

*Dom Helder Câmara*

## The Father of the Church of the Poor

KENNETH P. SERBIN\*

Brazil is currently the nation with the largest population of self-identified followers of the Roman Catholic faith. The Catholic Church played an important role in the foundation and development of Portuguese America, but because of the Portuguese crown's control of appointments of high-ranking clergy, the Church was never as powerful and independent as it was in Spanish America. The founding of the Republic in 1889 led to a definitive separation of Church and state in Brazil and freedom of religious observance. Still, the Church establishment continued to support the status quo that favored the interests of the wealthy and powerful. The twentieth century brought a series of new challenges to the Church that had serious repercussions for this venerable institution's role in Brazilian society. These challenges included the rise of Communist ideology and its critique of capitalism's injustices and religion's role in mystifying the exploitation of the poor, and competition from growing Protestant sects that aggressively proselytized Brazil's Catholic faithful to win converts. In nations such as Brazil where the Church had had a virtual monopoly on official religious practice, the influence of these competing institutions and ideologies made Church leaders more aware of the need to concern themselves with the hearts and minds of their parishioners. These and other pressures spurred the Church's leadership in Rome to promulgate the major reforms in the 1950s that came to be known as Vatican II. The intent was to make the Church and its clergy more effective in communicating the faith and more responsive to the needs of its members. For instance, the Mass, which had traditionally been celebrated in Latin, would now be celebrated in Portuguese or the local vernacular so that less-educated parishioners would understand the liturgy. Priests and nuns also became more active in the communities that they served and as a result became more aware of the need to improve the lives of their brethren, particularly the most vulnerable.

Professor Kenneth P. Serbin illuminates the dramatic shifts in Church-state relations during the twentieth century by focusing on the story of a

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man of relatively modest origins who became one of Catholicism's most admired and influential leaders. Dom Helder Câmara lived the big changes of the twentieth century with intensity as a dedicated clergyman. He began his career as a priest supporting conservative political movements that drew inspiration from fascism, but would later go on to become one of the most outspoken leaders of the Catholic left. His leadership brought about dramatic transformations in the Brazilian Church's organization, theology, and practices. Under his influence, members of the Catholic clergy and laity became activists, some of whom contributed to the development of Liberation Theology, which sought to square Christianity with socialist critiques of the excesses of capitalism that left the poor subject to "institutional violence." Conservatives saw Liberation Theology as, at worst, outright Communist subversion and, at best, a school of thought that lent legitimacy to Marxist ideology and the violent leftist guerrilla movements that flourished in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution. Leaders such as Dom Helder, however, held a peaceful vision of Christian social transformation that would bring about greater equality.

Professor Serbin's research has focused on the history of Catholicism and society in Brazil. His book *Secret Dialogues: Church-Sate Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil* (2000) explores the behind-the-scenes negotiations between representatives of the military government and the Catholic Church during the military dictatorship (1964–1985). These "secret dialogues" sought to ease tensions between the military and the Catholic Church. The regime's censorship and savage repression created conditions that made the Church one of the few Brazilian institutions whose members could speak out against the torture and assassination of suspected leftists and the grinding poverty that continued to brutalize the country's poor. Dom Helder was one of the most outspoken critics of the military regime, and, as Professor Serbin shows, he gave up his chances to be a cardinal in order to speak his conscience during a dark chapter of the Cold War. Kenneth Serbin earned his Ph.D. from the University of California at San Diego in 1993 and is currently associate professor of history at San Diego University.

Dom Helder Pessôa Câmara, the archbishop of Olinda and Recife, was one of the great leaders of the twentieth century. Profoundly dedicated to social justice through nonviolence, he was a Latin American version of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. In striving to reform the Roman Catholic Church, Dom Helder helped to change the course of one of Latin America's—and the world's—oldest and most important institutions.

The diminutive but fiery bishop from Ceará pioneered the implementation of a Catholic ideal known as the "Church of the Poor." Once

a pillar of conservatism, in the 1960s and 1970s the Church in Latin America began to strive for social justice through the profound transformation of society. Dom Helder and the Brazilian Church played a decisive role in this shift. He and other leaders of the Church of the Poor preached Christian salvation not as an abstract afterlife but as a just society built in the present on Earth. The Church of the Poor defended human rights and socioeconomic equality, and it preached a "preferential option for the poor" over other social classes, urging common people to participate actively in politics, unions, and social movements such as neighborhood groups seeking better schools. (Some followers were self-avowed socialists.) In terms of international relations and economic policy the Church of the Poor espoused the most nationalistic ideas in Brazilian Catholicism. It strongly supported economic development, and it stressed the Brazilian and Latin American aspects of Catholicism as opposed to the European tradition.

