

Archbishop Romero, the United States and El Salvador

By JAMES R. BROCKMAN

*In 1980
Archbishop Romero
became alarmed
that a foreign nation
should now
intervene in order
to further a policy of
military repression.
On March 24, 1980,
exactly 10 years ago,
he was murdered.*

IN FEBRUARY 1980, the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar A. Romero, wrote a letter to the President of the United States, Jimmy Carter. A few days before, he said, he had read in the Salvadoran press some news that worried him very much: The U.S. Government was studying the possibility of providing economic and military assistance to the junta that constituted the Government of El Salvador. Indeed, according to the report, the United States had already sent \$200,000 worth of gas masks and bulletproof vests for crowd control to El Salvador's security forces the preceding November, along with six experts in their use.

The civil war that now afflicts El Salvador was still almost a year away, but the political scene was violent. Beginning in the 1960's and through the 1970's, many peasants, urban poor, laborers and others had formed organizations to press for better living and working conditions. In particular, the peasantry, the largest sector of society, needed access to the land monopolized by the wealthy few. The landowning oligarchy had long controlled the Government and the armed forces and bitterly opposed any movement toward land reform or anything else that would weaken its power. A coup led by a few progressive military officers in October 1979 began an attempt at a reform government with reform-minded civilians; but the oligarchy soon regained control of the military, and the frustrated reformers resigned at the beginning of 1980. The Christian Democratic Party then agreed to serve in the Government with the military in an effort to continue the reforms. But by February it was obvious that the unspoken pact between the Christian Democrats and the military called for a free hand for the latter to repress the popular organizations by killing, beating or torturing anyone they wished. On Jan. 22, the security forces fired upon a march of over 100,000 people, killing at least 20 and injuring hundreds.

JAMES R. BROCKMAN, S.J., a former associate editor of AMERICA, is the author of *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books) and the editor-translator of *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero* (Harper & Row).

Archbishop Romero had encouraged his people for three years to put their Christian faith into practice by participating in political life, whether in the popular organizations or in some other way. He saw the growth of the organizations as the best hope for a more democratic country, even though he never hesitated to criticize their particular actions when he thought they acted contrary to Christian ethics. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the Government's program was to impose some reforms from above in order to appease the demands for social justice, while letting the military repress and eventually destroy the organizations that the people themselves had built up to represent their interests. The policy meant a bloodbath for the people and the frustration of their deepest hopes, as well as a denial of their right to take part in determining the course of their lives as citizens. Archbishop Romero was alarmed that a foreign nation should now intervene in order to further the policy that he saw being carried out.

Since President Carter openly called himself a Christian and said that his Government would defend human rights in its foreign relations, Archbishop Romero wrote him to offer his own "pastoral viewpoint." If the news reports were correct, he wrote, "Your Government's contribution will not favor greater justice and peace in El Salvador, but will rather undoubtedly sharpen injustice and repression against the people's organizations, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights."

The present Government junta, and especially the armed forces and the military-style security forces, he went on, "have unfortunately not shown themselves able to bring about political and structural resolutions to the nation's serious problems. For the most part, they have merely resorted to repressive violence, producing a total of deaths and injuries much greater than during the recent military regimes, whose systematic violations of human rights were reported by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights."

HE THEN MENTIONED how a few days previously the security forces had stormed the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party itself in order to evict a group staging a sit-in, killing several of the demonstrators, even though apparently neither the junta nor the Christian Democrats had authorized the use of force. The action, he said, was "evidence that the junta and the Christian Democrats do not govern the country, but that political power is in the hands of unscrupulous military officers who know only how to repress the people and favor the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy."

If it was true, he went on, that in November a group of six Americans was in El Salvador delivering the \$200,000 worth of gas masks and protective vests and instructing the Salvadorans how to use them against demonstrators, "you yourself must be informed that it is

evident that since then the security forces with increased personal protection and effectiveness have repressed the people even more violently with deadly weapons." He

There was no just reason to deny popular organizations the chance to participate in the country's political life; they were the best representatives of the great majority

told President Carter, "if you truly want to defend human rights," forbid that military aid be given to the Salvadoran Government.

