

**Political Positions of Catholics and Evangelicals
in Quiché, Guatemala 1975-1985**

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Political Positions of Catholics and Evangelicals in Quiché, Guatemala 1975-1985

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In scholarship by Americans on the violent 1975-1985 period in Guatemala so much emphasis has been placed on Catholic/evangelical competition that an impression exists that evangelicals provided the principal obstacle to the progressive Catholic church. However, a closer look reveals that this is not true. Instead it can be shown that a more significant obstacle existed in the conservative wing of the Catholic church. The work of Guatemalan scholar José Luis Chea comes as a helpful corrective by not only summarizing the conservative political history of Catholics in Guatemala, but also by defining competing viewpoints in the Church in the 1980's: traditionalists, developmentalists, rebels and revolutionaries. Other information on evangelicals, from books and articles that emphasize the Catholic/evangelical divide as well as from my own observations, provide counterevidence to two prevailing stereotypes of evangelicals as politically right-wing and preferring escapist salvationism to social activism.

In the early 1980s many Mayan villages of northern Quiché, Guatemala suffered violent destruction. Some analysts, such as Philip Berryman, place these villages in the forefront of the liberation theology movement in Guatemala.¹ Complicating the picture is the sudden rise of the evangelical dictator Rios Montt. Since repression occurred under his rule, competition between Catholics and evangelicals became part of the vision of the conflict, with evangelicals presumed to be supporters of the army and thereby participating in the intimidation of progressive Catholics. As Berryman points out, "journalists wrote of a 'religious war' between conservative evangelicals and Catholics who took inspiration from liberation theology."²

Careful analysis reveals however that most Catholics and evangelicals were actually co-workers engaged in developmentalist projects who rejected violence as an avenue for change.

¹ Berryman, Phillip. *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984. p. 244.

They were both victims of army stereotyping of Mayans as revolutionaries or sympathizers, numerous priests were victims of army stereotyping of any kind of social action as a manifestation of a revolutionary liberation theology, and some evangelical pastors were branded “leftist sympathizers.”

A committed band of revolutionaries in Quiché did attempt to recruit the Maya with some limited success. But accounts from survivors that resisted army control as well as survivors that submitted to army control demonstrate the same conclusion: most victims did not perceive themselves as revolutionaries. David Stoll has described their situation as being caught “between two armies,” or as the survivors told him, “between two fires”.³

Without exaggeration, one can say that these peasants who died were caught in the crossfire of global conflicts between East and West. The “last battles” of the Cold War were being fought concurrently in Eastern Europe and in Central America. From the point of view of US intelligence services, peasant Maya were in danger of naively carrying a Marxist government into power in Guatemala, a threat that could not be permitted in this hemisphere. Therefore, the force of US counterintelligence strategies was placed at the command of the Guatemalan army to avert this threat.

These East/West conflicts contributed to great tension within the Catholic hierarchy as well. Guatemala’s revolutionary movement was interpreted favorably by some Catholics in Latin America such as liberation theologians who had allied with Marxist revolutionaries in Nicaragua. Therefore, links established between Christian base communities and revolutionaries in Guatemala appeared a positive development to these leaders. In contrast, those strongly opposed to Marxism, such as the Pope, saw his flock falling prey to Cubans and Soviets. In Eastern Europe the church had allied itself with US intelligence services to overthrow Marxism,

³Phillip Berryman, *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994. p. 2.

and the Pope's interpretation of Central America was shaped by his European experience. When he spoke to the Latin American bishops at Puebla in 1979 he strongly cautioned them against alliance with leftist revolutionaries in a quest for justice for the poor.

The history of the Guatemalan Church, particularly post-Vatican II developments, shows how varied political thinking was within the hierarchy. Accommodation to the army had long been the choice of the most influential Catholic bishops. In contrast, others in the bishop's conference issued statements offering a social critique and outrage at human rights abuses. A few priests became revolutionaries. However, most ordinary Catholics deplored the violence and the injustice and poverty from which it stemmed, though found it difficult to contribute to positive change in the tense and confusing situation. A similar range of attitudes existed among evangelicals as well.

If this is the case, where did the impression arise of the centrality of an evangelical/Catholic conflict? David Stoll's article in the widely read *Harvest of Violence* is one source of the interpretation of the conflict as a "confrontation between North American fundamentalism and liberation theology."⁴ In this article he reports that evangelicals received protection under Rios Montt and therefore many converted out of expediency. The same argument is advanced by Tom Barry who says that in addition to the high profile publicity of evangelicalism provided by Rios Montt's weekly televised speeches/sermons, the darker side was conversion as a way of guaranteeing personal safety, so "evangelical popularity was also a direct result of the army's ongoing counterinsurgency campaign".⁵

³ David Stoll. *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

⁴ David Stoll. "Evangelicals, Guerrillas, and the Army: The Ixil Triangle Under Ríos Montt" in Robert M. Carmack, Ed. *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. Norman, Okla: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. p. 91

⁵ Tom Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, Albuquerque, New Mexico: Inter-Emispheric Education Resource Center, 1992. p. 198.