As Dom Helder's life demonstrates, faith and politics are intertwined in Latin America. Along with military officers, the clergy carried great weight in the region's politics throughout the twentieth century. Priests and bishops exerted even greater influence in the sphere of religion, which played a significant role in the daily lives of most people.

Dom Helder personified how religion both participated in and was changed by Brazil's political and social modernization. His path was long, arduous, and complex. Dom Helder, who died in 1999, reached the age of ninety in a strife-filled era. His theological and political development both reflected and reinforced many of the major themes of a century in which Brazil and other Latin American countries strived but often failed to establish democratic systems, industrialize their economies, and alleviate wrenching poverty. The Church's involvement in this process deepened and led to its religious and political transformation. The modernization of Catholicism came with a price. Dom Helder received widespread praise and extended his influence to all of Latin America and to the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, but he also received much criticism for denouncing human rights abuses and the social injustices practiced by strong nations against the weak. He and his followers suffered violent persecution by an anti-Communist Brazilian military regime that was supported by the U.S. government.

A deep and unwavering religious faith was the key to Dom Helder's perseverance. He was born in 1909 into a large and humble family in Fortaleza, the capital of Ceará and an important port on northeastern Brazil's Atlantic coast. Like many Brazilians, Helder's first examples of piety came from his mother, a primary school teacher. She wanted him to be a priest. Helder's father, a bookkeeper, ignored the antireligious aspects of the Masonic lodge to which he belonged and fervently

practiced the faith. Ceará had one of the strongest Catholic traditions in Brazil. Father Cícero, Brazil's most revered priest, whom many in the northeast considered a saint, established a popular pilgrimage site in the backlands of Ceará in the late 1800s, and he later became the state's governor. As a young seminarian in 1927, Dom Hélder met Father Cícero and witnessed the profound respect that poor people still showed for the 85-year-old priest.

Dom Hélder studied under the French and Dutch Vincentian fathers, a religious order that had unique rules, tasks, and spirituality with the atmosphere of a tightly knit brotherhood. These strict disciplinarians played a major part in the Romanization, or conservative modernization, of Brazilian Catholicism between the 1850s and the 1960s. During this era the Church vastly augmented its political and social influence by carefully reorganizing itself, emphasizing morality, and bringing people's everyday, sometimes unorthodox religious practices into line with official Church teachings. From the Vincentians, Dom Hélder learned obedience to the Church hierarchy, but he also questioned the institution's arbitrary stifling of creativity. Like most Brazilian priests, Dom Hélder left the seminary with a superior education—he learned French and Latin, for example—yet he lacked knowledge of current events and his country's reality. In 1931, Dom Hélder was ordained as a diocesan priest and as such came under the authority of the Archdiocese of Fortaleza and its archbishop.

Dom Hélder developed a remarkable spiritual discipline and dedication to God. He renounced physical pleasures, offered up to God his feelings of attraction to women, and once fasted so rigorously that he fainted. He wore his cassock daily, even long after most priests had abandoned theirs. The long, white robe accented his image as a simple, holy, and kind man. Throughout his adult life, Dom Hélder would awaken each morning at two o'clock and for the next three hours would pray, read his breviary (prayerbook), answer correspondence, meditate on the challenges of the previous day, and write poetry. In all, during these nightly vigils, Dom Hélder composed more than 7,000 poems, known as the "Meditations of Padre José."

The renunciation of physical comfort impressed people. "It was impossible not to be attracted to him," remembered the prominent Catholic intellectual Rose Marie Muraro, who worked with Padre Hélder in the 1940s. "And we all knew that he was a man who practically didn't eat or drink, who prayed all the time, who didn't sleep, and who expressed such a deep love!" Dom Hélder drew his greatest inspiration from the teachings and life of Francis, his favorite saint, whose self-abnegation both resembled and softened the harsh penitential aspects of the northeastern backlands. "Brother Francisco" was one of Dom Hélder's favor-

ite nicknames. With his tenderness, tolerance, and captivating smile, he was perhaps the closest approximation to a Brazilian Saint Francis. Dom Hélder's profound spirituality and asceticism later provided him with the strength to overcome the adversities of his public and political life.

Dom Hélder developed a substantial political career and underwent a profound ideological shift before becoming a militant for peace and social justice. As a seminarian he already had demonstrated a strong inclination for politics and particularly admired the ideas of Jackson de Figueiredo, a fervent convert to Catholicism. Jackson was a follower of French integralism, an archconservative, corporatist form of Catholicism that resonated with elements of fascism. He founded the newspaper *A Ordem* and the important Centro Dom Vital, both of which deeply influenced many Brazilian intellectuals. In the early 1930s, Dom Hélder became deeply involved in Ação Integralista Brasileira (AIB, or Brazilian Integralist Action), first in Ceará, where he successfully promoted the movement, and then in Rio de Janeiro, where he served as a secret member of AIB's supreme council at the behest of Dom Sebastião Leme da Silveira Cintra, the cardinal-archbishop of Rio de Janeiro.