His petition went beyond that, however; he was concerned not only with the particular question of the military and economic aid that the news media had discussed, but with the deeper and wider question of U.S. policy toward El Salvador and its bearing on the Salvadoran people. With the aid it offered, the United States was backing the policy of reforms-with-repression, as events through the 1980's would amply reveal. Archbishop Romero could discern the beginning of the role that the United States would play in his country, and he tried to do what he could to stop it before it went any further. He therefore asked President Carter also "to guarantee that your Government will not intervene directly or indirectly, with military, economic, diplomatic or other pressure, in determining the destiny of the Salvadoran people."

The country was in a grave crisis, he said, but "it is beyond doubt that the people themselves have been growing in awareness and in organizing and have thus begun to prepare themselves to manage and be responsible for the future of El Salvador, as the only ones capable of surmounting the crisis."

The popular organizations had shown great skill and maturity in growing from small, disparate organizations into at last one giant coalition that had formed in January of that year and had skillfully managed not only the political organizing and logistics necessary for the Jan. 22 march, but also the extremely difficult task of moving the mass of the marchers out of harm's way to the distant campus of the national university after the column was fired upon by the military. There was no just reason to deny them the chance to participate in the country's political life; they had arisen from the people, and they were the best representatives of the great majority of the people, who had always been denied their just share of political power and their most basic rights.

"It would be unjust and deplorable," said Archbishop Romero, "for the intrusion of foreign powers to frustrate the Salvadoran people, to repress them and keep them from deciding autonomously the economic and political course that our nation should follow. It would be to vio-

late a right that we Latin American bishops gathered at Puebla [in January 1979] recognized publicly: 'our peoples' legitimate self-determination, which allows them to organize themselves according to their own spirit and the course of their history and to cooperate in a new international order' (Puebla, 505)."

Each Sunday Archbishop Romero offered the cathedral Mass at 8:00 A.M. and preached to the people, and the archdiocesan radio station broadcast the Mass and his homily to the nation. It had become the most listened-to program in the country. On Feb. 17, he had to celebrate the Mass in the Sacred Heart Basilica, several blocks from the cathedral, which was occupied by a protest sit-in by one of the popular organizations. His homilies had become long, because he included a commentary on local and national affairs in his preaching of the word of God and he found the people eager to listen.

It was thus natural that he would mention his letter to President Carter in the homily. The people had long grown accustomed to applauding what they liked in the homily, and before leaving for the Puebla conference a year earlier he had symbolically asked them for their permission to absent himself, and they had responded with their applause. Now he said he would send the letter after they had given him their opinion of it. The crowd in the basilica interrupted his reading six times with applause and applauded again at the end. He clearly had their approval.

This was not the first time he had mentioned the subject of possible military aid in his homily. On the first Sunday after the October coup, he had noted a newspaper report that the United States was to consider giving El Salvador military aid "if the new junta improves the human-rights situation." By way of commentary, he read with approval from a letter he had received from someone: "We have had enough of weapons and bullets. Our desire is for justice, for food, medicine, education and effective programs for equitable development. If human rights come to be respected, what we will least need is weapons or methods of death." The people had applauded those words.

The day after reading to the people his letter to President Carter, he noted in his diary that the president of the Jesuit university, Father Ignacio Ellacuría, and another Jesuit had come to see him in the evening. They wanted to tell him that his homily had caused a stir in Rome and that the Jesuit superior general, Pedro Arrupe, had informed the Central American provincial of what was being said in the Vatican Secretariat of State. That very night, said Archbishop Romero, the Jesuits told him they would speak with the provincial, who was in Panama, "so that if it is necessary he may go to Rome to explain the situation and show that the words of the homily correspond to the very difficult situation in El Salvador."

The principal concern, he said, seemed to be the letter for the President of the United States that he had read in the homily. The letter, he went on, "is prompted by the

proximate danger that military aid represents for El Salvador and especially by the new concept of special warfare, which consists in murderously eliminating every endeavor of the popular organizations under the allegation of Communism or terrorism. This type of warfare means to do away not only with the men directly responsible but also with their entire families, who in this view are completely poisoned with such terrorist ideas and must be eliminated. The danger is serious, and the letter is directed to asking the President of the United States not to provide military aid, which would mean great harm to our people, since it would be for the purpose of wiping out many lives."