However, a trajectory of evangelical growth already existed after nearly 100 years as a nearly invisible minority. In 1976 a severe earthquake brought a number of evangelical groups to the country to participate in relief efforts. After the immediate crisis, many neo-pentecostals stayed and planted new churches, and this sudden increase in converts and visible growth began to be noticed by the local hierarchy. The evangelical surge did not go unnoticed in Rome either. Pope John Paul II came to Guatemala in March 1983 during the Rios Montt period and raised the visibility of Catholicism in the country. But the exodus into evangelical congregations continued, and by 1987 over 30% of the country identified itself as evangelical.⁶

While Stoll does not recant his earlier work, his subsequent work contains interpretations that are far more subtle. He did fieldwork from 1987-1992, living in Nebaj in 1988 and 1989. His dissertation and subsequent book are based on his extensive interviews with those at the more southern end of the zone of conflict who did not have the option of escape into Mexico, and who, on the whole, chose to submit to the army “amnesty” offered under Rios Montt. He analyzes the attempt of the Maya to maintain neutrality in this context and their view that two “outside” groups were exploiting divisions within the community. He concludes that though the Guatemalan Church in Exile placed their own organizing work at the center of the conflict, the Maya in Quiché “corroborate the repression that the clergy divulged to the outside world, but they explain it differently--as a reaction, not to peaceful Catholic social projects, but to the arrival of guerrillas.”⁷

In this interpretation, evangelicals also were caught “between two fires” and forced to make difficult choices. Evangelical leaders also suffered death or repression; in many cases where leaders reached an accommodation with the army, they did so out of prudence in a quest for survival of those they felt were under their care, not out of ideological support. The people

⁶ Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 197.

criticized both the army and the guerillas for their violence since their religious philosophy as traditionalists, Catholic progressives, or evangelicals all advocated non-violent solutions.

Nor is it clear that there was a strongly articulated version of liberation theology at work in Quiché. “Base communities” appear to have been involved in quite traditional forms of community development work. Eventually some members of these groups did join the revolution, but the choice to do so appears much more individualized rather than representative of a widespread group process brought about through reflection in the pattern of liberation theology.

Though some liberation theologians had reached the point of concluding that violent revolution was necessary (as in Nicaragua, for example), almost all progressive Guatemalan Catholics who supported the cause of the poor did not support the revolutionary movement. The position of the Bishop’s Conference--critical of the army’s human rights abuses, critical of the social injustice in the country, critical of the violence of the revolutionary movement, and critical of communism--represents this position. A minority within the church disagreed with them and favored the army or the guerillas. Since a similar political spectrum existed among evangelicals this invalidates the stereotype of “evangelicals on the right” and “Catholics on the left.”

The historical irony is that the Catholic church has been so identified with the “right” or the conservative position, that one of the standard acts of any many liberal governments was to expel the archbishop as a political *persona non grata*. Though progressive foreign clergy and the winds of change brought by Vatican II allowed for a shift in this position for some, the church as a whole continued in its relatively conservative ways. Furthermore, the evangelicals were favored by liberal governments and therefore had historically been allied with a progressive element. This important fact has been obscured by the wealth of publicity surrounding the recent

⁷ Stoll, *Between Two Armies*, p. 172.

Guatemalan conflict and journalists' fascination with the rather anomalous evangelical general. That the majority of generals had been Catholic and continued to be Catholic was somehow obscured by the surge of journalism during Rios Montt's 16-month tenure in power.⁸

During the Colonial period, as in the rest of Latin America, the Guatemalan church and the state spoke and acted in concert, forming what has been called a "coalition".⁹ The Guatemalan diocese, formed under the archdiocese of Seville in 1534, came within the jurisdiction of Mexico in 1547. By 1743 Guatemala's bishop became an Archbishop with jurisdiction over the rest of Central America (which then included Chiapas but not Panama).

As the desire to separate from Spain progressed, the disintegration of this system began. The Guatemalan archbishop opposed all revolutionary movements, advocated the status quo, and thereby identified the Church with conservatism. This political position allied it with the landowning hierarchy, whereas the opposing "liberal" progressive element favored new entrepreneurs. By 1825 the anti-clerical faction had gained control of the 1821 revolution, and a conflictual relationship between Church and state began. This led to financial losses, expropriation of property, ridicule, and the legalization of civil marriage and divorce. The new liberals solved some of their problems with the Church by the simple expedient of expelling the archbishop from the country and expropriating church property, setting an example that was repeatedly followed each time liberals came to power.

From 1839-1871 conservative politicians regained power and cooperation returned to Church/state relations. The government overturned anticlerical laws, and a new constitution in 1851 gave the Church a privileged position. An agreement with the Vatican in 1852 reinstated state financial support for the Church and established Catholicism as the sole religion.

⁸ Phillip Berryman, *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, p. 117.

⁹ Jose Luis Chea. *Guatemala: La Cruz Fragmentada*. San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Departamento Ecueménico de Investigaciones (DEI), 1989. p. 43ff

The Liberal revolution of 1871 resumed a conflictual relationship and began “the longest and most severe restriction that the Catholic church has suffered in Latin America.”¹⁰ Foreign clergy were expelled and the limited number of clergy that continued to work in the country-- 119--remained relatively constant until the 1944 revolution. The archbishop was expelled once more and evangelical missionaries were invited to come to the country by the President and actually started working in Guatemala in 1882. Throughout Latin America these movements toward secularism, modernism and separation of Church and state became institutionalized and the Catholic church was forced into a relative decline. A political skirmish in 1887 resulted in yet another expelled archbishop.

Conservative President Estrada Cabrera who came to power in 1898 successfully negotiated the naming of an archbishop of his choosing, thereby temporarily resolving conflicts by the submissive position of the church to the state. Nevertheless, one bishop whose popularity made him a locus for discontent with the dictatorship was expelled and another archbishop was expelled in 1922 after Cabrera’s fall from power. That the archbishop named in 1928 managed to remain in favor with several governments, including the dictator Jorge Ubico (1931-1944), begins to appear remarkable.

Decentralization began when the diocese of Quetzaltenango was formed in 1921, and the diocese of Verapaz in 1935.¹¹ Mariano Rossell y Arellano became archbishop in 1939 and did not enter into political conflict with the dictator Ubico, but rather concentrated on pastoral ministry by support for clergy, education, and increased indigenous involvement in the church. Given the low number of clergy (126 for 3 million people in 1940),¹² foreign clergy began to fill

¹⁰ Richard Newbold Adams, *Crucifixion by Power: Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944-1966*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1970. p. 278.

¹¹ Chea, *Cruz Fragmentada*, p. 65.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 70.

the gap and were one avenue for change in a conservative church. The Maryknolls began work in 1943 and had more progressive ideas than local clergy.