The most influential bishop of his time, Dom Leme lent the Church's support to the regime of President Getúlio Vargas, who had seized power in the revolution of 1930. In return for privileges and subsidies, the Church gave the increasingly nationalistic and authoritarian Vargas moral support and a Catholic ideological framework that lent legitimacy to his government. Dom Leme also felt the need to bet discreetly on the Integralistas in case they came to power. Many other churchmen joined or sympathized with AIB because of its opposition to both communism and liberal capitalism. Communism, of course, was atheistic, and the unsuccessful 1935 revolt by its followers against the Vargas government polarized society. Capitalism was too individualistic and did not recognize the need for the social safety net and political unity of the integralist model. Significantly, young Padre Hélder's embrace of Integralismo led him to defend the use of violence for political ends. Wary of Integralismo's potential as a political competitor, however, Vargas crushed the organization in 1938.

Like several other important Integralista intellectuals, Dom Hélder ultimately rejected the movement for its association with violence and European fascism in the period before World War II. When political opponents later tried to use his authoritarian past against him, Dom Hélder readily admitted his mistake. Significantly, however, many former Integralistas retained the movement's nationalistic fervor. Among them were the great intellectuals San Tiago Danras, who would become the minister of foreign relations for leftist president João Goulart (1961–1964), and Alceu Amoroso Lima. Alceu introduced Dom Hélder to the

work of the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose anti-authoritarian "integral humanism," support for democracy, and acceptance of religious pluralism influenced an entire generation of Brazilian clergymen and intellectuals who later became proponents of the Church of the Poor and Liberation Theology.

Starting in the late 1940s, Dom Hélder gradually shifted to the political left. In order to keep the Church in step with the rapidly changing world of the postwar era, he undertook efforts to modernize it and increase its sensitivity to social questions. In the process he became the most dynamic and original leader in the recent history of the Brazilian Church.

Dom Hélder began by reorganizing Ação Católica (Catholic Action), the most important movement for the laity within the Church. The laity were those members of the Church who were not clergy (ordained priests or nuns). In spiritual matters, the Catholic laity was expected to follow the dictates of the Church hierarchy. In the 1900s, however, the Church's fear of losing its flock to growing and aggressive Protestant churches and the atheistic tenets of Marxism convinced its leaders to involve the laity more actively in the life of the institution. Catholic Action arrived in Brazil in the 1930s. As its national director from 1952 to 1962, Dom Hélder shifted its emphasis from spirituality and organizational questions. He criticized the clergy's paternalistic treatment of the laity and transformed Catholic Action into a vibrant array of groups that became involved in adult literacy training (for example, in the Movimento de Educação de Base, or MEB), union organization, and other kinds of political and social work. The most influential Catholic Action group was the Juventude Universitária Católica (JUC, or Catholic University Youth). The JUC grew rapidly in political importance and advocated cultural and economic nationalism. In 1959 the JUC developed "a Christian historical ideal for the Brazilian people." This platform focused on Brazil's economic underdevelopment, criticized capitalism for its anti-Christian abuses, and accepted socialism as a viable option. In the early 1960s the JUC supplied leadership to the radical student movement, many of whose members came to embrace Marxism in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

By stimulating the search for a socially relevant faith, Dom Hélder helped to provoke a major shift in the basic values and practices of Catholicism. He wanted the Church to break away from its exclusive emphasis on traditional morals and the afterlife and instead focus on people's daily concerns and needs. One key example was his advocacy of agrarian reform, the redistribution of unused land owned by the wealthy few to poor landless Brazilians to farm. Along with other clergymen, Dom Hélder stimulated some of the first serious discussions of the issue. In

1950, while still a priest, he wrote a famous pastoral letter on the topic published under the name of a bishop. The Church believed that redistributing the property of large landowners among the poor would stop the flow of migrants to the cities, thus solving the problem of the burgeoning *favelas* (urban shantytowns) and preserving the Church's traditional base in the countryside.

The demand for agrarian reform became a trademark of the Church of the Poor and eventually led to the founding of its Pastoral Land Commission in 1975. This commission has defended small rural property owners and landless agricultural workers in their struggles against violent land speculators, large landowners, and oppressive government actions. The work of the Church in this area contributed significantly to the establishment of the Movement of the Landless (Movimento Sem Terra, or MST; see also Chapter 11). The MST is perhaps the liveliest and most innovative initiative for the poor to emerge in all of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. Its activists frequently occupy unused private property and public lands in order to grow subsistence crops. Dom Hélder and the Church of the Poor's efforts pressured the Brazilian government to implement full-fledged agrarian reform. Until now, land reform has been piecemeal, but the MST has helped to accelerate government land-reform programs.

