

## **Helder Camara Memorial, 10/3/99**

b. Fortaleza, Ceará, 1909. Father a poorly paid book-keeper, part-time journalist & free thinker. Mother as he recalled her was a devout Catholic primary schoolteacher, a strict setter of high standards but kind, with a great understanding for the human weaknesses which she saw as the ultimate root of all evil. Called to the priesthood as a boy, he was tutored privately to prepare for the seminary. Developed the lifelong habit of writing down his often prophetic theological reflections in the form of poetry.

As a seminarian, he was influenced by the Brazilian Catholic nationalist thinkers of the 1920's, who sought to define an authentic Brazilian Christian politics as a defense against the oligarchical pseudo-democracy of secular Liberalism on the one hand, and atheistic Communism on the other (of these, like Pope John Paul II today, they saw the greater danger in Communism). Already in those days, Dom Helder was committed to an intense Catholic social activism, combined with an equally strong private devotional life.

Ordained 1931. A few months later the Brazilian Integralist Party was formed, in open imitation of Portuguese and Italian fascism but without the suspicion of religion and the subjection of individual conscience to party authority that characterized those movements. Its mystical nationalism had the motto "God, Country, Family" and the Greek letter sigma for a symbol; members wore green shirts and black or white pants, raised their right arms in a fascist-style salute, and hoped to establish a truly Brazilian theocratic state. As a newly-minted priest Helder Camara became the regional secretary of the Integralista movement in the Northeast, and later moved to Rio de Janeiro to serve as personal secretary to the party's founder, and later its national secretary. He travelled the country giving speeches and writing vociferous articles in Catholic publications, referring to himself as a "simple green-shirted priest from Ceará" and working to organize an army of young soldiers for Christ -- even over the objections of the Cardinal Archbishop of Rio, who thought that priests should not mix so directly in politics.

After the establishment of Getulio Vargas' Estado Novo in 1937, he turned his attention during the 1940's to the Catholic Action movement and a variety of adult education campaigns, and continued travelling all over Brazil -- though by this time he had toned down the rhetoric considerably. Through all of this work, he developed a wide network of acquaintances in Brazilian Church circles, a deep understanding of Brazil's political, social and economic reality, and an appreciation of the importance of the often unorthodox popular Catholicism of the Brazilian people.

As Auxiliary Bishop of Rio de Janeiro, 1952-64, he was especially active in work designed to benefit the poor inhabitants of that city's shanty-towns or favelas, seen then by both Church and state as a fertile ground for Communist agitation.. But unlike most Catholic leaders of that day, still deeply anti-socialist and anti-democratic, wedded to the old political ideal of a paternalist authoritarianism, Helder Camara learned through his direct encounters with poor people, and with those who organized among them effectively, the vital difference between a hopeful democratic socialism and an authoritarian Soviet-style communism. In time, he left the anti-Communist rhetoric behind and became the strong public advocate of a radical social democracy in which all adults could have an active role in the public decision-making process; and that was the beginning of his ability to have influence far beyond the borders of Brazil.

Dom Helder was instrumental in 1952 in founding National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil, which Church historians think of as the principal accomplishment of his lifetime. Brazil is the biggest Catholic country in the world;and it is the country in which the Church faces the most severe challenges of poverty and inequality. The process by which its bishops confronted, discussed and attempted to find solutions to those problems during the 1960's, 70's & 80's and still today, is a critically important chapter in the history of the whole Church in the modern world. The bishops' conference nourished the base Christian communities movement and the theology of liberation; and it had a major impact on the general conferences of Latin American bishops in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. Helder Camara, along with

several close friends among the Brazilian Bishops, played a very large role in that process for more than thirty years.

Dom Helder attended the three sessions of the Second Vatican Council between 1962 & 1965, though like most Third World Bishops he was denied a leading role in the historic discussions that were held there -- even though several the kinds of changes in the life of the Church which were authorized there had already been underway for a decade or so in Brazil, under the influence of Bishop Camara.

In 1964, the very year in which Brazil fell under the governance of a cruel military dictatorship he was made Archbishop of Recife, the principal city of the Northeast, a position which he held until he reached the mandatory retirement age in 1985. There he earned his reputation as the "Bishop of the Poor" by refusing to live in the Archbishop's palace or enjoy the life style of a prince of the Church.

Right after Second Vatican Council in 1966, he took the lead in drafting a statement signed by 15 Latin American bishops committing the church to a "preferential option for the poor." Like the other leading Latin American theologians of his time, he reacted against the continuing existence of hundreds of millions of Latin American people as non-persons in societies dominated by wealth, and viewed the capitalist economic system and other institutions that perpetuate injustice as expressions of "social sin." Never an ideologue, he was always an eloquent prophetic spokesman for the poor, whose voice of protest he heard as the voice of God. He was active in encouraging the growth of base Christian communities, and the mass literacy movement that had been pioneered during the late 1950's in the Northeast by Paulo Freire.

But his greatest concern was with what he called the "spiral of violence" into which he saw Latin America and the world descending as a result of the joining together of Latin America's oligarchies and the U.S. government to establish the heavily militarized national security state.

He was an outspoken opponent of the Brazilian military regime whose 21-year rule corresponded exactly with his tenure as Archbishop of Recife, and which was responsible for the murder, torture or disappearance of many of his close collaborators. For many years the publication of his writings or the broadcasting of his speeches was prohibited by the dictatorship; and he endured what one supporter referred to as the most severe 24-hour harassment ever administered by a government to a leader of the Latin American Church. As he put it, when he fed the hungry he was called a Christian; but when he questioned the reason for hunger, he was called a Communist.