When the 10 year “Guatemalan spring” began in 1944 under the liberal President Arévalo after the fall of Ubico, the clergy initially approved. But the possibility of competition existed since both church and state desired social justice and material well-being, but saw different means of reaching those goals. Rossell, for example, attempted to form unions controlled by the church where the worker’s situation would improve, but without class anger. These unions were formed under the auspices of the Catholic Action movement.¹³

But by 1953 Archbishop Rossell was actively engaged in the anticommunist fight against Arévalo’s successor, President Arbenz, who had created a land reform law vigorously opposed by the US-based United Fruit Company. After the “liberation” arranged by the CIA, the church returned to a co-operative relationship with the state. The archbishop made no secret of his political preferences, calling new President Castillo Armas a “legitimate saint.”¹⁴

Rossell was reluctant to recruit more foreign clergy due to his nationalism, but the Vatican pressured him to have more priests than were in training in Guatemala, more decentralization, and to accept foreign funds. The number of priests increased from 132 in 1950 to 483 by 1965; sisters increased from 96 to 354.¹⁵ Under Arbenz, whom the CIA had deposed as a communist, four new bishoprics and a sub-district had been created: Jalapa, Zacapa, San Marcos, Sololá, and Petén. Three of the new bishops were foreigners.¹⁶ The US Catholic church also made financial contributions, having participated in the overthrow of the Arbenz government.

¹³ Ibid. p. 75.

¹⁴ Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 190.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 173

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 78.

By 1964 the philosophy of collegiality at Vatican II had influenced the creation of the Bishops' Conference of Guatemala.¹⁷ Rossell participated in Vatican II and in subsequent meetings until his death in December 1964. The new archbishop, Casariego, carried the prestige of seniority, but structurally, each bishop independently reported to Rome.

In 1967 Thomas Melville and Marian Peter of the Maryknolls became allies of the revolutionaries and were expelled from the country. In their writings they discuss how the extreme social problems of the country moved them to this involvement; however, the Maryknolls that remained in the country continued their work in a developmentalist framework.

As revolutionary activity increased, Casariego maintained good relations with the government and with international capital (blessing new factories, etc.), a feat some saw as antithetical to the prophetic voice needed. His public pronouncement on the Medellin Conference in 1968 emphasized that it was not a call to violence.¹⁸ As chaplain of the army, he participated in numerous army events and once said that if he hadn't become a priest he would have been a soldier.¹⁹ His prestige increased when he became the first Central American Cardinal in 1969.

In June 1983, shortly after the Pope's visit in March of that year, Casariego died of a heart attack and the new archbishop, Próspero Penados del Barrio brought significant changes. José Luis Chea took a snapshot of the church in 1985 through his surveys and interviews with priests and bishops. He reported that there were 12 dioceses, 326 parishes, 433 priests, and 39 parishes without priests (10 in Quiché).²⁰ An important part of the church included 40 different lay movements, one of which was Catholic Action. More significantly, he analyzed different attitudes within the church which will be discussed below.

¹⁷ Chea, *Cruz Fragmentada*, p. 93.

¹⁸ Chea, *Cruz Fragmentada*, p. 171.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 174.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 121.

This historical background of conservatism, the changes coming from Vatican II, conflicts between local and foreign clergy, the climate of political chaos, and revolutionary movements elsewhere in Central America resulted in a period of factionalism in the Guatemalan church in the 1970s and 1980s. In his analysis of the political positions of various church leaders, Chea distinguished between traditionalists (the leading example of which was Archbishop Casariego), developmentalists (who favored reform and work with the poor but denounced violence), revolutionaries (such as the Melvilles), and rebels.

The rebels consisted of a vocal group characterized by opposition to the hierarchy rather than by any particular social program and though there was quite a following for a period (53 priests signed an initial document), the movement fell apart from a lack of coherent vision and the conflicts which arose within the group. Eventually the Bishop's Conference excommunicated one of the major leaders of the rebel group.

The Bishop's Conference issued a 1971 message called "We Reject Violence in All its Forms" which called for constructive development.²¹ However, this developmentalist approach which the bishops could agree upon soon divided over issues of structural change. Seven of the seventeen bishops took a progressive stance and by 1976 legitimated the expropriation of unused land (an act for which Arbenz had been overthrown as a "communist"), and criticized the economic injustice of the country. They still rejected revolution as a means of righting these wrongs, but advocated dialogue and wholistic development. Predictably, conservatives accused the bishops of a Marxist analysis.²²

The 1976 document which legitimized land expropriation was not signed by Casariego who led a party of eight conservative bishops. In fact, in 1978 Casariego autocratically emended

²¹ Berryman, *Religious Roots...*, p. 177.

²² Chea, *Cruz Fragmentada*, p. 184.

the text for publication of a document the other bishops had agreed upon in his absence.²³ The conflict between the bishops led Bishop Luis Manresa, the leader of the seven progressive bishops, to appeal to the Vatican to remove Casariego. Instead, the Vatican supported Casariego and Manresa resigned his post at Quetzaltenango in 1979.²⁴ The bishops condemned the “wave of violence”--murder, disappearances, terrorism, kidnappings and torture--in a 1979 document.²⁵

One of the progressive Bishops was Juan Gerardi of the Quiché diocese. His diocese became a central battlefield once the “Guerrilla Army of the Poor” (EGP) began operation there. A band of 15 revolutionaries crossed secretly from Mexico in January 1972. By June 1975 they took their first military action and the army came in with immediate and harsh reprisals.