Dom Hélder also modernized the Church by founding the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB, or National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil) in 1952. One of the first such organizations in the Catholic world, the CNBB revitalized the institution, increased the bishops' interest in social and economic problems, and laid the groundwork for programs such as the Pastoral Land Commission. Dom Hélder served as secretary general from the start until 1964. The CNBB has consistently pressured Brazilian leaders on issues of social justice.

Dom Hélder also sought religious modernization by employing the mass media to transmit his message. He contributed frequently to newspapers and other publications, appeared on a prime-time weekly television program called "On God's Paths," and spoke on a nightly radio program. In 1959, Dom Hélder organized a "demonstration of faith" on Good Friday that filled the Maracanã soccer stadium with 200,000 people and was broadcast on television and a nationwide radio network of 300 stations. Dom Hélder's television popularity caused some conservative Brazilians to label him a show-off.

The year 1955 marked a decisive moment in Dom Hélder's religious and political quest when he reached a new height of ecclesiastical prestige by becoming an archbishop. He also organized the 36th International Eucharistic Congress (IEC), held in Rio with government support,

this event united the state, the armed forces, business, the tourist industry, the working classes, and the Church in the campaign for economic development and anticommunism. It marked the pinnacle of the triumphalistic, corporativistic neo-Christian model of Catholicism first introduced by the Vincentians and fulfilled by Dom Leme. The IEC highlighted Dom Hélder's extraordinary (though often forgotten) organizational skills. By boosting his appeal among Brazil's entrepreneurial and social elite, it projected him as the country's most dynamic, most beloved bishop. But the IEC had the added effect of forcing Dom Hélder to reflect on the growing gap between rich and poor generated by the Brazilian development model. Pierre Cardinal Gerlier, one of the attending dignitaries from Europe, urged Dom Hélder to "use this organizing talent that the Lord has given you in the service of the poor. You must know that although Rio de Janeiro is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, it is also one of the most hideous, because all these *favelas* in such a beautiful setting are an insult to the Lord." With this revelation, Dom Hélder later recalled, "I was thrown to the ground like Saul on the road to Damascus."

After the IEC, Dom Hélder intensified his efforts for the poor. He took part in the formation of the Conselho Episcopal Latino-Americano (CELAM, or Council of Latin American Bishops). The CELAM increased awareness of the region's importance in the Catholic Church and provided support for the emerging Church of the Poor. In Rio, Dom Hélder inaugurated a housing project for *favela* dwellers and set up an ongoing charitable drive for the needy. He soon gained international renown as "the bishop of the *favelas*." Dom Hélder also lobbied the government for development programs to assist the masses. His prestige and growing political influence enabled him to become one of the principal advisers to President Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961), who promoted rapid industrial development through foreign investment, government stimulus, and the transfer of the national capital from Rio to newly built Brasília. Dom Hélder and the CNBB assisted Kubitschek in the effort to spread the benefits of development. For example, the bishops were instrumental in the foundation of an ambitious government program to bring industry and progress to the impoverished northeast.

Dom Hélder drew spiritual inspiration from groups that identified with the experience of poverty—for example, the French worker-priests, who sought to attract the working class to the Church by earning a living in factories. Dom Hélder and other clergymen of his time adopted a spirituality of poverty and literally sought to live like the poor. In Recife he abandoned the archiepiscopal palace to reside in a small parish house behind a modest church.

More than anything else, Dom Hélder's profound faith in the Brazilian people shaped his support for social justice. Although as an archbishop he represented the central power of the world's quintessential multinational and multicultural religious organization, headquartered in Rome, he believed in the self-determination of nations and individuals. Consummately loyal to the institution, he also favored the administrative decentralization—and even democratization—of the extremely hierarchical and male-dominated Church. He believed that only by respecting the dignity of all followers could Catholicism become truly modern. As the leader of Catholic Action, Dom Hélder encouraged the laity to assert itself within the Church and to focus on questions of national importance. He demonstrated these ideals through his willingness to delegate responsibility—especially to women.

A host of female members of Catholic Action, volunteers, and Church employees assisted Dom Hélder throughout his career. One of them was the young Rose Marie Muraro, the future feminist intellectual and author. She belonged to a group of young female followers known as "Hélder's Girls." "Dom Hélder was really one of the first men to value women," she recalled. "He had great female friends, but everybody accepted that as something human and important, including the quite deep spiritual conviviality he shared with women." Rose Marie and some of the other women came to hold important jobs in the Church. These women assistants were especially instrumental during Dom Hélder's leadership of the CNBB. Dom Hélder's relationship with women contrasted sharply with the exploitation of nuns and other women in many sectors of the Church. To this day his trust in women and the people has yet to find its equal in the Church, which, like numerous other Brazilian institutions, continues as an unmoderated patriarchal structure hindered in its effectiveness by its refusal to tap the professional and leadership potential of women.

