

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FMF-21
Northeast Brazil: Violence

Fortaleza, Ceará
Brazil
14 November 1968

Richard H. Nolte, Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

"Every man, Christian or not, has a portion of violence within him."

From this phrase, scribbled on a blackboard, jagged arrows were chalked in all directions, probably to illustrate the diverse expressions which this inherent violence may take. I studied the graffiti as I waited in the office of Padre Crespo, a priest active in the rural syndicate movement in the Northeast, and I wondered what had been the topic of the discussion predicated on the omnipresence of violence.

But, the reference did not surprise me. The fact of violence and the talk of violence is commonplace in Northeast Brazil. Its significance has been amplified and refined until it encompasses a far larger area than the traditional concept of direct physical aggression.

In my conversation this year with Dom Hélder Câmara, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda (subject of FMF-8), I found him overwhelmingly preoccupied with violence as a burgeoning force in the Brazilian society. Last year, he was already concerned with its rise, but it did not consume his thinking as it did this year. His main comment to me in October 1967 was:

"I foresee that I will be the Martin Luther King of Brazil—that in their frustration with the lack of progress and reform our people will move beyond peaceful and lawful solutions. Our best young people are now convinced that violence is the only solution. I will not be a part of violence. I will be swept aside just as Martin Luther King has been in the U.S., and the radical leaders will take over."

Six months later, when King was assassinated, Dom Hélder was not the only one to suggest that their deaths might be similar. While in Rome in late April, he commented to a group of Brazilian seminarists, "My elimination is easier than you might imagine, and it could be that my visit to Rome this time will be my last."

When this comment appeared in the press, a flap ensued and Dom Hélder explained:

"Please understand—what I wanted to do was clarify non-violence. As a proof that non-violence did not signify passivity

or cowardliness, I cited the fact that the apostle of non-violence fell assassinated. When I was asked if I too ran this risk, I said there was no doubt...but with no intent of being dramatic...I wanted only to demonstrate that non-violence is not as innocuous as it seems."

Talking with me, Dom Hélder explained that in his visit to Rome he had found the Pope very worried about the growing tendency to resort to physical violence in Latin America. Dom Hélder agreed that violence prevails, but not just the physical confrontations of a guerrilla uprising or a street demonstration but---even more pervasive and more destructive---an institutionalized violence sired by a structure which allows 100% infant mortality in some municipalities, a slow but sure starvation of millions, a subservience of the masses to a privileged few, a denial of educational opportunities to a marginal majority, a law enforcement system defending the interests of a small power elite, etc.

Dom Hélder comprehends the impatience of intellectuals, students, peasant leaders, etc., who have become convinced that the only way to combat the institutionalized violence is with physical violence. But as a pacific man he cannot accept this as the only solution, and he does not believe it can resolve the problem.

In Rome he offered to found a movement which would counter the violence at large in the society---both physical and institutionalized. Dom Hélder's plea is:

"Just give me a few years to try the non-violent way---if it doesn't work, the fault is not mine."

Whether the forces for change allow the few years is a moot point. In the meantime, Dom Hélder tries to stave off the physical solutions by arguing the unlikelihood of their success:

"Even my friends who favor the route of violence agree that it will not work now. The masses are not ready. We must first conscientizar the common people (see explanation, FMM-20, p. 7).

Just the day before we talked, Dom Hélder had gone out to the Pernambucan village of Cabo where the peasants were staging a strike. His visit there had given great moral support, but he himself was visibly taken aback by the encounter.

"One cannot call them people, they are masses---misery has reduced them to a subhuman level, the system has dehumanized them. They were like human cattle---so poor, so defenseless that all were in panic to know where they would get food to feed their families the next day."

Without the support of the masses there can be no effective resistance. In addition, Dom Hélder is sure that the two major world powers would not allow any uprising of the people in Latin America:



Dom Helder Câmara

"We know that if there were a movement of (physical) violence here, Brazil would be crushed immediately, either by the United States which will not permit a new Cuba, or by the U.S.S.R. To change one for the other of those two powers would all be the same, as neither of the two serve for Brazilians."

Dom Hélder is known for his anti-U.S. views, but he is also critical of the Soviet Union. He feels that both are equally selfish—lavishing huge amounts on arms and space races while the world starves, maneuvering between themselves to maintain their own areas of supremacy, resorting to military might to subdue any independent ambitions of other peoples, etc.