In Quiché the priests had come and gone for several centuries, but the majority of the population followed a mixed Maya/Catholic religion often called “Christo-Paganism”. In this traditional religion the Mayan deities also had Catholic saint’s names, and the theology could not be considered orthodox Catholicism. In the 1950s Spanish priests organized Catholic Action as a way of reconverting the Maya. In the early years Padre Gaspar Jordán clashed with the saint societies badly enough that they sent a delegation to the departmental capital to complain he was an evangelical.²⁶ The encouragement of youthful leadership further threatened community elders.²⁷ When Padre Javier Gurriarán arrived in the 1970s, Catholic Action had mellowed as the leadership had matured.²⁸ Yet an increased tolerance (for alcohol, for example) actually led some members to reject the group as “impure” and resulted in some evangelical converts.²⁹

²³ Berryman, *Religious Roots...*, p. 187-88.

²⁴ Chea, *Cruz Fragmentada*, p. 196.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 194.

²⁶ Stoll, *Between Two Armies*, p. 47.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 53.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 54.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 175.

Berryman cites Catholic Action in Quiché by the 1970s as a center of liberation theology in Guatemala.³⁰ Padre Javier attempted to put the concepts of Christian base communities into practice in Catholic Action, and reached a total of 400 coordinators of 68 communities in the Nebaj parish.³¹ His work largely consisted of development projects: a cooperative, honeybees from Italy, low-interest loans for housing, new schools, water systems, etc. Padre Javier himself says he was not politically radicalized until after the violence forced him out of the country.

Meanwhile, the evangelical church in Quiché continued as small and marginal. When Protestantism was invited into Guatemala after the liberal revolution in 1871, the initial churches concentrated in the capital. As more missions entered the country a concern arose that there should be no unnecessary competition or duplication of resources. Under the plan agreed upon by the missions present in the country in 1935 (excluding Pentecostals), each mission received responsibility for a particular area of the country.³² Quiché became the responsibility of a relatively small denomination known as the Primitive Methodists. Their missionaries thus settled in Nebaj, as well as elsewhere in the department.

Berryman says that “the Protestant sects in Guatemala tended toward an otherworldly theology that led members to see ‘salvation’ as the only important goal, and this vision was centered on the church, rather than on the larger community.”³³ Barry says they “offered a haven for many in the church who sought a purely spiritual experience in lieu of the tendency toward a mixture of religion and politics.”³⁴ In contrast to this impression, as with missions elsewhere, schools and clinics for the community as a whole were an important part of the work of the Primitive Methodists in addition to church building. The mission established a hospital in Chimaltenango with paid health workers scattered throughout the area. They also established a

³⁰ Berryman, *Religious Roots...*, p. 244.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 179.

³² Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 196.

³³ Berryman, *Religious Roots...*, p. 180.

boarding school in Quiché, and devoted themselves to agricultural projects in Nebaj. These activities were in addition to the evangelization and church planting that were their primary objectives. Because all of these efforts were principally directed toward the oppressed Maya, they were, in fact, involved in grassroots political empowerment.

Under the Arbenz regime which took an active interest in “Indian” affairs in contrast to previous governments, the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators was invited to do the work of linguistic analysis and preparation of reading materials in Mayan languages. Ray and Helen Elliott moved to Guatemala as part of this mission in 1953. They informally provided health care as well as the bilingual education services for which they had contracted with the government. Their work began the first bilingual school program in the Ixil area.

The Primitive Methodist missionaries present in Nebaj in the 1970s, Don and Elaine Lawrence, continued the pattern of church work and development work. They established themselves as extremely civic minded and, for example, helped to purchase an ambulance for the community, organized the emergency volunteer corps, engaged in water projects, etc .

I arrived in 1978 with my husband Stephen, the Elliott’s son, and we set to work on development projects as well. These projects were financially supported by evangelical churches from the US and coordinated by a committee of evangelical pastors in the community. Projects included preparation of bilingual education materials, a revolving micro-enterprise loan fund, land purchase and sale, higher education scholarships, a weaving export business, etc.

In my observation, differences between Catholic and evangelical leaders were far less pronounced than either group assumed. Objectives for both Catholic and evangelical projects included greater justice and opportunity for the poor. Both groups expected that things would be

³⁴ Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 194.

better in the life to come, yet commitment to change in this world came from Christ's clear instructions on the subject as well as the social teaching of the Old Testament. The obvious discrimination against the Maya, the impossible working conditions on the *fincas*, and lack of social services were of great concern to all the expatriates--Catholic and evangelical--and each one worked hard on something they hoped would bring about change.

This commonality between Catholics and evangelicals is something Berryman might contest since he says that previous to 1976 "very few Protestants were involved in social struggles."³⁵ Yet summarizing the situation in his 1994 book, Berryman cites many socially active evangelicals.³⁶ He says that a majority of Catholics as well as evangelicals hold a conservative position "with regard to the role of the church and Christians in society."³⁷ The minority who believe in activism, however, include Catholics and evangelicals, but Berryman credits such things as the Rios Montt presidency with bringing about such thinking among evangelicals.³⁸

Alternatively, I would suggest that this may not be a change in thinking, but simply more public articulation of what had been implicit among some evangelicals for over 100 years in Guatemala. Unlike the Catholic church, the evangelicals had not had a history of condoning the social system of landowners and peons, since most converts had been from entrepreneurial or poorer classes. Barry, who also accuses evangelicals of otherworldliness, acknowledges that evangelicals have always incorporated a social-assistance component. They established the first modern hospital in Guatemala and built primary and secondary schools as well as a University. He cites the extensive political involvement of neo-pentecostal groups and says that most modern evangelical churches offer daycare, education, health care, or feeding programs. Developmentally

³⁵ Berryman, *Religious Roots...* p. 180.

³⁶ Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 211-218.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 204.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 212

oriented evangelicals have formed an umbrella group which indicates the prevalence of this approach.³⁹

In 1975, however, the developmental approach was doomed in Quiché for at least the next decade by the extreme anti-communist mentality of the army and the presence of a determined band of guerrillas in the region. In the context of war, developmentalists were forced to change tactics, either doing emergency relief, exposing the injustice, leaving the area, and/or becoming radicalized and joining one side or the other.