Dom Hélder transcended Brazilian issues to become a spokesman for the underdeveloped world. Some of his greatest achievements took place at the Second Vatican Council. In this series of momentous meetings some 2,000 bishops from around the world came together in Rome between 1962 and 1965 to discuss how the Church might be modernized. Vatican II resulted in the greatest reform in the history of the institution. At the Council, Dom Hélder successfully propagated the ideas of the emerging Church of the Poor. He pointed out the need to address the injustices of the world economy through dialogue between rich and poor countries and through international cooperation for development. Setting up informal meetings of reform-minded bishops, Dom Hélder worked behind the scenes to change the hierarchical, Eurocentric

organization of the Church and to encourage greater lay participation. He also worked for the Council's adoption of ecumenical relations with other religions (such as Judaism and Protestantism) and dialogue with other ideologies, including atheistic Marxism. Vatican II revealed the new influence of Latin American ideas in world Catholicism and projected Dom Helder as one of the great international leaders of the Church.

In 1963 and 1964, Brazilian politics became extremely polarized between left and right. Dom Helder swung further left, signaling a clear break with Brazil's elite. He declared that the wealthy had caused the failure of the Alliance for Progress, a Cold War program started by President John F. Kennedy to stop the spread of communism in Latin America after the 1959 Cuban Revolution through financial assistance and social reform to help the poor. Brazil became a focus of this and other U.S. programs because it bordered every nation in South America except Ecuador and Chile. It was feared that if Brazil became a Communist nation like Cuba, then all of South America would follow suit.

At the urging of Dom Helder the CNBB issued one of the most radical pronouncements in the history of the Brazilian Church. This document supported the expropriation of land for transfer to the poor. Dom Helder became ever more deeply involved in President João Goulart's controversial efforts to implement land redistribution and other basic reforms. Conservatives attacked Dom Helder because of his support of literacy and other programs for the poor that some observers feared were inspired by communism. He refused to back the brewing military conspiracy against President Goulart's government, which further disenfranchised many of his old friends among the elite.

Meanwhile, at Vatican II, Dom Helder angered conservative and traditionalist bishops with his progressive positions. In early 1964 ecclesiastical jealousy of Dom Helder's success and suspicions about his politics led to his transfer to the obscure archdiocese of São Luís do Maranhão. The sudden death of another archbishop, however, caused the Church to return Dom Helder to Olinda and Recife. Radical politics and cultural movements had flourished in Recife for years, making it one of the most important cities of the Third World and drawing the attention of U.S. government officials worried about revolutionary upheaval in Latin America. On March 31, 1964, the Brazilian army overthrew President Goulart, thus beginning twenty-one years of repressive martial rule. The U.S. government quickly recognized the military officers who came to power by deposing a democratically elected government as Brazil's legitimate political representatives. Later in the year the Brazilian bishops voted to replace Dom Helder's faction in the CNBB with a more conservative leadership.

At first, Dom Helder took a wait-and-see approach toward the military regime, hoping to keep open channels of dialogue and possible collaboration. Unlike many on the left, Dom Helder did not have prejudices against the military. He considered himself a pastor to all people. General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, the first military president of the new regime, liked his fellow *cararens* Dom Helder and even after 1964 went to hear some of his sermons. Although Dom Helder accepted dialogue with Marxism and defended the rights of political prisoners held by the regime, he continued to oppose communism—but never in the truculent, intolerant manner of the right. He wanted to pre-empt communism with a nonviolent, Catholic, and humanistic social revolution in which the government would promote the well-being of all its citizens, effect the radical transformation of society, and maintain Brazil's independence from foreign powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union. At the same time, Dom Helder was well aware that the Church itself was not capable of creating or leading a socialist regime. Socialism could develop only through the efforts of politics and civil society, and it had to maintain its independence of the superpowers. The Church should not trade neo-Christendom for a socialist Christendom.

Yet Cold War fears and hatred blinded both members of the left and right to the peaceful political middle ground offered by Dom Helder. The growing conflict between Catholic progressivism and the military regime's oppressive anti-Communist national security policy seriously undermined Church-state relations. Military officers and conservatives now branded Dom Helder a "Communist," the "Red bishop." In the northeast, especially around Recife, the army unleashed the worst repression of the immediate post-coup period. Dom Helder aided the persecuted while continuing to speak out against injustice. President Castelo Branco and other moderates tried to reduce tensions with the Church, but many military hard-liners disliked the activist clergy and stepped up their attacks against the Church of the Poor and Dom Helder. Conservatives frequently accused him of encouraging violence in his critiques of inequality. The popularity of Cuban revolutionary leader Ernesto "Che" Guevara who died organizing Bolivian guerrillas, the revolutionary Colombian priest Camillo Torres, and others increased the appeal of violence as a solution to the political and developmental impasse of the Third World.

