

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FMF-8

Northeast Brazil: The Archbishop of  
Recife and Olinda

Recife, Pe.  
Brazil  
4 October 1967

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Communist, saint, demagogue, P.R. man---all are epithets applied to Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda, in Northeast Brazil. He is generally conceded to be the most influential and is certainly the most controversial bishop in this, the world's largest Catholic country. At the Ecumenical Council Vatican II, he was the gadfly of the avant-garde; he has been a personal and persuasive friend of Pope Paul VI since, still a simple priest, he approached the then Monsignor Giovanni Montini in 1950 with an ambitious organizational scheme for the Brazilian Church.

Dom Hélder is a man of the times---in the mainstream of the ecumenical spirit, in the forefront of the modernization of structure and content of the Church, and attuned to the reality and rightness of rising expectations. As primate among the churchmen of the poverty-stricken Northeast, seated in a city rife with misery and discontent, he has perhaps the most challenging ecclesiastical assignment in all Latin America. By dint of personality and importance, he is sought after by the Liberal Catholic world, called upon to lecture and confer throughout the United States and Europe. His thoughts and actions represent, almost in exaggeration, the new tendencies which are working to reshape Roman Catholicism.

Consistent with his image of the Church, his own personal style is simple and direct. My first encounter with him was in Recife. As I mounted the worn steps leading into the archiepiscopal palace, I puzzled how I would announce my presence because the antechamber held only an abandoned desk. At that moment a figure in modest black habit emerged from a side door. Having seen photographs, I recognized him to be Dom Hélder, who greeted me with a broad smile and, with the casualness of an old friend, escorted me into a spacious sitting-room, wide open to the sunlight and trade winds of the Northeast. To me, unknown and unrelated to his work, he gave an hour and a half, though it meant he arrived late for an important downtown bank appointment.

He is a big man---in the projection of his personality, the warmth of his smile, the vigor of his speech and gestures, the intensity of his feelings. Physically, he is diminutive---5'4", 120 lbs. His hands are those of a child, thin, smooth and expressive. They are streamers in a breeze---they never rest.

They clutch at the sky, grip one another, coil against his chest—and reach out to grasp the arm of the listener when the words are critical. Likewise, his face is a kaleidoscope of expressions, paced by large eyes, deep-set and dramatized by the surrounding crosshatch of wrinkles. Now 58, he has the appearance of a man who has always been old and yet is ever a boy.

He has charisma, he knows it and he uses it. In fact, he is likely to focus in upon himself; a conversation may become a monologue rather than a dialogue. But it will not be a dull monologue as he jumps into the air like a youngster to emphasize the magnitude of the needs of the Northeast, or he crouches as a fetus against the wall to illustrate the helplessness of the poor before the power of the rich.

He is accessible to all and, of course, the poor flock to him as to a piper. But, paradoxically, he also has a way with the rich. In Rio, where he was Auxiliary Bishop for ten years, he organized the well-to-do housewives into a charitable organization to aid the poor of the favelas (slums). To many of these pious ladies he is a paragon and even a saint.