The chronology in the appendix shows the trajectory of increasing violence and the ferocity with which the Catholic church was attacked. On March 2, 1980 a shootout in the plaza in Nebaj was witnessed by Padre José María Gran who reported this massacre of civilians to the diocese. He and his assistant were ambushed and killed June 4, 1980, probably in retaliation. The bishops responded strongly and said that those who “plan and execute” murders of priests would be excommunicated. On July 10th Padre Faustino Villanueva was also killed in Quiché and on July 18th Bishop Gerardi’s life was threatened. The next day he determined to close the Diocese.⁴⁰

Gerardi’s action was apparently greeted with some skepticism by those not familiar with the realities he was dealing with. Other missions, the Peace Corps, etc. all withdrew their personnel from Quiché. From this point of view, Gerardi was not like a Captain refusing to go down with his ship,⁴¹ but like other executives moving company personnel out of danger. His decision even had Biblical backing. Jesus said, “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.” (Matthew 10:23)

Don Lawrence, the Primitive Methodist missionary in Nebaj also received a death threat in this same time period and left the country within 24 hours as he was told to do. Speculation

³⁹ Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 200.

was that because he also had witnessed the massacre in the plaza and could confirm other human rights violations that he was *persona non grata*. A Wycliffe couple working in Usphantan, Stan and Margot McMillan, left after their home was burned. The three couples working with Wycliffe Bible Translators in the Ixil triangle received no threats, possibly because they were operating from Guatemala City and did not have as much first hand knowledge at that point. In fact, Ray and Helen Elliott were in the United States for personal health reasons. My husband and I were in Antigua. Therefore, though we remained in contact with community members, none of us were threatened.

Rather than condemn Bishop Gerardi's actions, his decision seems wise in this volatile situation where more priests would have died. The Catholic Justice and Peace group responded to Padre Gran's death by advising increased personal security. They wrote, "there is no point in being martyrs before our time; the people need servants who are living."⁴² Bishop Gerardi hoped that his action would draw attention to the seriousness of the problem and asked for "dialogue with the authorities...to solve this most serious problem as soon as possible." He presented his problem in Rome and Pope John Paul II responded with a letter to the Guatemalan bishops. He objected to the "scale of suffering and death that presses down, giving no sign of letting up, upon so many families and church communities, deprived not only of many catechists, but also of priests who have died in obscure circumstances, at times in vile and treacherous ways". He mentions Quiché and exhorts "those responsible in your country to spare no effort at remedying the tidal wave of discord and hatred".⁴³

When Bishop Gerardi attempted to return to the country in November of 1980 he was interrogated at the airport, refused entry to his own country and subsequently refused entry to El

⁴⁰ Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 110.

⁴¹ Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 110.

⁴² Berryman, *Religious Roots...*, p. 202.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 205-6.

Salvador as well. He then went into exile in Costa Rica, choosing not to identify himself with the priests, nuns and catechists from Quiché who went to Managua, Nicaragua. This group established the “Guatemalan Church in Exile” and devoted themselves to publishing exposés of what was occurring, and so gained an international hearing. After two years Gerardi returned to Guatemala, and worked in Guatemala City.

Meanwhile, the first attempt to reestablish Catholic leadership in Quiché failed when Padre Juan Alonzo Fernández was killed February 15, 1981, ten days after he arrived, confirming once again the good sense of Bishop Gerardi’s actions. Rather than causing a cry of outrage from Cardinal Casariego who had insisted that the embarrassment of an empty diocese be remedied, this death passed in relative silence. The silence continued from him even as the death toll reached twelve priests, none of whom were revolutionaries. When the Pope came to visit in 1983, he followed Casariego’s lead and made no public mention of their martyrdom, afraid perhaps that this would be interpreted as a sign of support for the left.

After accusations regarding lay leaders turned revolutionaries, on August 6 the Bishops condemned the violence of both right and left and disavowed a communist revolution as a solution for the country. Most Christians--Catholic and evangelical--agreed completely with this stance of non-violence. The violence not only endangered everyone’s lives, but damaged the economy, damaged the country’s reputation, and eliminated the possibility of living “normal” lives for ordinary people. Development agency workers, teachers, health care workers, et. al. saw the need for social change, but did not want it to occur violently.

Once the violence overwhelmed development work with the need for emergency food, clothing, shelter and medical care, we did our small part. Though some funds came to the community via Rios Montt’s church, they only raised \$200,000 and never reached the “billion dollars” promised. That some of this support was not spontaneous evangelical loyalty is

underlined by the interference of the White House in encouraging US evangelical groups to support Rios Montt with advocacy to Campus Crusade for Christ, Moral Majority, 700 Club, and Youth With a Mission.⁴⁴ Yet to say such relief was an affirmation of the political right-wing or an anti-communist venture as part of Rios Montt's "beans and bullets" campaign, makes a false dichotomy between evangelicals and Catholics. More relief in sheer dollar amounts was managed by Catholic agencies than evangelical ones, even in army controlled areas.

Even if there was no clear dichotomy between Catholics and evangelicals, there were differences within each religious group. A spectrum of political attitudes existed from right to left: participation in the military, alliance with the military, neutralism, a critical stance toward both extremes, alliance with the guerillas, and participation in the guerillas. The majority of Catholics were neutral, and a conservative faction was strong within the church, including practicing Catholics who served in the armed forces. In evangelicalism the spectrum existed as well, but the rise of Rios Montt and the cooperation of missionaries with his church's aid program has overshadowed the neutralism of the majority.

A relatively temporary alliance between Wycliffe missionaries and Rios Montt has been magnified as evangelical support for the right by its repetition in the "reality" created by footnotes and citations. Ray and Helen Elliott are the only ones cited, but in fact, Paul Townsend of Cotzal was equally involved with FUNDAPI, the organization created by "Church of the Word." Yet in private conversations with each of them, their motivation was clearly and simply humanitarian aid: people were dying without proper food, shelter or medical care and something needed to be done.