Dom Helder recognized the violence present in Latin America, yet he increasingly emphasized nonviolence as the solution. Some on the left criticized his "pacifist" attitude toward the military regime. Perhaps naively, in 1967 he outlined a plan to form a third political party—the Partido do Desenvolvimento Integral (Party of Total Development)—as

an alternative to the two official parties allowed by the military to function after it abolished all traditional ones in 1965. In 1968, Dom Hélder officially launched a movement called "Action, Justice, and Peace," partially modeled on the work of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The movement foundered, however, because of deepening political polarization and military censorship.

In mid-1968 the Latin American Church made its clearest, most mature statement about the kind of society it envisioned for the region. Bishops representing the area met in Medellín, Colombia, to study how Vatican II's conclusions might be applied locally. Dom Hélder led the other delegates in forging a proposition for radical but peaceful social transformation in the region. They denounced the "institutionalized violence" inherent in social inequality and the oppressive social structures of Latin American nations that victimized the poor. They also promoted the creation of *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, or Grassroots Church Communities. In these small groups humble Catholics came together to reflect on the importance of the faith in their daily lives and political struggles. This methodology became known throughout Latin America as *conscientização*, or consciousness-raising. The Medellín conference marked the birth of Liberation Theology, which became the ideological foundation of the Church of the Poor. The Medellín statement led many priests, nuns, and lay volunteers across Latin America to become activists for the poor and to oppose authoritarianism. The Brazilian military regime considered the document to be susceptible to manipulation by Communist revolutionaries. Yet the generals failed to understand that Church leaders held the Medellín meeting as part of its own strategy to contain communism and encourage social reform rather than violent revolution. In line with Dom Hélder's own beliefs, the declaration emphasized nonviolence.

In December 1968 the Brazilian generals decreed full dictatorship by suspending civil liberties and freedom of the press, closing the National Congress, and allowing the security forces free rein against not only the growing antigovernment guerrilla movement but against peaceful opponents of the regime as well. Again, Dom Hélder tried to give the military a chance to prove its good intentions. But torture had become routine at military interrogation centers. Dom Hélder himself came under intense scrutiny by military and police intelligence. His home was riddled with machine-gun fire, and in May 1969 a right-wing death squad brutally murdered one of his young priests. In November 1969 the security forces assassinated Carlos Marighella, a violent revolutionary considered Public Enemy No. 1 by the regime. In the process they jailed and tortured Dominican friars and other priests accused of collaborating

with Marighella, who wanted to overthrow the military and install a socialist government. Among the detainees was Father Marcelo Carvalheira, one of Dom Hélder's assistants and today the vice president of the CNBB. The intelligence community unsuccessfully tried to use the incident to link Dom Hélder to the violence.

In May 1970, Dom Hélder attacked the government by denouncing the existence of torture to the world in a public speech in Paris. The decision to speak out was perhaps the most controversial of his life. Since 1964, Dom Hélder had worked for the release of political prisoners and had visited them in jail. In Recife he publicly denounced torture by the political police. Yet at no time had he commented on torture abroad, where he was well known. Dom Hélder specifically mentioned the case of Tito de Alencar Lima, one of the imprisoned Dominicans. Friar Tito was brutally tortured by the security forces and, unable to recover psychologically, later committed suicide.

The Paris speech was unthinkable for Brazil's military leaders. Proud of an "economic miracle" that made their nation one of the world's fastest growing, they dismissed critics as "bad Brazilians" and adapted the propaganda phrase used by conservatives in the United States: "Brazil: Love it or leave it." The generals became locked in a battle with the Church over Brazil's foreign image and the redefinition of patriotism as the country became an industrial power. The generals increasingly considered defense of human rights to be subversion.

