.

In December 1982, the Sandinista government sent out a nationwide call for volunteers to help with the coffee harvest in the mountainous northern region. Despite the chronic decline in its world market price, coffee was and continues to be one of Nicaragua's chief exports and principal sources of desperately needed foreign exchange. Sabotaging the coffee harvest has been a principal tactical objective of the contras, and several volunteer coffee harvesters had already been killed by the bands coming in from Honduras. Thousands of people from all over the country responded to the call for volunteers for this dangerous patriotic task, and the Barredas were among the first to sign up from Esteli. When Felipe's mother warned him to stay home because of the danger, he replied lightly that if he stayed home he might die of diarrhea--but that if he died harvesting coffee he would at least be remembered as a good Sandinista.

Mery organized the celebration of Nicaragua's principal religious festivity for La Purisima in Omar Torrijos in early December, and then joined with her friends there to make preparations for a traditional Christmas Eve feast--for many of the families, the first they would ever experience. Before leaving with Felipe to join the coffee-picking brigade, she wrote the following lines to people in Omar Torrijos:

We have been awaiting this Christmas with real joy. Since we came to live among you, you have become a part of our lives. We love your children, your streets, your problems--in short, everything that is you. The best Christmas gift the Lord could give me would be to share this Christmas with you, and I was wondering what gift I could give you. But then I suddenly had the chance to give you a very fine present, although it means that I will not be with you at Midnight Mass. It is the chance to pick coffee for ten days. The little bit that I will pick will be transformed into health care, clothing, housing, roads, education and food for our people--that is why I am enthusiastic about going. In every

coffee bean I pick, I will see each of your faces. . . .I ask that you also pray to the Lord to look after your companeros and our children. I'll be thinking of you wherever I am.

A big hug for everyone,  
Maria.

At the Agro-Nica state farm near El Ural in Nueva Segovia, two kilometers from the Honduran border, Felipe and Mery and their youngest son, Mario, went out with the brigade on the morning of December 28, 1982, to harvest coffee. A fellow volunteer remembered that Mery was feeling sick that morning, but hadn't wanted to miss work. At about 11:30 the brigade was attacked by a contra band led by Julio Cesar Herrera, known in the counterrevolution as "Krill." Felipe ran toward the truck to send out an alarm on the CB radio but was shot and wounded in the arm as he ran. Mario managed to escape with the rest of the brigade, but Mery had to run to tend to Felipe. The result was that both of them were captured along with four young militiamen, tied up, blindfolded and marched off toward the border. For many weeks there was no news of what had become of them, beyond the report of Cayetano, one of the four militia members who managed, after a few days as captives, to escape and make their way back to Nicaragua:

When we reached Honduran territory, they took the blindfolds from us and untied our hands. Those of us who had been carrying the contra wounded were almost fainting from exhaustion, and when we fell to the ground we were kicked back onto our feet. It was then that we overheard one of the contras say, "what luck, we've caught a couple of big fish." They were referring to Felipe and Mery Barreda, who were taken off shortly afterwards and separated from the rest of us. It wasn't until the next day that we saw them again. Mery was entirely nude and covered with blood and mud. Felipe was bleeding from the head and had his hands tied, and there was a gaping wound in his left hand. We were watching this scene in horror when two contra soliders took us aside and said, "See what happened to those two? Don't be a fool. Stop working with the communist Sandinistas. Can't you see that they are wiping out religion, and we are fighting against them to free Nicaragua from the hordes of Communists?"

Informed of the kidnaping of the Barredas, Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto entered a vigorous protest with the Honduran government. He called for a full investigation, declared the Hondurans responsible for the fate of Felipe and Mery, and demanded their immediate return. But there was no reply to this diplomatic representation, and it was not until several months later that the full story emerged and could be made public.