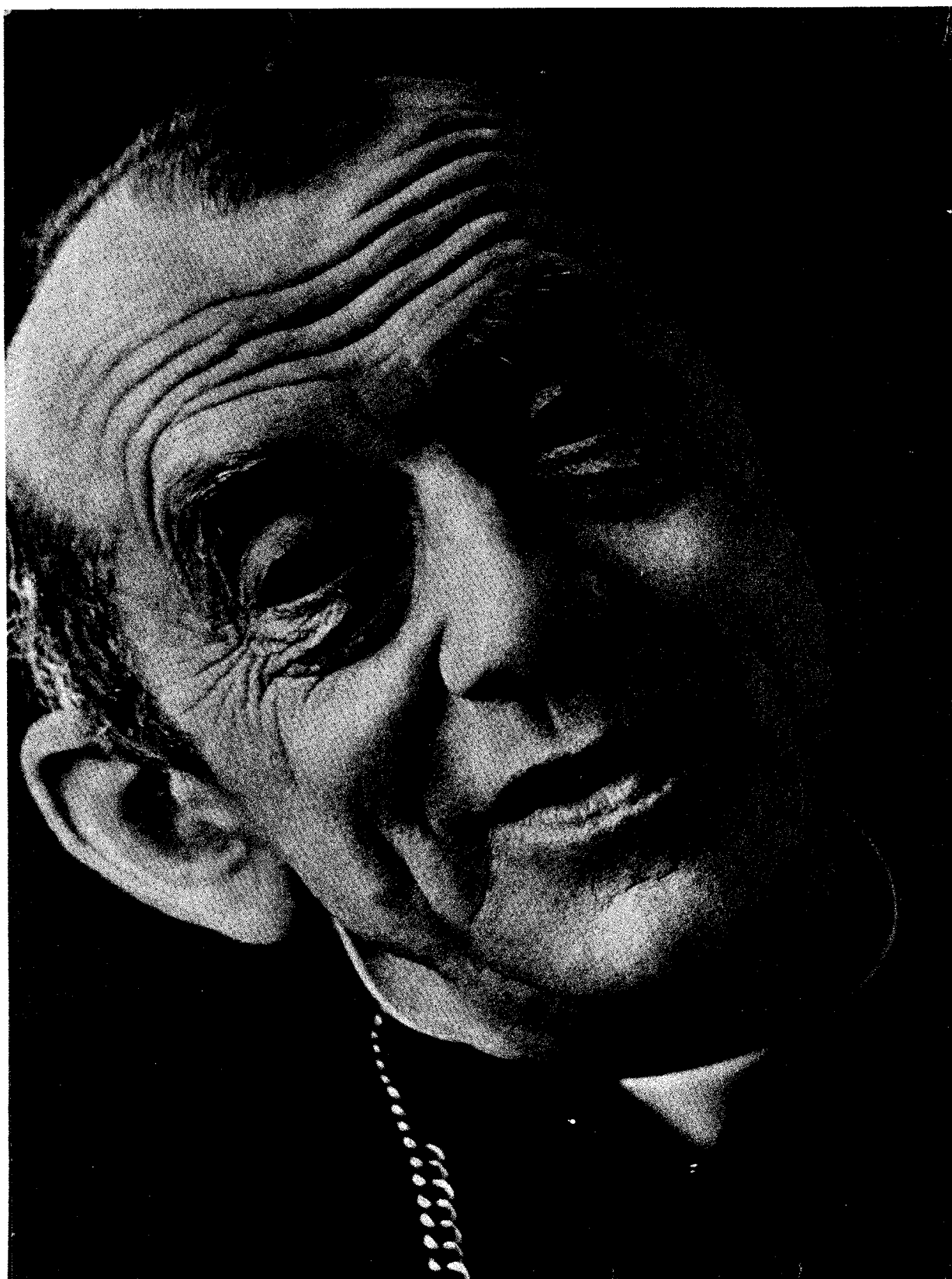
To others of this class he is, at the least, a demagogue. The conservative ex-governor of Guanabara (Rio de Janeiro), Carlos Lacerda, said of him: "He cultivates misery like one cultivates lettuce in his garden." In addition, others revile him as "fellow traveler" and even "Communist".

Unabashed by the charges, Dom Hélder persists in verbal flagellations of the rich and forceful lamentations for the poor. In private conversation, such as I had with him later in New York, his words tumble freely:

"We must build up a dialogue not only to 'conscientize' the poor but also to make the rich aware of their responsibility. I feel sorry for the rich—when I was a child this was a big thing I did not understand about Jesus, his concern for the rich—but now I know that this money they hold is cold and so their hands are cold.

"We go to the poor and we say, 'Man, you must do something about this terrible way you live', and he says, 'But I cannot, I don't know how—there is no way.' And we say, 'Yes, band together, use the intelligence which God has given to you and put your hands to the job.' We try to make him realize that he can help his own situation. But the thing that worries us is that we see all the time that we become poorer and others become richer."

Dom Hélder is quick to call attention to his being labeled



"Communist". His comments about it are mixed with humor and pathos:

"I often use President Kennedy's words because he says what I want---if I use my own words everyone cries 'Communist' ---but if I use his, it's all right."

Or, "How long will the stupid and egotistical belief last that whatever is good for the people is Communist?"

Or, "To defeat Communism we must overcome misery---I say that we must make changes in our ways exactly to keep Marxism from taking us over."

Fear and distrust of Dom Hélder were brought to a head by conditions surrounding Brazil's 1964 change of government--- variously called "golpe", "coup d'etat" and "Revolution". Preceding and during the crisis, he was in Rio, second to that city's archbishop, Dom Jaime Barros Câmara, who is considered the leader of the conservative faction of the bishops. The two of them staged a running battle, contradicting each other and taking opposite stands on issues.