Dom Hélder's denunciation of torture was one of his biggest contributions to peace and social justice. It helped to solidify the Church's new position in favor of human rights and made the theme an issue in international politics and diplomacy. But it also infuriated the generals and wrecked his ecclesiastical career. The Paris speech brought down a rain of criticism in Brazil. The press and conservative intellectuals engaged in an intensive smear campaign against Dom Hélder. Then the dictators prohibited any further mention of the archbishop in the media. They also used diplomatic channels to prevent him from winning the Nobel Peace Prize. It was as if Dom Hélder no longer existed. Bureaucrats of the Vatican, the central authority of Church government in Rome, also tried to restrict Dom Hélder's movements. By now he was far too controversial to become a cardinal, a high post he surely deserved but which the military regime opposed. Dom Hélder strategically retreated from internal Brazilian politics and concentrated on making speeches abroad, where he continued to draw attention for his support of peace and justice. At a meeting of Church leaders in São Paulo he passed the mantle of defender of human rights to Archbishop Paulo Evaristo Arns, who in the 1970s became the most outspoken critic within Brazil of the regime's

violations of human rights. Only in 1977, after the regime began to relax censorship, did a Brazilian newspaper once again interview Dom Hélder.

Despite fears of assassination, Dom Hélder maintained his calm during the difficult 1970s by remaining a man of simplicity, peace, and deep spirituality. His quest for peace relied on the daily exercise of basic values not always easy for human beings to practice: kindness, patience, respect, humility, humor, willingness to learn from young people and the poor, and, when necessary, silence. Dom Hélder symbolized the Christian, nonviolent face of the Brazilian left as many students and activists in the 1960s and early 1970s lost patience and turned to armed struggle as a way to fight the military and transform society. The atheistic revolutionary left nevertheless admired Dom Hélder for his courage in criticizing the military regime.

Many of the innovations anticipated in Dom Hélder's earlier work came to fruition in the 1970s. These were the heroic years of the Church of the Poor. The CNBB and many individual bishops outspokenly defended human rights and advocated socioeconomic equality. Inspired by Catholic Action and reinforced by the Medellín declaration, the Grassroots Church Communities multiplied, and Brazilian Liberation Theologians published prolifically. Liberation Theology became one of the most important religious schools of thought in twentieth-century world Catholicism. In addition to the Pastoral Land Commission, the Church established the Indigenous Missionary Council to protect Brazil's native peoples from exploitation. The Church gave key support to the development of a labor movement independent of the government-controlled unions first set up in the 1930s and emasculated of all significant leadership after the coup of 1964. As a result of these and other initiatives, the Church became a primary force in the broad opposition front that gained strength in the late 1970s and helped to speed the return to civilian rule. Dom Hélder's faith and ethics contributed to other important developments—for example, the fight for women's equality, the trend toward religious diversity and plurality, and the growth of nongovernmental advocacy groups, many of them staffed by Catholic activists.

As archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Dom Hélder presided over important experiments in ecclesial democracy. He maintained his delegative style of governance, relying greatly on a council of laity and priests to run the archdiocese. These and other activists organized a network of grassroots communities known as the Encontro de Irmãos, or Brotherly Meetings. Dom Hélder also set up the Peace and Justice Commission to examine human rights issues.

In seminary training, Dom Hélder oversaw the implementation of one of the most radical experiments in the post-Vatican II Church. He and other bishops established the Seminário Regional do Nordeste II (SERENE II, or Regional Seminary of the Northeast II sector of the CNBB). Instead of living in a large and traditional seminary shut off from the world, SERENE II students were divided up into small residences in the metropolitan area's poor neighborhoods and shantytowns. Some did pastoral work in the vast sugarcane-growing region, where powerful landowners still ruled with an iron fist not unlike the slaveowners of Brazil's colonial era. Others took part in a program called "the theology of the hoe," which trained priests for work among the poor of the backlands. The SERENE II students and other seminarists from the northeast did their academic work at the Instituto Teológico do Recife (ITER, or Theological Institute of Recife).

ITER developed an extraordinarily ecumenical staff who aroused suspicion among more traditional Catholics. It included priests who had left the ministry to marry, radical Church activists, and female professors such as the North American nun Janis Jordan, who lived in a *favela*, and the controversial Brazilian sister and liberationist-feminist writer Ivone Gebara, punished by the Church in the 1990s for her views. ITER had few resources and functioned in a decrepit building, but its teaching staff showed remarkable intellectual productivity. ITER broadened its program to include special classes for lay activists and poor Catholics who wished to study theology and apply its principles in their communities. Thus, in his archdiocese, Dom Hélder and the ITER staff ended the monopoly on theology held by ordained males and chipped away at the stern clericalism that had ruled the Church for centuries.

In 1985 the military left power and Dom Hélder retired as archbishop. The Brazilian Church now felt less need to play its denunciatory role as "the voice of the voiceless" in defense of the poor and victims of human rights abuses. The Church retreated to a more conservative position. This shift occurred partly under pressure from Pope John Paul II, an ardent anti-Communist fearful of leftist influence in the Latin American Church. John Paul II, who became pope in 1978, focused on winning the Cold War for the West and rejected radical approaches to ending Latin America's social ills. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 especially muted the arguments of those in the Church of the Poor who advocated socialism. Another factor was the rise of new political parties, unions, and a plethora of nongovernmental organizations and grassroots groups in a democratic system now free of the violent repression and censorship earlier employed by the military. These movements had largely grown under the protective wing of the Church, but they now took over the



role of speaking for the people. The political climate had changed and the Church of the Poor began to lose steam.