In June 1983, the Sandinista state security police captured a young contra intelligence officer by the name of Pedro Javier Nunez Cabezas, known to his colleagues as El Muerto ("the Dead Man"). Nunez had been sent into Nicaragua by FDN intelligence chief Abel Hernandez to try and assassinate three leading figures in the Sandinista government: Miguel d'Escoto, his Vice Minister Nora Astorga, and the Minister of Culture and religious poet, Ernesto Cardenal. Shown on the national TV, El Muerto was identified by the four young militia members who had shared the Barredas' captivity as the officer directly responsible for their custody and torture. Then, subjected to interrogation by the State Security police, Nunez Cabezas revealed the time, place, manner and motive of the execution of Felipe and Maria Eugenia Barreda.

According to El Muerto's testimony, Felipe and Mery were already in pitiable condition when they were brought into the contras' Pino Uno base camp by Krill's men. Mery was faint and bleeding, and Felipe was wounded on the arm and face. The six captives had then spent the night of December 28 naked in the chilly mountain air, tied to some coffee bushes near the contra camp. Next day they were taken for interrogation aimed at finding out what their relationship was with the Sandinistas, and whether or not they would be willing to join the FDN in making propaganda attacks against them. During the first round of interrogation, Nunez Cabezas had instructions to beat them only around the lower part of the body so marks would not be left which would show up if they were brought before the TV cameras.

This interrogation failed to produce "good results," because the Barredas persisted in answering all questions with a remark to the effect that they were Christians and Sandinistas and would be so long as they lived. But El Muerto's commanding officer, the notorious contra "task force" leader known as El Suicida ("The Suicide"), hoped to make points with the FDN headquarters in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. He called to say that he had

two prominent Sandinistas under arrest, and recommended that they be considered for use in making propaganda. With this in mind, Abel Hernandez traveled down with journalist Noel Ortiz of the FDN's 15th of September radio and TV station to film the Barredas surrounded by Somocistas and then broadcast the story that they had joined the FDN. Cayetano, the militiaman who had escaped, told the Barredas' friends in Esteli that the interrogators had tried to get Mery to say on a videotape that there was no freedom of religion in Nicaragua. He had heard her loudly proclaiming her faith in God and the revolution during the interrogation. The propaganda project was a failure; once the filming was over, the Barredas were tied up and tortured some more. This time, said El Muerto, there was no instruction to preserve the appearance of the couple, so he beat them until the faces of both were badly disfigured.

Nunez Cabezas recalled pistol-whipping and kicking the Barredas repeatedly, opening up Felipe's wounds in the process. He was assisted in this work by an especially heartless interrogator from DNA headquarters in Tegucigalpa named Tijerino or "L-67." When these two grew tired, they handed the torturing over to El Tapir and Juanito of the intelligence team--loyal sidekicks of El Suicida's since their days with him in Somoza's elite infantry training academy (the EEBI) in Managua.

At about this time, two peasant boys aged 13 and 17 who had been kidnapped from Nicaragua and were serving in the FDN forces, were sentenced to death by El Suicida. They were accused of offending the chief by praising the military leadership of one of his hated rivals, Benito Bravo. El Suicida viewed Bravo and most of the FDN high command as cowards who were good at giving orders, but unwilling to risk their necks fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. A contra soldier from the boys' home town remembered them as having been Sandinistas, and somebody else thought they were infiltrators who were planning to burn down the camp's storehouse. El Muerto and Tijerino were assigned the task of first torturing and then eliminating the boys. Unable to pry any information out of them, El Muerto recalled without apparent remorse that he had done away with them with dispatch: "I killed them clean, with a buck knife. I put them face down on the ground, and then I slit their throats. They died immediately, with no pain." Nunez Cabezas, asked what he thought of the order to kill these two young soldiers, replied that it was a good way of maintaining the indispensable discipline of the commando, and the men's respect

for authority.

El Suicida hoped to extract some important information or propaganda advantage from his six captives from the coffee brigade, and he was enraged when the four members of the militia escaped and the Barredas would not break down under torture. Seeing that he was getting nowhere, on about January 5, 1983, he requested instructions from Tegucigalpa and was told to have his prisoners killed. El Muerto was given the assignment, and recalled that on the 7th: "I went into the hut we have on Potrero Grande hill near the command center of the camp, which is where I held and interrogated prisoners. When they saw me with my pistol in my hand, they knew they were going to die. But they said nothing until just before I shot them." The Barredas insisted to the end that they were Christians and Sandinistas. El Muerto killed each of them with a single bullet into the brain.