For instance, in April 1963, the Bishops of Brazil issued a declaration entitled "Pacem in Terris and the Brazilian Reality", in conjunction with Pope John XXIII's encyclical. It is hard to imagine how consensus was reached on such an epistle since the hierarchy is split into four major factions: the ultra-reactionaries, the conservatives, the moderates and the progressives. However, against the wishes but with the signatures of the right-wing representatives, including Dom Jaime, the following statement was publicized; there is no doubt that Dom Hélder was instrumental in its drafting:

"Our social order is still debased by the heavy weight of the capitalist tradition that dominated the West in the last centuries. It is an order in which economic power always determines, in the final reckoning, economic, political and social decisions. It is an order in which a minority possesses the means of access to all the cultural opportunities, to an advanced standard of living, of health, of comfort and of luxury; while a majority does not possess these means and is, by that very fact, deprived of the exercise of many of the fundamental and natural rights which are mentioned in the encyclical Pacem in Terris... No one can ignore the situation of millions of our brothers living in the rural areas who cannot share in the development of our nation, who live in conditions of misery which are an affront to human dignity...(Let it be known) that the expropriation of land in such a situation is in no way contrary to the social doctrine of the Church."

Eleven days after the downfall of the Goulart administration on 1 April 1964, Dom Hélder became Archbishop of Recife and Olinda. He thus returned to his home region where he was born in the drought-plagued state of Ceará. His mother a schoolteacher and his father a bookkeeper, he was one of 13 offspring, nine of whom died in childhood.

The appointment of Dom Hélder continues a contemporary trend toward placing church leadership of that region in the hands of those who know it best: "Northeasterners" of lower class upbringing. Not since the 17th century has this been the case. Dom Hélder himself has six vicars, all of whom are Northeasterners educated in the Northeast. This homogeneity has the effect of intensifying the concern for the area and also of distinguishing this group from the hierarchy of southern Brazil who tend to be more conservative and more akin to the upper classes. One simplification used to characterize the two groups of bishops is that those of the Northeast are obsessed with the threat of "liberal capitalism" while those of the South, with some exceptions, are equally exercised about the ogre of Communism.

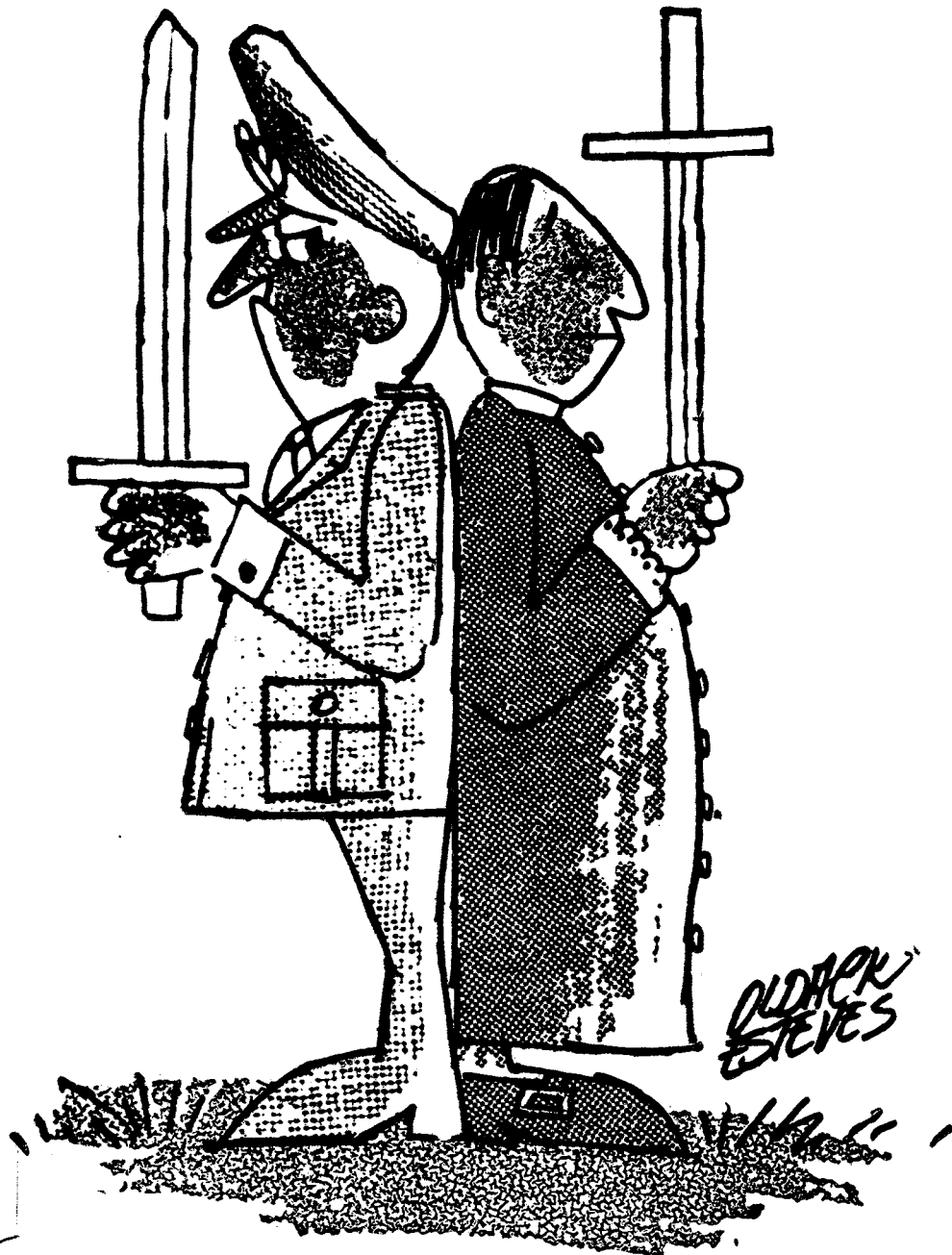
The so-called Revolution of 1964 was essentially the work of South Brazil, particularly São Paulo, and it was by no means wholly supported by the Northeast churchmen. Dom Hélder, undeterred by the overzealous jailing of "Communists" and their sympathisers which followed the coup, took what actions he saw fit, including the sheltering of the sister of Pernambuco's governor (Miguel Arraës), himself among the first to be seized by the Army.