In evaluating where various people stood on the political spectrum, Ray and Helen Elliott have been placed firmly on the right, and classified as far more supportive of the army than they

⁴⁴ Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 197.

actually were. One might suppose that Cardinal Casariegos, as chaplain to the army, would be analogous to them, but in actuality it can be shown that his support for the army was much greater, more ideological, and far more damaging to the progressive church.

It is true that the Elliots believed that a General/President of their own religious tradition would be more trustworthy than those who had come before him. There is no evidence that they did anything except to attempt to alleviate suffering in a town and a region where they had lived 30 years. They criticized an army commander who mistreated people and he was removed. They criticized the army for civilian deaths, forced labor, patrolling by unarmed civilians, and the mistreatment of refugees. To the extent they had any impact, limited as it may have been, this could be construed as minor victories in championing human rights. However, it is used as evidence of their support for the army by Stoll and Berryman. The later contrasts their behavior with priests and sisters who worked with the communities in resistance.⁴⁵

Since Berryman's political preference is for the "resistance" rather than for those who submitted to army control, his preference is for those who ministered to those in resistance rather than those who ministered to those under army control. Ministry in the presence of the army does not equal support for the army, and therefore it would be more accurate to say that Elliotts served the Ixiles and put up with the army's unpleasant presence in their "hometown." Victor Perera, who gives the standard "progressive Catholics/evangelical right wingers" analysis, interviewed Ray Elliott and wrote, "Elliott was harshly critical of the army's activities in the Ixil area and said he feared a total military victory as much as a guerilla takeover."⁴⁶

Berryman's frame of reference has led him to exaggerate the actions of the Elliotts and minimize the actions of Casariego and many in the Catholic church who agreed with the Cardinal. Casariego did support the army and evidenced it numerous times, in ways far more

⁴⁵ Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 119.

damaging than the dispensing of food. Berryman says that “routinely the deliberations of the Guatemalan Bishops Conference were reported to the government by Casariego and other bishops”, a serious betrayal.⁴⁷ Berryman says that Casariego gave the President the letter from the Pope which criticized the army, but then proceeded to blame it on Gerardi and distanced himself from its contents.⁴⁸ The consequence was Gerardi’s exile. Berryman says that “Cardinal Casariego’s stranglehold over the episcopal conference impeded any independent initiative from the Catholic church” in the area of monitoring human rights violations.⁴⁹

At Casariego’s death, a General eulogized him, saying:

until his death, [Casariego] was the spiritual guide of many army officers and the confessor of the majority and he was considered the religious guide of the military institution with which he was always identified.⁵⁰

Yet though all of these instances of Casariego’s betrayals, obstructionism, and support for the army are scattered throughout his work, nowhere does Berryman coherently argue that the Cardinal’s behavior--so dominant in the Church during this difficult time--was a far more serious threat than that of evangelicals attempting to give humanitarian aid.

The division in the Catholic Church leadership did begin to heal after Casariego’s death in 1983. The new archbishop, Penados del Barrio, represented a progressive position. Under his leadership a series of prophetic documents were issued. In March 1988 a pastoral later called “The Cry for Land” called for land redistribution (which angered the elite). In 1989 in the Declaration of Cobán they challenged the country’s deplorable economic and social conditions. In 1990 they issued a declaration criticizing the army.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Victor Perera, *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993, p. 89.

⁴⁷ Berryman, *Religious Roots*, p. 177.

⁴⁸ Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 189.

⁵⁰ Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 193. Also partially cited by Berryman in *Stubborn Hope*, p. 125.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* pp. 193-4.

Evangelical protests also occurred. When the Pope came to Guatemala a group of evangelicals sent him a letter saying that under Rios Montt's rule, 50 pastors had disappeared, 10 were jailed, 35 murdered, and others had fled the country.⁵² A group calling itself the "Evangelical Confraternity" used a newsletter to attack Rios Montt as "anti-Christian", accusing him of taking advantage of the naiveté of church leaders.⁵³ Abducted Reformed church missionaries who left the country provoked a statement by their Board that Rios Montt was dishonoring the name of Christ.⁵⁴ Ixil evangelical leaders that I knew criticized both the army and the guerillas for their injustices.

Berryman and Stoll cite some instances of evangelicals who joined the revolutionaries, so though not numerically strong, this political position existed in the evangelical spectrum. It was most marked among Catholics, and four priests and two lay brothers are known to have joined the revolution. The priests all happened to be Jesuits who were seriously influenced by liberation theology and who initially worked in a poor barrio of Guatemala City.⁵⁵ However, though almost half of the priests surveyed in 1985 supported liberation theology as useful, almost none supported a violent implementation of it. Therefore, the percentage of priests who chose revolution, 5 out of 433 (or slightly more than 1%), truly represented a minority option.⁵⁶

Another non-violent but progressive position, is represented by Ricardo Falla. A Jesuit anthropologist, in an act of "accompanying the people" joined with the survivors of the massacres in the Ixcán. These survivors who had not submitted to the army and were known as the "Communities of the People in Resistance (CPRs)" told him the stories of those who died. He also interviewed refugees who had escaped across the border into Mexico. His book is

⁵² Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 123.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 121.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 122.

⁵⁵ Chea, *La Cruz Fragmentada*, p. 252.

⁵⁶ These guerilla priests were: Padres Luis Pellecer Faena, Fidel Hernández, Fernando Hoyos, Enrique Corral and Donald MacKenna. Chea, p. 246-250.

consciously a memorial to these dead, naming as many as he could discover and verify. His pastoral role therefore included a validation of the horrifying stories told by the survivors as well as a theological interpretation of the conflict. In this interpretation, those who died bore the image of Christ sacrificed, and the survivors bore the image of Christ resurrected. His theological framework allowed him to both validate their appalling pain and to offer a hopeful vision to heal them.