THE JESUIT PROVINCIAL, who had intended to fly to Brazil, went to Rome instead and visited the Secretariat of State to explain the situation in El Salvador. Meanwhile, the chargé d'affaires of the U.S. embassy in San Salvador visited Archbishop Romero on Feb. 21 to explain the State Department's position, and the Archbishop explained he still feared that military aid would result in greater repression of the people. He added that any aid to the Government, which lacked popular support, would seem to the people like a foreign imposition. "What we would be most grateful for," he observed in his diary, "would be for them to encourage the process that the people already have underway, not impede it by im-

VOICES from Latin America

James R. Brockman

ROMERO

A Life

The definitive biography of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated as he celebrated mass March 24, 1980. An engrossing look at one of this century's most controversial churchmen. Paper \$9.95

Jon Sobrino

ARCHBISHOP ROMERO

Memories and Reflections

"Scholarly biographies and hagiographies will follow but few will be as moving, intimate or as revelatory. . . . Sobrino's book is an epiphany. . . ."—RENNY GOLDEN Paper \$12.95

Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga

PURSUING THE KINGDOM

Writings 1968-1988

"The vast lens through which to see the turbulent and hopeful situation among Christians in Latin America is the one provided in this collection of writings by Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga. . . . The courage and inventiveness of this modest man are evident throughout."—HARVEY COX Paper \$10.95

María López Vigil

DON LITO OF EL SALVADOR

Another step along the way of listening to and learning from the poor, told in the earthy voice of a lay catechist from El Salvador. " . . . makes an important contribution to our understanding of life and faith in El Salvador."—PHILLIP BERRYMAN Illustrations. Paper \$8.95



Orbis Books

Maryknoll, NY 10545

1-800-258-5838 In NYS Collect 914-941-7687

San Salvador
February 17, 1980

His Excellency
The President of the United States
Mr. Jimmy Carter

Dear Mr. President:

In the last few days, news has appeared in the national press that worries me greatly. According to the reports, your Government is studying the possibility of economic and military support and assistance to the present Government junta.

Because you are a Christian and because you have declared that you want to defend human rights, I venture to set forth for you my pastoral viewpoint in regard to this news and to make a specific request of you.

I am very concerned by the news that the Government of the United States is planning to further El Salvador's arms race by sending military equipment and advisers to "train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications and intelligence." If this information from the newspapers is correct, your Government's contribution will not favor greater justice and peace in El Salvador, but will undoubtedly sharpen injustice and repression against the people's organizations, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights.

The present Government junta and, especially, the armed forces and security forces have unfortunately not shown themselves able to bring about political and structural resolutions to the nation's serious problems. For the most part, they have merely resorted to repressive violence, producing a total of deaths and

injuries much greater than during the recent military regimes, whose systematic violations of human rights were reported by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The brutal form in which the security forces recently evicted and murdered the occupiers of the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party even though the junta and the party apparently did not authorize the operation is evidence that the junta and the Christian Democrats do not govern the country, but that political power is in the hands of unscrupulous military officers who know only how to repress the people and favor the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy.

If it is true that last November "a group of six Americans was in El Salvador... providing \$200,000 in gas masks and flak jackets and teaching how to use them against demonstrators," you yourself must be informed that it is evident that since then the security forces, with increased personal protection and effectiveness, have even more violently repressed the people with deadly weapons.

For this reason, given that as a Salvadoran and archbishop of the Archdiocese of San Salvador I have an obligation to watch that faith and justice reign in my country, I ask you, if you truly want to defend human rights:

—to forbid that military aid be given

to the Salvadoran Government;

—to guarantee that your Government will not intervene directly or indirectly, with military, economic, diplomatic or other pressure, in determining the destiny of the Salvadoran people.

In these moments, we are going through a grave economic and political crisis in our country, but it is beyond doubt that increasingly the people are growing in awareness and in organization and have thus begun to prepare themselves to manage and be responsible for the future of El Salvador, as the only ones capable of surmounting the crisis.

It would be unjust and deplorable for the intrusion of foreign powers to frustrate the Salvadoran people, to repress them and keep them from deciding autonomously the economic and political course that our nation should follow. It would be to violate a right that we Latin American bishops, gathered at Puebla, recognized publicly: "our peoples' legitimate self-determination, which allows them to organize themselves according to their own spirit and the course of their history and to cooperate in a new international order" (Puebla, 505).

I hope that your religious sentiments and your sensitivity to the defense of human rights will move you to accept my petition, thus avoiding greater bloodshed in this suffering country.