Although he respected Dom Hélder, John Paul II worked to roll back many of the innovations introduced by his Brazilian colleague at Vatican II and in the 1970s. The Vatican's most direct attack on the Church of the Poor came precisely in the archdiocese of Olinda and Recife, where Dom Hélder's conservative replacement, Dom José Cardoso Sobrinho, dismantled many of his programs and punished or suspended a number of progressive priests. In a move that at best can only be termed insensitive in light of the recent dictatorial era, Dom José called out the police on several occasions to enforce his ecclesiastical policies against groups of Catholics who protested. In addition, in 1989 the Vatican ordered the closing of SERENE II and ITER. It was one of the most painful moments for Dom Hélder and the history of the Church of the Poor in all of Latin America. Throughout these incidents, Dom Hélder once again remained calm and, unlike his time of conflict with the military regime, spoke little about them. He continued his simple, unassuming lifestyle until his death in 1999.

Dom Hélder was a major Latin American religious figure and leader of great popularity. He captured the hearts of the people through his charisma and piety. Like most bishops, Dom Hélder was a politician who built links to the rich and powerful, yet he had the rare gift of appealing to all groups, including students, revolutionaries, and the press. Until 1964 even conservatives liked Dom Hélder. He ultimately renounced the seductive temptations of power and ecclesiastical honors. Had he played the game, Dom Hélder could have become a cardinal, and, had he danced with the military, perhaps even archbishop of Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo. He rejected these possibilities in order to side with the poor.<sup>6</sup>

More than any other bishop, Dom Hélder was responsible for the modernization and political transformation of the Brazilian Church. Catholic values changed. They kept in step not only with a rapidly growing Brazil but also with the moral and social concerns that arose out of economic progress. Even after the conservative reaction of the 1980s and 1990s, the Church remained sensitive to social issues and unafraid to criticize the government when it failed to show concern for the national interest or the fate of the poor.

In a century filled with international conflict and ideological polarization, Dom Hélder made the transition from advocate of violence to peacemaker. His struggle for economic development, social progress, human rights, and greater equality among nations largely defined the Church of the Poor and had an impact on Catholics around the world. Dom Hélder embodied human humility and fraternity. Yet he helped

Brazil and other Third World nations assert themselves within the great human community by giving a voice to the poor.

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## CHAPTER 14

*Madame Satã (Satan)*

The Black "Queen" of Rio's Bohemia

JAMES N. GREEN

The reader briefly met Madame Satã in Chapter 7. He was the cross-dressing malandro (streetwise hustler) who landed the punch that killed his fellow malandro and samba composer Geraldo Pereira in a street altercation. Who was this cross-dressing thing? Madame Satã often dressed and behaved like a woman to proclaim his sexual tastes and his public rejection of respectable norms. For Satã, the title "Madame" had an ironic twist that associated his black masculinity with the travesty world of prostitution, where French women traditionally provided the high-priced intimacy prized by many Brazilian men of means. Even Madame Satã lashed out when others first began to call him this name. Despite stereotypes that we might have about cross-dressing men, Madame Satã was far from stigmatized. He could strike fear even in the burly hearts of Rio's sadistic cops, who sometimes brutalized other men who dressed as women on the streets of Rio's downtown neighborhood and nighttime hotspot of Lapa, where Madame Satã, when not in jail, preferred to hang out.

Professor James N. Green's analysis highlights the changing sensibilities and nostalgia that later made Madame Satã into a celebrated figura (character) of Rio's nightlife and underworld in ways that would have been hard to imagine when Madame was a younger man. In the 1960s and 1970s the youth of Brazil, as in other parts of the world, became disillusioned with traditional ideas of patriotism and conformity to protest government indifference to many of the injustices of the day. While many young people in the United States focused their protests around the civil rights struggle and the war in Vietnam, in Brazil they protested an authoritarian military regime that came to power in 1964 after overthrowing an elected democratic government. Under Brazil's twenty-year military dictatorship, censorship, the suspension of civil rights, the violent suppression of public protests, and the incarceration, torture, and murder of suspected Communist subversives angered many young Brazilians who sought to criticize military rule. Well-heeled young people more generally joined prohibited acts of protest where they became subject to the police brutality usually reserved for Brazil's poor. In the 1970s the hip, upper-middle-class journalists of the counterculture newspaper Pasquim fought government censorship with biting parody to offer alternative views in a stilted