Examination of Falla's chronology demonstrates that the scorched earth policy began just before Rios Montt came to power. A week before the coup on March 23, Catholics and evangelicals, both of whom seemed to consider themselves "safe" since they did not support the guerrillas, were massacred in their churches in Cuarto Pueblo.⁵⁷

Falla then claims that under Rios Montt the army pitted evangelicals against Catholics.⁵⁸ Yet the only evidence he offers is that at Samaritano, a resettlement project started by an evangelical church, the army instituted a strategic hamlet. His own account contradicts the notion that religious polarization was successful. The evangelical inhabitants were already hiding in the jungle with what would become the "Communities of the People in Resistance" (CPRs) and they refused to return. The eight families (10%) who had gone to the highlands did return--90% did not. Therefore the hamlet was settled with people from elsewhere.⁵⁹ In his conclusion Falla states that both evangelicals and Catholics were persecuted.⁶⁰

Another contradiction to the notion of an "attack on Catholic progressives under Rios Montt" is the chronology of when Catholic priests were killed. One priest was killed under Laugerud (in 1976), eleven were killed under Lucas García (1978-82) before Rios Montt, and one under Mejía Victores (1983-1985) after Rios Montt. No priests were killed under Rios

⁵⁷ Falla, Ricardo. Translated by Julia Howland. *Massacres in the Jungle: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975-1982*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1994. p. 81.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 157.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 173.

Montt, but “a few dozen evangelical pastors suspected of harboring leftist sympathies” were killed.⁶¹ Ten out of the total of 35 Primitive Methodist pastors were killed from 1980-82, including three under Rios Montt. Approximately 50 Full Gospel Church of God pastors were killed after 1976.⁶²

Given the four themes I have presented--the historical conservatism of the Catholic church, the divisions between traditionalists and progressives within the church, the commitment of both Catholics and evangelicals to development work, and the fact that both Catholics and evangelicals were impacted by violence--I dispute the facile interpretation of the 1975-85 decade in Quiché as a contest between “fundamentalism and liberation theology.” Religious differences existed, but do not seem as central to the conflict as racism, land disputes, economics, and the romance of revolution.

Most who espoused “liberation theology” understood it in what Boff calls a “sacramental articulation”. At this level people recognize that poverty is social and therefore against God’s will, and that it results from insufficient “love of our neighbor as ourselves”. Followers of Christ choose to change this for themselves and others. A lifestyle of committed love which emphasizes Jesus’ predilection for the poor is the result. The limitation is that without social analysis, it has little political force.⁶³ Many evangelicals had committed to this type of liberation theology, though they did not recognize it by that name.

The “socio-analytic” articulation of liberation theology, in contrast, sees social realities and desires a break with the status quo. It seeks a change in structures, not only persons, and these unjust structures include the world economy, and the implication is that revolution may be

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 187.

⁶¹ Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, p. 288.

⁶² Stoll, *Between Two Armies*, p. 336.

⁶³ Leonardo Boff. *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978.

the solution. Those who choose that path may experience the conflict of Jesus' life and ultimately of his death.⁶⁴

One person who recognized this devoted himself to working on human rights investigation: Bishop Juan Gerardi. He had played a part in the peace process which culminated with peace accords in December 1996 and was the director of the Guatemala City archdiocese's human rights office. The 4-volume report, "Never Again in Guatemala", was based on 6,000 interviews with survivors.⁶⁵ When he presented this in the Cathedral on April 24, 1998 he said:

We want to contribute to the building of a country different than the one we have now. For that reason we are recovering the memory of our people. This path has been and continues to be full of risks, but the construction of the Reign of God has risk and can only be built by those that have the strength to confront those risks.⁶⁶

He was murdered in his own home on Sunday night, April 26, 1998. Since this occurred two days after he presented the report on Friday, the assumption is that the killing occurred in retribution. The report stated that nearly 80% of rights abuses were due to the Army and civilian paramilitary groups created by the army.

However, things had changed since the rejection he experienced after withdrawing from the diocese in 1980. His death resulted in a national funeral and three days of mourning called for by the President. The government assigned 150 police to the case and they were supported by the FBI. Human rights groups immediately sent alerts for action out over the internet. A massive march was organized by human rights groups in the country. The archdiocese called for an immediate and thorough investigation, and condemnations were issued by the Pope (with whom Gerardi had met during the past year) and the United Nations. My husband and I--two

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 279.

⁶⁵ "Prelate Killed In Guatemala After Issuing Rights Report", *New York Times International*, Tuesday, April 28, 1998.

⁶⁶ From Internet: EPICA (202) 332-0292--translation of a press release from the Guatemalan Archdiocesan Human Rights Office.

evangelicals who had lived in his diocese before 1980 but not recognized him as our pastor--now not only mourned him, but looked up to him as a saintly and stalwart Christian leader.

As I've reflected on this history, a self-assessment leads me to conclude that my husband and I did our best to uphold high standards of human rights, humanitarianism, and justice. We donated as much money and time as we could to improve opportunities and to save lives. We secured grant funding for useful projects. We did not hide our criticisms of the army or landowners in what we said and wrote. We supported Maya organizers engaged in non-violent efforts for social change, particularly in the area of education, including lobbying Congress for Maya as leaders in their own education reform. We supported efforts to publish in Spanish and Maya (and subsequently in my own English translation) a novel which disseminated the voice of a Maya writer offering serious social criticism. Acting within our limited knowledge of how to make things happen, we labored for peace and justice.

I continue to chose non-violent development as the most consistent and moral approach in the face of poverty and injustice. I find myself agreeing with Pope John Paul II who wrote:

It is by uniting his own sufferings for the sake of truth and freedom to the sufferings of Christ on the Cross that man is able to accomplish the miracle of peace and is in a position to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to evil and the violence which, under the illusion of fighting evil, only makes it worse.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ John Paul II. *On the hundredth anniversary of Rerum Novarum*. Encyclical letter, May 1, 1991 Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Publication No. 436-8. p. 47, 48.