This critical view of both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. is not peculiar to Dom Hélder. It is increasingly evident among Brazilians concerned with the world situation and their country's development: according to their redefinition, the basic conflict in the world today is not communism vs. capitalism, is not ideological, but rather is between the developed and the underdeveloped nations, between the rich and the poor. This concept was confirmed by the uncooperative attitude of the developed nations at the UNCTAD meeting in New Delhi. And the cynics even suggest that there is a gentleman's agreement between the two powers—that each may dominate in its sphere of influence—this explaining, for instance, the lack of U.S. action in the case of Czechoslovakia.

To better set forth this disdain for both the great powers on the part of the "Third World", I quote certain passages from a feature in the moderate newspaper, Jornal do Brasil. The October 1968 article was entitled: "Recommending the Simultaneous Destruction of the Kremlin and the White House".

"Since the 11th of October, a Soviet trawler was seen from the bow of the aircraft carrier Essex which at a determined point in the Atlantic awaits the descent of Apollo-7.

"It was the two great powers, always close to each other, carrying out a planetary and interplanetary escalation. The United States and the Soviet Union battle to conquer the moon. Probably, when they arrive there, half of the moon will be communist and the other half capitalist.

"Here, on earth, the North American negro athletes continue raising their fists in the Olympics while the Czechs give up their liberty and their honor to the cannons of the Kremlin.

"Russians and North Americans proceed as if they were invaders from Mars. They are of another race, another civilization. This planet is a colony which they exploit shamelessly and whose inhabitants—us—as the inferior beings that we are, can continue dying of hunger in our sun-baked and noisy craters.

"The present politics of the two great powers is the most immoral

fact of the century, excepting the massacre of the Jews by Nazi Germany...It is necessary to declare war on international egotism.

"What difference does it make to reach the moon if the negroes have their hearts consumed by hate? What difference do the latest technological conquests make if authors are subjected to forced labor? But someday these will pay dearly for this indifference, this violence, this injustice..."

"What a beautiful dream, though naive! If it were possible to destroy simultaneously both the Kremlin and the White House!..."

In Paris after his Rome visit, Dom Hélder delivered a lecture entitled "Violence: the Only Option?" which was given first-page coverage in Le Monde and was described as "one of the most serious documents of our epoch" by the leftist Brazilian journal, Última Hora:

"How to avoid the growing breach between the developed world and the underdeveloped world? Today 85%---tomorrow 90%---condemned to misery in order to make possible the super-comfort of 15%---tomorrow 10%---of the satiated. Who can not then comprehend the urgency of a structural revolution...?"

"In the moment of asking if the structural revolution, which the whole world needs, presupposes violence, it is necessary to observe that violence already exists and is exercised, sometimes unconsciously, by those same people who denounce it as a scourge of society.

"It exists in the underdeveloped world: the masses in a subhuman situation are violated by small groups of the privileged, the powerful ...if these masses consider becoming people and exert themselves to gain a basic education and a consciousness of themselves; if they organize themselves in syndicates or cooperatives, their leaders are labeled subversives and communists. (The ones with power) comment correctly: 'They are rebels against the established disorder...they are outlaws (to the laws we have created)...they must be done away with so that order reigns: order-disorder!'"

"The option of non-violence, if it is rooted in the Word, is based also on reality. Do you want realism? Then I say to you: if in whatever corner of the world, but above all in Latin America, a violent explosion goes off, you can be sure that, immediately, the Great Powers will arrive. Even without declaration of war, the Super-potencies will be there, and we will have a new Viet Nam. Want even more realism? Exactly because it is essential that we realize a structural revolution, it is indispensable first to promote a 'cultural revolution'; but in a new sense. If the mentalities do not change profoundly, the structural reforms...will remain on paper, useless... While we try to exercise a moral pressure on those responsible for the situation of our people, let us try to prepare ourselves for our responsibilities of tomorrow and to help the masses become people. You know very well that material and physical underdevelopment involves intellectual, moral and spiritual underdevelopment."

Dom Hélder returned from Europe and with the support of 43 Brazilian bishops, he organized a non-violent movement to further the "cultural revolution". First called Moral Pressure, the name was changed to Action, Justice and Peace, and the movement was launched in Recife on October 2---marking the centennial of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi. With the stimulus of Dom Hélder it was established shortly thereafter in other Brazilian cities---São Paulo, Santos, João Pessoa, Campina Grande. Its basic document stated that the movement was aimed not at the Government but at the structure and that it was firmly committed to non-violence:

"In the Latin American context, non-violence should manifest itself by an attitude of nonconformity with the injustices practiced under diverse forms and pretexts. In addition, this nonconformity will express itself by a constant and courageous action to obtain profound, urgent and audacious reforms of the structure---as rapidly as possible---Without this, violence sooner or later will be inescapable and, in fact, it is one of the temptations of the moment."

