

CHAPTER NINE

THE HIERARCHY AND ROMERO'S CHAPEL

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The following morning, June 16, the schedule called for a 9 A.M. audience with Arturo Rivera y Damas, the ninth Bishop and the fifth Archbishop of El Salvador, named to the position after the 1980 assassination of Oscar Romero.

“When Romero’s predecessor died,” said Sinclair, referring to Archbishop Chavez, “the choice for bishop was between Damas and Romero. At the time, it was thought that Romero was much more conservative and Damas much more liberal. But the two men worked closely together. After Romero’s death, Damas was the most important influence to bring together the opposition. He’s thoughtful, deliberate, and he’s excited about his relationship to SHU.”

The relationship Sinclair referred to had started when our university conferred an honorary doctorate on Damas on May 17, 1990 for his work with the poor. At the same time it was hoped that the conferral of the degree would send a message of solidarity to the people of El Salvador following the assassination of the Jesuits at the UCA in 1989.

In the Archbishop’s offices, we were ushered into a room with a large conference table. Damas, a short, trim, fit-looking man in his late 60s, dressed in gray slacks, a white shirt with clerical collar, and

a dark gray jacket, walked in and stood at the head of the table, a welcoming smile on his face.

"Your Excellency," Trebon began, "we are very pleased to be here. The President of our university, Dr. Anthony Cerna, has asked me to give you this letter with greetings from him."

Damas took the letter and sat down, folded his hands on his lap, and looked directly at each of us as we introduced ourselves.

"We have come here to find out what has happened in the last few months," said Sinclair. "We know you have had a large part in the activities of recent times."

"We are very pleased to be able to receive you," he said. Then he turned to Sinclair. "Maybe it would be better if we translated," he added, indicating a preference to speak in Spanish.

With that, Sinclair filled him in on our visits to Tierra Blanca, Nueva Esperanza, and the National University, then mentioned our scheduled visit the next day to Calle Real, the community where Fr. Dave Blanchard worked.

"David Blanchard, who is in the parish, has done much writing about the situation in this country," Damas said, "and it seems he has much material to publish some books."

Interview with Damas

I think there are two aspects to consider in El Salvador. Peace and social justice are very important. And the relationship between the two has much to do with our chances for peace. The lack of these two things caused much of our problem. And the doctrines of the National Security and the Marxist and Leninist responses of the FMLN have created much of our problems.

We are trying to implement the peace accords, which end on the 31st of October. Two bodies have been charged with the supervision of the accords, and there is good will, but there are concerns about the delays.

The other area which needs much attention is the area of human and spiritual values. Our crisis came from a lack

of values, where a party tried to impose its values on an entire country. International pressure, facilitated by the signing of the agreements, pressure that must be continually brought to bear on these people, will give both sides the political will to achieve peace.

Q) What can Sacred Heart University do?

A) To help our situation, I think it would be best if you worked through an institution here, another university, and worked for peace. Then you could work together for a lasting reform. That is what occurs to me at this time.

Q) Your excellency, which university would be willing to help us?

A) The university with the most prestige is UCA, the Jesuit University. Also Einstein University and the Technical Universities. Also the bishops have a university in Santa Ana. However, size is not important.

Q) I wonder if you could talk about the National University and the fact that they are working with people in the country.

A) The National University [UES], is the largest. They probably have thirty-five thousand students, and we have a friendly relationship with them. I didn't mention them because of the politicization on the side of the left. There are efforts to correct this problem, but we are too early in the process to judge their efforts.

Q) Could you define the term "*mystica*" for us?

A) There is a great sense of religiosity among the people. They practice many devotions. The Vatican II Council has tried to enrich our religion even through the years of the conflict. The people are very persistent. They will not allow themselves to be beaten down. The Christian-based communities that started ten years ago were very politicized. They fed into the armed resistance. One was aligned to the ERP, the Revolutionary People's Army, and the other to the FPL, this was the popular church. But these were more the exception than the rule.

The other component is that they have served to contain the growth of fundamentalist sects.

Q) What are the rich doing to help the peace process?

A) Communities of faith take place in the parishes of the wealthy, but not with the same vitality. The Churches have approved that the accords be followed, and we are trying to see that this happens. We also try to promote the encyclicals. Last year we held a week long conference on *Rerum Novarum*. Also there is social doctrine given each week at the end of the homily, and this is roundly rejected by the wealthy.

The former administration of government, the Christian Democrats, implemented many structural reforms. The present government had done away with many of these reforms. But the peace agreements have supported those reforms, especially with land distribution. The land should be passed over to the people where the FMLN are. In these places, there is very strong discussion about redistribution measures where the owners are selling to the people. The people are trying to buy the land.