Appendix A: Chronology

- 1972** 15 Guerrilla leaders enter from Mexico to form the nucleus of the EGP
- 1975**
May Killing of informer in Ixcán: Guillermo Monzón
June 7 Killing of Luis Arenas (landowner in the Ixil area) by guerrillas
June 10-July 7 37 cooperative leaders kidnapped in Ixcán in retaliation
- 1976**
Feb 4 Earthquake
throughout Kidnappings in the Ixil triangle, bombings
Nov 20 Father Bill Woods, leader of Ixcán cooperatives, killed in mysterious plane crash
- 1977**
early Archbishop Casariegos writes to his diocese to avoid politics
- 1978**
Jan Catholic Peace and Justice Commission is formed
 Division between Casariegos and other Bishops
April Death of Mario Mujía
May 1 First public appearance of CUC (Peasant Organizing League)
May 29 Panzós massacre
June 30 Death of Padre Hermógenes López
Oct Bus fare protests
Dec 19 Father Carlos Stetter expelled from the country (worked in Ixcán)
Dec 31 Kidnapping of Roberto Herrera Ibargüen (prominent sugar plantation owner)
1978 At least 879 kidnappings in the year
- 1979**
Jan 25 Puebla Bishop's conference
Jan Guerillas occupy Nebaj
Jan Alberto Fuentes Mohr killed
Mar Manuel Colóm Argueta killed
 Bishops issue statement on violence
 Padre Gregorio Barreales expelled
mid-year Bishop Luis Manresa of Quetaltenango resigns
1979 At least 1371 victims
- 1980**
Jan 31 Spanish Embassy protest
Feb Uspantán pastoral agents leave after army attack on parish
Feb 14 Declaration of Iximché
Mar 2 Shootout in Nebaj plaza
Mar 24 Archbishop Romero killed in El Salvador
May 1-12 Padre Conrado de la Cruz, Herlindo Cifuentes, Walter Voordeckers killed
 Bishops denounce the violence of both extremes
June 4 Padre José María Gran (priest in Chajul) and Domingo Batz killed

July 10 Padre Faustino Villanueva killed in Quiché
 July 18 Bishop Juan Gerardi's life threatened
 July 19 Decision to leave the Quiché Diocese
 Aug Bishop Mario Ríos Montt goes into hiding after threats
 Sept Vice President Villagrán Kramer resigns over human rights violations
 Nov Pope John Paul II sends letter to Guatemalan Bishops
 Nov Reagan elected
 Nov Bishop Gerardi interrogated at airport; exiled to Costa Rica

1981

Jan Amnesty Int'l publishes "A Government Program of Political Murder"
 April 16 Cocop massacre (Cotzal)
 April 30 Massacre of Cuarto Pueblo leaders (Ixcán)
 Sept 30 Padre Luis Pellecer's "confession"
 Dec First Civil Patrols

1982

Feb 7 URNG formed
 Feb 13 Chisis massacre by civil patrollers
 Feb 13-28 Massacres east of Ixcán
 Mar 14-16 Cuarto Pueblo massacre
 Mar 23 Rios Montt Coup
 Mar 31-Apr 2 Xalbal massacre
 April Rios Montt visit to Ixil country
 April Massacres in Ilóm, Estrella Polar, Covadonga, Chel, Juá, Amachel
 late April 46 executed in Acúl
 May 27 Bishops object to genocide
 June 6 Guerrillas shoot 13 Cotzaleño civil patrol leaders
 June 7-8 Burning of Mayalan
 June 15 Massacre of Chacalté, probably by EGP guerrillas
 June-Aug Burning houses in Parramos Grande
 July 1 State of Siege
 July Visit of SIL missionaries to Ixil area, formation of Love Lift

1983

March Pope John Paul's visit

1984

Sept 1984 20 killed from Parramos Grande
 end of 1984 Padre Guillermo moves to Ixil country

1987

1987 Padre Miguel, a K'iche' assigned as priest to Nebaj

Appendix B: Priests Killed

Name	Date	Order	Nationality
1. William Woods	11/20/76	Maryknoll	US
2. Hermógenes López	6/30/78	Diocesan	Guatemalan
3. José Maria Gran	6/4/80	Sacred Heart	Spanish
4. Conrado de la Cruz	5/1/80	Immaculate Heart	Filipino
5. Walter Voordeckers	5/12/80	Immaculate Heart	Belgian
6. Faustino Villanueva	7/10/80	Sacred Heart	Spanish
7. Juan Alonso	2/15/81	Sacred Heart	Spanish
8. Carlos Gálvez	5/16/81	Diocesan	Spanish
9. Marcelo Maruzzo	7/2/81	Franciscan	Italian
10. Carlos Pérez Alonso	8/3/81	Jesuit	Spanish
11. Stanley Rother	7/27/81	Diocesan	US
12. John David Troyer	9/17/81	Diocesan	US

Combatants killed

Priest	Fernando Hoyos
Religious	Raúl Josef Leger
Lay missionary	Rodrigo Martínez

From Chea, p. 256-7.

Appendix C: Divisions among the Bishops

Traditionalists

Cardinal Casariego
Rodolfo Quezada Toruño
Angélico Melotto Mazzardo
Ricardo Ham Freely
Rafael González Estrada
José Ramiro Pellecer Samayoa
Pianegonda
Mario Martínez de Lejarza
Hugo Contreras Martínez

Neutral

Luis Estrada Pateau
Miguel Angel García

Progressive

Luis Manresa
Juan Gerardi Formosa
Víctor Hugo Martínez C.
Mario Enrique Ríos Montt
Eduardo Flores
Constantino Luna

Próspero Penados del Barrio

From Chea, p. 195.

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