There were innumerable instances of Church support given to individuals whom the victors of the Revolution considered corrupt and/or subversive. Talk of "Communist priests" and "Marxism in the Church" was rife. In the excitement of the first days of the new regime, newspapers from one end of Brazil to the other headlined the imminent imprisonment of Dom Hélder. But the authorities did not touch him, and it can be surmised that they realized his power and popularity were too great to tamper with. He, as well as most bishops of the region, has never given his wholehearted endorsement to the 1964 change of government.

An overt test of strength between the Northeast bishops and the military came in August 1966. The sudden clash was a manifestation of the long-festered alienation between the conservative echelon of the Army and the progressive wing of the Church.

Because of reports received from the rural areas, the bishops representing the states of Alagoas, Pernambuco, Paraíba

# IMAGENS DO DIA



(Estado do Minas - 20 Aug. 1966)

and Rio Grande do Norte, at their regular regional meeting in July 1966, drafted and signed a manifesto which supported the cause of the agricultural workers in the Northeast.

Excerpts which follow reflect the tone of the document:

"The Church...does not take a position against anyone. It came into the world to serve all...supervisors and workers, wage earners and owners, poor, rich, and men of average conditions... However, the maternal concerns of the Church take it back by preference to those who suffer, to those who cannot earn the bread for themselves and their families even by the abundant sweat of their brows, for those who seem condemned to stagnation in sub-human conditions of life.

"We call upon the authorities and men in control to use their energies and their resources in the creation of new means of social promotion. We deplore and condemn all the injustices committed against the workers, be it in questions of salary, be it coercion exerted against the workers' organization, be it in the innumerable transgressions against the Labor Code and the Statute of Land. We urge the workers...to continue trusting their unions...

"At the same time, however, we urge the workers, while defending their rights, not to forget under any circumstances, their duties to their job and to try ever harder to be conscientious and efficient in the exercise of their professional tasks."

In an attempt to squelch the manifesto, the officers of the 10th Military Region, with headquarters in Fortaleza, Ceará, circulated two letters among the local clergy which labeled the manifesto subversive and suggested that Dom Hélder "had placed himself on the side of the leftists" and that he was an agitator responsible for "programs causing scandals".

This attack immediately rallied the 72 bishops of the Northeast to the side of Dom Hélder and to the support of the manifesto. These reinforcements were led by Dom Eugénio Sales of Salvador and Dom José Delgado of Fortaleza. Almost four weeks after its signing---weeks filled with debate, accusations and posturings among the bishops, the military and their conservative backers---the manifesto was finally divulged to the public. This defeat for the hard-line generals was exacerbated by the subsequent rapprochement between Dom Hélder and President Castello Branco and by the latter's dismissal of the rightist commander of the Northeast's Fourth Army.