Before an audience of 3000 on the night of October 2, Dom Hélder elaborated his theme of the necessity of immediate non-violent action in order to forestall violence:

"Many Latin American governments, perhaps without realizing and without caring, are preparing an explosion worse than the nuclear bombs, worse than the H-Bomb: the M-Bomb, the bomb of misery.

"The M-Bomb is prepared by those who cower before the Powerful and the Privileged and make a show of elaborating reform laws and creating organs to execute them, but who afterwards leave the situation as it is to see if it won't take care of itself.

"The M-Bomb is prepared by those who fear the conscientização of the masses and who try to stop it by accusations---carping and now ridiculous---of subversion and communism.

"The M-Bomb is prepared by those who try to repress by force the protest of the youth, the workers, the Church as they fulfill their human and Christian obligation to give voice (to the needs and rights) of those who cannot speak.

"This climate of misery which goes on and on and becomes worse, while the rich become richer; this climate of laws and official organs which seem to exist to delude and divert---is driving an ever increasing number of our young people to radicalism and violence---almost always our best youth, the most idealistic and the most pure.

"Brazil and Latin America need the conscientização of their people just as much as roads and electric energy."

"Action, Justice and Peace knows that not all that is legal is

just and not all that is just is respected by the laws of men."

Naturally, Dom Hélder's causes, actions and words are not well received by many. They bring counterattacks from politicians, journalists, landowners, lawyers, Army officers, etc. Most persistent of the charges is that Dom Hélder, if not himself a Communist, is at least an inocente útil (a useful innocent---i.e., a naive person being used by the Communists). A signed column in a Recife newspaper observed in early October how effectively Communists were achieving agitation and subversion by exploiting the "great majority of the students in innumerable countries of the world". But it pointed out that the main thrust of the international intrigue was to gain the participation of the Church "which has now had success in its first stage, notably here in Brazil, where the number of priests, and even bishops, who serve the Communist movement is significant. There can no longer be any doubt that the creative intelligence of Dom Hélder Câmara fulfills perfectly (their purpose) with his plans now being executed---formerly with the same subversive campaign as today but with a less pleasing name of "Moral Pressure"---now with three words forming a suggestive title: "Action, Justice and Peace".

On October 9 the Recife papers carried front-page stories headlining the rumor that Dom Hélder would shortly be taken from Pernambuco and confined in Amazônia. Talking with him late that day, I asked him as we parted if he took the rumor seriously. He laughed and said:

"My opponents know better---think of the reaction of my friends across the country and the world, and (mischievous twinkle in his eye) just think of all the foreign journalists who would come to interview me in Amazônia."

But on the whole---in this, my fourth meeting with Dom Hélder---I found him lacking in the enthusiasm and energy which was so evident in the earlier talks. His eyelids were heavy not with sleep but with fatigue, and his face had a greyish cast. He is short and slightly stooped, and as the two of us sat at the table, I being taller felt compelled to slide down in my chair so that our eyes were at the same level. He is not a man to look down to. His boyish zest surged forth at moments, and I trust that the reason for the weariness was just that it was the end of a particularly full and trying day and after a number of long trips.

The next day, I lunched with an usineiro, the owner of one of the major sugarcane plantations in Pernambuco. When Dom Hélder's name was mentioned, my host said, with relish:

"We're going to send that little priest off to oblivion in the jungles of Amazônia."

The confinement did not take place, nor was the rumor taken seriously by the knowledgeable in Recife or Brazil. Dom Hélder is politically untouchable---were he not, there are forces who

would have rid themselves of this bête noire long ago. It is something of a power play, the Archbishop knowing that his position and international prestige allow him to goad the Establishment to the point of exasperation, and perhaps beyond.

Recently, this frustration on the part of his opponents has been expressed by physical acts. The walls of his residence are painted with insulting slogans. Last month it was machine gunned twice and for several consecutive days, single shots were fired at it from cars passing in broad daylight. On October 30 a guard of two policemen was assigned to protect it.

And so, Northeast Brazil lives increasingly convinced that---

"Every man, Christian or not, has a portion of violence within him."

Sincerely yours,



Frances M. Foland

Photo, p. 3: Fotos e Fatos, 9 May 1968.

Received in New York November 18, 1968.