There will be better distribution of the land, but not everything relies on land. But it is an important part of the problem. It is very important that the land reform be peaceful. So there is pressure on those who don't rely on the land to sell it to the people who subsist on the land. And this gives me hope for the future of our country.

Education is something very dear to all of us here. We see that the richness of life is the person. The person's development is an integral process of body and soul. And education is the way to develop the people. The war has been expensive in costs to health and the education of the people. Just this last week the teachers' union is on strike, which I believe is an injustice because it tramples on the rights of the students to learn.

Q) Are you still perceived as a liberal leader in the church for the cause of peace?

A) In El Salvador, the archbishop has been close to the people. Monseñor Gonsalves, Monseñor Romero and I have tried to continue this closeness to the people based on the Christian idea that the person is created in the image of Christ, and the people confide in their pastors.

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The session over, we thanked Damas, and walked down the hall to meet with Rafeal Uriotia, the heavy-set, garrulous Chancellor of the Archdiocese and Director of the Social Secretariat, who spoke about the church's efforts during and after the war, and its roles in the evolving national dialogue.

Rafeal Uriotia's Talk

I give courses, and I work in a parish in the afternoons and evenings. I'm also entrusted with the cause of the canonization of Monseñor Romero. And occasionally I go to the beach . . . when I sleep.

In the area of social work, we have four or five things going on at the same time. There is much work to be done for the people. The General Secretariat has about eighty-five people. Our current projects include leadership, administration, a program for permanent housing (rebuilding after the earthquake), health promotion, program and project design, and educational work in the communities.

Our fundamental work is based on humanitarian assistance: health, housing, food and nutrition, and basic utensils. Basically it involves people going back to their homes after the war, the repatriated people. We have programs for health and permanent housing, programs of agriculture for self-subsistence, programs for the promotion of women, and a school for appropriate technology. We also support the housing and food needs of FMLN

combatants in their areas, along with the support of CARITAS [Catholic Relief Services]. And then there is what the Archbishop has asked me to do. So this is how eighty-five people keep busy. In all of this we are looking to train our staff here and in other countries.

Through the twelve years of the war we have not accepted any money for humanitarian assistance because it was not appropriate to accept money from a country that was also supporting the war. The U.S. government has supported a political regime. But the exploitation of the poor has been alarming, and there is a cry for social reform. For example, the government in power can't impose a tax on rich companies for a source of income for the government. Couldn't tax them in any way. So they have a graduated sales tax, and the harm falls on the poor people.

After the Jesuits were killed, we refused to accept any money which at its root made us silent or that would not allow us to look for justice. The gospel values are not to be negotiated, not with sister Church. Not by the government nor by any amount of money. Now we are open to talk about other services. But often our values and principles are not respected. Even the Catholic Relief Services adopted a stance that was pro government, and we did not accept their intent. The money is good, but we cannot allow the hurt of our people.

Here are two examples. Catholic Relief Services placed certain restrictions on their credit loan programs. We base credit at ten point two percent. They wanted fifteen point five percent. And each community would need a letter from the mayor. I was responsible to see that the letters were signed by all the mayors. Then they wanted to have the names of all the people who would be the beneficiaries. But that is very dangerous. Even in this moment of peace, we know that people are being pulled from their houses and being killed. So these are some of the problems stipulated by AID [Agency for International Development]. The Church

has a history of helping people and we are proud of that. We want any aid that comes to respect our perspective, and to respect the people and not abuse them.

Anything that you can do for the National University means a great deal. The Catholic University has other ways to help. But the National University is much more in need of help.

In the office on the wall is a map which shows the settlements where the FMLN are located. We wanted to see how the settlements were divided up in the diocese. Because of the history of the Church, it never assumed its historical role. In 1981 the archbishop created the Social Secretariat. I'm the second. The first was forced to leave the country in 1989. The Salvadoran branch of CARITAS never looked to the problems of the war. So Romero founded this Social Secretariat which now attends to all the victims of the country.

We are a channeling agency for so many things. We were seen in a bad light by the government and half of the bishops. We are looked upon as Communists, as friends of the FMLN and dangerous people. In January the European community looked to us to provide for the needs of the FMLN. In January Damas was named President of the Bishops Board. Based on that we sent a proposal to CARITAS to work in the camps. We did not want to take on this work unless CARITAS also did. And if this work is considered Communistic, then let's get the whole Church involved.

For women, we have productive programs, programs that would help to raise their spirit in the face of the *machismo* of the Salvadoran people. But mostly our work is with the widowed women, to get them productive work.