Throughout Brazil, discussion centered on this imbroglio

knotted by so many issues: the controversial personality of Dom Hélder, the conflict of Church and State, the cleavage between the progressive and traditional wings of the Church, the relation of social reform to Communism, the schism between the conservative and reform forces of the society.

Small samples of the August frenzy are the two comments which follow. On the one hand, the conservative economist, Eugénio Gudin, wrote in an article entitled "The Frivolities of Dom Hélder":

"Nothing could be more wrong nor more subversive than to try to convince the people that the poverty from which they suffer results not from the low productivity of the economic society of which they are a part but from the egoism and evil intents of men. The evil is to instill these fallacies into the defenseless minds of the ill-prepared masses, creating a climate of subversion under the guise of reverence and respect for Catholic teachings."

In contrast, the liberal intellectual Alceu Amoroso Lima, writing under his pen name "Tristão de Atháide", said:

"Dom Hélder represents today the passage of the polemic Church to the missionary Church...(to) the Church present in the mainstream of the world, participating in it in order to convert it, in order to reform it so as to defend it against exploitation, misery and injustice."

In September 1967, Atháide detailed the significance of the "New Church" as reflected in the Vatican Council Constitution, Gaudium et Spes. He called attention particularly to the following passages:

"The living conditions of modern man have changed profoundly from the social and cultural point of view, to such a degree that it is proper to speak of a new era in the history of man."

And, "We are witnessing the birth of a new humanism by which man will be defined primarily in terms of his responsibility to his fellow men and history."

Surveying the acts and words of Dom Hélder, it is indeed possible to take him as symbol of the "rebirth" of the Church championed by Pope John XXIII and upheld by Pope Paul VI. The Archbishop is striving to shift the base of Catholicism's prestige from a static reliance on "The weight and tradition of the ecclesiastical institution" to a dynamic involvement



in an ideology and cause attuned to the world's needs. He sees this cause as liberal reform and would have the Church's concern be for man's life in this world as well as the here-after. He would involve the laity in the Church's work; he would change the relationship between the clergy and the congregation from one of distance and awe created by ritual and pomp to one of equality and dialogue based upon simplicity in language and dress. He supports a modernization of the Church's administration so that it may better coordinate its program on a national and international level. And he would forfeit the advantages which derive from alliance with the State in order to gain independence of action.

In pursuing these progressive ends, Dom Hélder paradoxically is often accused of using out-of-date methods. For instance, though he sanctions social action, reversion to passive charity is often the reality. The well-to-do housewives of Rio, whom he inspired to organize the Banco da Providência, concentrate largely on visits to slum-dwellers to whom they contribute alms in the form of food, clothing and even money---little emphasis is given to self-help or vocational training. Though sympathetic to his call for social reform, liberal critics in the Northeast lament his use of contributions which come from all over the world, particularly his tendency to distribute money directly from his pocket to the poor who flock around him. They suggest that an organized program of basic education, such as that founded by Dom Eugénio Sales in Natal, has far more worth than Dom Hélder's somewhat diffuse and personalized program. This criticism is made even though Dom Hélder was involved in the creation of the Natal Movement, as well as Recife's "Operation Hope".

Personalism and diffuseness are, however, dominant characteristics of Dom Hélder's style and argument. Regardless of physical size, he has maximized his personality to such a degree that he seems to float free of those around him. He tends to talk at, rather than with, a person. One has the impression that he does not hear or at least does not retain the opinions or counter-arguments of others. In every verbal encounter he assures victory to himself by inundating his adversary with ingratiating smiles, expansive gestures and a one-way flow of words.

One Brazilian analyst, sympathetic to Dom Hélder, commented that "in order 'to sell an idea', he is capable of hammering on the same subject for more than an hour until everyone, convinced or tired, agrees with his argument."

His victories, therefore, are not always arrived at by democratic discussion. Thus the wholehearted support of

the vanquished is not always assured, and it is often by the sheer force of episcopal will and energy that projects are carried forth. Also, the Archbishop himself might profit from the exercise of discussion in order to strengthen the fiber of his ideas.