Sincerely,
Oscar A. Romero
Archbishop

Translated by James R. Brockman. An earlier version was published in Archbishop Oscar Romero, Voice of the Voiceless (Orbis Books), pp. 188-90.

posing another system that is not what the people are fashioning as the author of their own destiny." The Archbishop felt that the chargé at least left with the idea that the aid should be conditioned on getting social reforms started and eliminating the repressive policies of the Government. On March 1, he noted that he had received a visit from a group of "specialists in land reform supported here in El Salvador by the United States. In a situation like this, one must have great caution in regard to such assistance, which intends to impose a particular scheme over the people's own wishes." He expressed his misgivings to the experts, saying that the plans they were making needed the people's approval and not just the backing of a repressive Government.

On March 14, Robert E. White, the new U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, called on the Archbishop and delivered a reply to his letter to President Carter signed by

The U.S. replied: "We will use our influence to avert any misuse of our assistance in ways that injure human rights of the people of El Salvador and will promptly reassess our assistance should evidence of such misuse develop."

Cyrus Vance, the Secretary of State. "We understand your concerns about the dangers of providing military assistance," said the reply, "given the unfortunate role which some elements of the security forces occasionally have played in the past." Whatever aid was sent would be directed at helping the Government "defend and carry forth" its program of reform and development, so that the armed forces could "fulfill their essential role of maintaining order with a minimum of lethal force"—words that reinforced the impression that the equipment and training would be used to impose the Government's program on the people whether they wanted it or not.

"We will use our influence to avert any misuse of our assistance in ways that injure the human rights of the people of El Salvador and will promptly reassess our assistance should evidence of such misuse develop," continued the letter.

The Archbishop commented briefly on the State Department reply in his homily of March 16. The letter said the Carter human rights policy was still in effect. "Naturally, we believe so," said Archbishop Romero, "but we have always said that since it is a human rights 'policy' it may not be in agreement with the church, which defends human rights not as policy but out of religious conviction." The letter also reasserted the U.S. support for the governing junta, whose program, it said, "offers the best prospect for peaceful change toward a more just society." That, said the Archbishop tersely, was a political judg-

ment that was open to discussion. To the admission that the security forces had "occasionally" exceeded themselves "in the past," he remarked: "It's at least something that they acknowledge it and feel concern about providing aid indiscriminately. 'We are as concerned as you,' says the letter, 'that any assistance we provide not be used in a repressive manner.'"

"The United States will not interfere in the internal affairs of El Salvador," said Secretary Vance's letter. Archbishop Romero had often observed in regard to Salvadoran Government promises, which almost unfailingly proved empty, that it was best to await the results. This time he said the same: "We hope, as we have always said, that the event will speak better than the words." He added a final observation on the letter's implication that the junta's policies were the only alternatives "... I believe that there are still reasonable solutions that we must sincerely look for."

During the final eight days of his life, Archbishop Romero continued to look for reasonable solutions, as he had been doing. His diary shows that members of all groups and opinions consulted him during his final weeks. An assassin's bullet felled him on March 24, 1980.

Does Archbishop Romero's letter to Carter still have validity? I believe it does. While the present political organizations in El Salvador are different from those in Archbishop Romero's time, the basic conflict of rich against poor remains. Those who side with the poor—who shelter refugees, who try to help the wounded, who support negotiations for peace—are regarded as subversive and are persecuted by the military and the Government. Their activity and the ideas they profess lead to events like last November's, in which six Jesuits and two women coworkers were murdered by the Army, church workers were arrested, foreign social workers expelled from the country, refugee work disrupted, churches and offices sacked and the Blessed Sacrament desecrated. The present Government, like that of 1980, has shown itself unable or unwilling to control the military.

U.S. intervention for 10 years has produced disaster for El Salvador, frustrating and repressing the Salvadoran people's right to decide autonomously the course that their nation should follow. Archbishop Romero's worst fears have been realized. Seventy thousand Salvadorans have died violently, mostly from the repression he tried to stop. One-fifth of the population have fled their homes. The poor remain hungry, oppressed and denied human dignity; U.S. aid intensifies and prolongs their suffering. I believe that only withdrawing all aid destined to prolong the war will bring the armed forces to negotiate an end to the slaughter of combat and to stop the slaughter of repression. With a peace negotiated by themselves, the Salvadorans can begin to rebuild the spiritual and material fabric of their country and to enjoy their "legitimate self-determination, which allows them to organize according to their own spirit and the course of their history and to cooperate in a new international order." ■