Since the signing of the accords, the violations of human rights have decreased tremendously. There have been cases, but most are viewed as isolated cases. In a situation of so much military structure, it is difficult for the military to even control itself. At the mid-level commands,

they can take actions. But I think little by little, we are learning what it means to live in a democracy. It means not just to vote. And this is thanks to all the social structures and to the war, unfortunately.

For us, the government economic policies are seen as an exploitation of the poor. People in government would refer to it as the gains brought about by neo-liberalism. For the people in power, the policies of neo-liberalism have brought the goods. Even during the war, production increased, and people got more money. Even now when President Cristiani comes to power. But it has helped only a few, especially the rich.

In our history the Salvadoran people are idiosyncratically capitalistic. We are naturally pushed toward private property. We are a business people one hundred percent. If you lose your job, the next day you are out driving cars. Salvadorans don't die of hunger. They work, or they organize to make war. We are looking for a system that is capitalistic, but that respects the rights of the workers, not only those of the owners. If in El Salvador we don't create the basis for social justice in the next twenty years, then there will be another war.

On the causes of the war, clearly the land ownership is one of the principle causes. But also the exploitation of the *campesinos* is the other. And the *campesinos* made the war.

The Chancellor's wide-ranging talk, emphasizing the initiatives of the Church for the poor in the postwar era, reinforced much of what we had already seen and read about. Admitting that not everyone in the hierarchy was "on board" with the message, nevertheless the Church was attempting to walk in the shoes of the people, championing economic and spiritual welfare, and positioning itself at the forefront of the drive for justice.

For lunch we ate at a courtyard restaurant in the heart of San Salvador, across the street from a building painted white with a sign announcing "*Academy Sagrado Corazon*" [Sacred Heart Academy].

Instantly, the cameras popped out, with members of our group intent on capturing a photo of our namesake institution, complete with razor wire strung across the roof of the building. A circular to the right of the Academy's front door listed the subjects: "*Corte y Confeccion*," "*Bordardo a Maquina*," and "*Capacitation en Macquinas Industriales*" [preparatory courses in sewing and industrial machines].

"Not exactly our curriculum back on campus," someone observed. Inside several girls sat in front of sewing machines stitching pieces of cloth, training to become seamstresses, hoping for a sought-after position in a maquina factory – notorious for long hours, poor wages, and lack of workers' rights.

"These trade-oriented academies offer their students a better chance to support themselves," said Sinclair. "But the salaries provide little more than a subsistence living."

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Driving to the Chapel of the Divine Providence, where Archbishop Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980, we passed through an affluent section of the city with manicured lawns and tropical trees surrounding gated mansions with high cement walls topped with razor wire, guarded by armed uniformed personnel.

Up a long drive the meticulously groomed grounds of the chapel and cancer hospital were bathed in sunlight. As we left the van and made our way toward the chapel, we couldn't help but recognize the reverential atmosphere about the place where only a dozen years ago the unspeakable had occurred.

"The man who did it was a dentist in town," Sinclair said. "He was hired, probably by the military."

Many people, he explained, including diplomats in El Salvador, believed that Roberto d'Aubuisson, a right-wing radical and former National Guard officer and one-time national intelligence chief who studied in the U.S. at the International Police Academy in Washington, ordered the assassination. Dismissed from the military in October of 1979, and arrested in 1980 after an unsuccessful coup attempt, he returned to found the ARENA party in 1981.

“Romero’s assassin was known as a marksman,” Sinclair added, “and he never admitted to who had paid him. Romero had just made his famous homily asking the military to stop killing their brothers and sisters.”

In a pew halfway down the center aisle, I stared at the sanctuary blanketed with fresh flowers, and the plaque marking where Romero had fallen, and felt I had come face to face with the nexus of good and evil – where the life of a revered prince of the church ended with the crack of an assassin’s rifle.

“I want to tell you that Romero had a profound effect on me,” McAllister wrote later as he wrestled with his visit to the chapel. “I still don’t know what happened in the chapel, but Romero has changed my life.”

As we filed out of the chapel, Sinclair stopped to talk to a nun. “Would it be possible for us to visit Romero’s house?” he asked.

“This is not a usual time for visitors,” she said.

He explained about our delegation and our purpose for visiting El Salvador, and the nun agreed that “an exception would be made.”

She led us from the chapel to a modest cottage behind a low stone wall with a small front garden, a grotto with a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and a white pedestal supporting a bronze bust of Romero.

Inside was a micro-museum. Pictures hung on the walls of the front room, and the vestments Romero wore when he was shot were displayed in a glass case. His blood had turned dark with age.

When the nun escorted us to Romero’s tiny bedroom with its simple cot and writing table, it became clear that, as much as was possible in his daily life, this man of God had moved away from the trappings of his ecclesiastical office to live in monastic simplicity.