This unsuccessful experience with the interrogation of prisoners, according to El Muerto's testimony, led El Suicida to issue orders that his men were no longer to take them. El Muerto agreed: "Prisoners are nothing but trouble. . .[From now on]. . .if somebody looks suspicious, grab them and try to get useful information. If they give it, fine; and if they don't, it's all the same. . .Bang! And an end to it."

On July 30, 1983, thousands of Christians from the northern frontier area of Esteli, Madriz and Nueva Segovia--the front line of the war against the contras--joined with delegations from the rest of Nicaragua and some other countries to hear a memorial Mass for the Barredas concelebrated by thirty priests from all over the diocese. They gathered at the Cathedral of Esteli, where the Barredas had served for so many years on the Pastoral Council. It was notable that Monsignor Ruben Lopez Ardon, Bishop of Esteli, was absent from the celebration, which was presided over by the Barredas' old friend Father Agustin Toranzos of Ocotal.

The celebration was a moment for evaluating the significance of the Barredas and their lives of service, and for renewing Christian commitments to the revolutionary transformation of Nicaragua. Indiana Barreda read her mother's farewell letter to the women of the Omar Torrijos barrio. Songs from the Cursillos were sung, along with songs from the Misa Campesina, Nicaragua's own contribution to the liturgy of liberation. Felipe's Bible, well-thumbed and full of annotations, was open on the altar

between two torches (he had been in the habit of saying that the Bible was the torch that lit them on their way). The flags of the Frente Sandinista and of the Catholic Church were displayed together, along with a coffee-picker's basket filled with beans as a symbol of the Barredas' sacrifice. Father Pedro Declercq, who works with the Salvadoran refugees in Esteli and had been closely associated with Felipe and Mery, said afterwards that the ceremony had been an occasion for a "gathering up of their lives. They did not lose their lives; they gave them. We here have attempted to gather them up, to rescue them."

Another worshipper and friend of the Barredas observed quietly that the Mass had really been a memorial for the several dozens of Catholic catechists and Delegates of the Word who had been killed by contra raiders into Nicaragua, most of them unknown outside their families and immediate communities. Felipe and Mery stood for them all.

After Mass, the crowd marched to Omar Torrijos where Mery and Felipe had given so much of themselves to others. On that day, one of Mery's last projects was brought to completion when a neat little brick house built entirely by the neighbors with bricks from the coop, was handed over to the aging and indigent mother of Ronaldo Arauz, a young man who was killed in the insurrection of 1978. A woman of the neighborhood then gave her own obituary for Maria Eugenia Garcia de Barreda:

So many times we have come back from working in the fields to eat tortillas that she has made, or we have put clean clothes on our children that she has washed. . . It wasn't until we met her that we knew the meaning of Christian love, although she herself never spoke of it. There are memories of Mery in every house here . . . she sat right there; over here we had the first meeting . . . So we remember her every day. She didn't only make tortillas with us; she was brave enough to give her life for us . . . Jesus gave his life on the cross. Mery gave hers in the coffee grove.

The Barredas had always wanted to be buried simply to the sound of two favorite hymns of the Sandinista movement. Those hymns were sung by their friends after the local Sandinista leader had promised that once peace was restored with Honduras their mortal remains would be given a proper burial in Esteli, where Felipe and Mery would be remembered forever with love and gratitude.

Very much in evidence on that day in long-suffering Esteli were placards bearing the simple but revolutionary words from the Gospel of John, 15:13: "There is no greater love than this: that one lay down one's life for one's friends."

[Based on testimony gathered by Witness for Peace in Esteli, and on articles by Warren Hoge in New York Times 8/3/79; in El Tayacan 66 and Amanecer 19, both for August, 1983; in Barricada, 9/16/83; in Latinamerica Press, 9/22/83; and by Michael McConnell in .ul The Other Side for April, 1984.]

Felipe and Mery Barreda

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