This trait of egocentricity has not endeared him to his fellow bishops of the Northeast. They resented him immediately when he moved into Recife as Archbishop in 1966 after a prolonged absence from the Northeast. Instantaneously the national and international spotlight was on him, his words and actions taking the headlines that other bishops' long years of hard work had never gained. The slogan "New Northeast", coined by Dom Hélder, aggravated them as it implied that only with him had things begun to move in the region. With the manifesto crisis of 1966 there was some careful concession to his leadership, but his unquestioned supremacy will never be established.

His abundant use of charisma works well with the masses, but it does not always persuade his peers who perceive an intellectual fuzziness beyond the smokescreen. Though they recognize his value as a gadfly for social reform, many liberals lament the misuse of this potential which garners international prestige, immunity from ostracism by conservatives, and a position of power and influence. But Dom Hélder's rhetoric sometimes lacks punch and sometimes even a convincing logic. In the pre-1964 days of the then-president João Goulart, Dom Hélder's popularist appeal was in vogue, but the progressive thinkers feel that today's situation in Brazil demands a more precise analysis, better-documented argument, and a more vigorous, disciplined program of action.

Dom Hélder's major concern is economic development, with a steadfast insistence on the needs of the Northeast. However, the concern exceeds provincial limitations to encompass the roles of international trade and the developed nations. In his own words to Paris' Le Figaro, he sees two prongs to the world's dilemma: 1) "not Communism but underdevelopment", and 2) "the lack of dialogue between the developed and the underdeveloped nations."

It is for the second reason that he grabs opportunities to talk to Americans: he seems consumed by the need to "educate" us to the reality of the Brazilian situation. He feels that amid our affluence we cannot possibly comprehend the "national slavery" which keeps the "masses" (Dom Hélder: "They cannot yet be called 'people'.") in subjugation.

He talks of "cartels" in Brazil and refers to the U.S.

companies there as "big rich boys" and the Brazilian magnates as "little rich boys"---none of whom feel any responsibility for social conditions. He continues that the present Brazilian government is more American than the U.S. government---that the Latin American situation is much worse due to U.S. refusal to comprehend Cuba and to U.S. intervention in Santo Domingo. Furthermore, "it is a great humiliation to Brazil that, when the U.S. needed a 'front man' in the Dominican Republic, it was Brazil which was put in command of the occupying force."

He opposes the Alliance for Progress, feeling that "American aid does not alleviate because there is no comprehension of how to cope with the Latin American situation." Speaking on television in Washington D.C. in 1963, he said:

"I am not speaking as a Brazilian addressing Americans but as a man talking to other men...The Alliance for Progress is dead, however much I should hope for its resurrection. The main reason for its failure seems to be the following: it was necessary to establish close coordination between the help from the Alliance and the basic reforms, but unfortunately the rich in Latin America talk too much about reform and label as Communists all those who try to enforce it. This is easy to understand: the rich in Latin America go on holding 80 per cent of the land on the Continent. Often they control Parliament and have the intensity of their idealism and hope in the future gauged by the bank deposits kept in their names in the United States and Europe..."

Instead of aid, Dom Hélder would have the developed nations grant fair terms for international trade:

"I am not an economist. I do not know about 'economics', but I read the reports of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the writings of its Secretary General, Raul Prebisch, who explains that Latin America's loss due to the drop in world prices for her exports far exceeds all foreign aid. This is not just---there is no justice in a situation that wrongly makes a charity case of a man who can take care of himself."

A synthesis of Dom Hélder's ideas would seem to run along the following lines: in Latin America the conditions of misery and despair which plague the poor can be blamed on the monopoly of power held by the rich; similarly, the Northeast is a poor man being held in subjugation by the wealth of South Brazil; by projection, Brazil and all underdeveloped nations are victimized by the developed nations; foreign aid establishes a sort of colonialism and a support

of the status quo from which Latin America would free itself if world trade were adjusted fairly. As to the method to change these relationships, Dom Hélder appears to have faith in the eventual reformation of the internal and international power structures by means of peaceful persuasion---this to the disappointment of the radical left who see violence as the only way to basic change.

Whatever one's opinion of Dom Hélder's ideas and personality, the impact of this tiny man is to be reckoned with. His strange amalgam of Prebisch theories, Church piety, social reforms and Madison Avenue techniques may not represent the solution for the Northeast and the world, but he will continue calling attention to the problems and pushing hard for progress in the Catholic Church and in Brazilian society.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Frances M. Foland". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'F'.

Frances M. Foland

Photo: Realidade.

Cartoon: Estado do Minas, 20 agosto 1966, Belo Horizonte.

Received in New York October 11, 1967.