

# Persecution in El Salvador

Four parish priests have been murdered in less than two years in the San Salvador archdiocese. On March 12, 1977, Father Rutilio Grande, S. J., died in an ambush between the towns of Aguilares and El Paisnal, along with an old man and a boy. On May 11, 1977, Father Alfonso Navarro and a teen-aged boy were shot while talking in a parish house in San Salvador. Last November 17, security forces killed Father Ernesto Barreda and reported that he died in a shoot out with urban guerrillas in his parish on the outskirts of San Salvador. The archdiocese suggests, however, that he was killed elsewhere and his body taken to the scene of the battle. After the shoot out, an extremist captured with a wound in his throat appeared on television answering questions in writing for the police and journalists. The police later declared that he died of a bullet in the head during the skirmish, and so the only witness to Father Barreda's death disappeared.

Two days ago, Father Octavio Ortiz, pastor of San Francisco Parish, was with a group of teen-aged youths in a retreat house owned by the archdiocese next to the rectory of San Antonio Parish. They were making a "Christian initiation course" with the help of a nun and a laywoman. At about 6 A. M., while all were still sleeping, security forces surrounded the building and sealed off the neighborhood. With an armored car, they broke down the door of the retreat house, named El Despertar, "The Awakening," and entered in a hail of gunfire. Father Ortiz and four of the boys died, the priest of a crushed skull (perhaps the armored car ran over him), the boys of causes that I have not yet learned. Today's newspapers show two bodies on the roof of the building, where the boys may have fled from the bullets or where the police may have placed them.

For the police suggest that the boys

were on the roof to shoot at the police. No guns are visible in the photos, however, and the police story is part of an amazing tale told by the security forces of a police patrol peacefully investigating a report of "something strange" going on in the retreat house and meeting gunfire from the building, of returning the fire and entering to find a terrorist training center, complete with a store of firearms and a mimeograph for turning out subversive literature.

The archdiocese immediately denied the Government version of the killings, and yesterday, in a funeral Mass concelebrated at the Cathedral of San Salvador, the Archbishop called it "a lie from beginning to end." He went on to contradict flatly President Carlos Humberto Romero, who a few days before had told Mexican journalists that there is no persecution of the church in El Salvador. "There is persecution of the church," said the Archbishop. The presence of the bodies on the cathedral steps, he said, "shows how untruthful that is." His words could also be translated: "Shows what a liar he is," referring to the President. However, I hesitate to interpret his words so strongly. Either way, once again battle lines seem to be drawn between the two Romeros. The softspoken Archbishop seems an unlikely man for such a role. Two years ago, the Government and the ruling class fought for his appointment, and priests and others committed to a pastoral approach of identification with the poor fought against it. But a few weeks after his installation, high-powered bullets cut down Rutilio Grande on the road to El Paisnal, and for Oscar Romero the shots were like the bolt that struck on the road to Damascus. Now he is clearly the moral leader of the church in El Salvador, loved by countless thousands of the ordinary people, for whom he speaks and who listen to his words each week on

the Catholic radio, YSAX, and supported by his clergy, who know that any of them could be the next victim.

In his homily at yesterday's Mass, he summed up the state of things when he said: "The conflict is not between the Government and the church. The conflict is between the Government and the people. The church is with the people, and the people are with the church, thanks be to God." The Government and the ruling class it represents persist, however, in seeing themselves as besieged by an army of terrorists, whom "Marxist" priests abet. Several groups of extremists who presently hold four kidnapped men have frustrated efforts to find them. The Archbishop and the clergy, however, never cease to condemn such tactics and appeal for the release of the captives and against violence. But their appeals for the release of political prisoners, for an end to killings of peasants, for a more equitable social order, are "subversive" and "Communist" to the rulers and to the newspapers that support them. The newspapers, while mentioning the archdiocese's version of the killings and printing pictures of yesterday's concelebration (in two of which *America's* correspondent appears), nevertheless give greater prominence to the Government's version and carry such banner headlines as "Five Killed in Confrontation" (today's *La Prensa Grafica*), and "Four Dead in Armed Clash" (yesterday's *El Diario de Hoy*). Today's *El Diario de Hoy* places next to the photo of the concelebration an unrelated story headed: "John Paul II Attacks Marxism Again."

Among El Salvador's five other bishops, Archbishop Romero can count on support only from Bishop Arturo Rivera of Santiago de Maria. His own auxiliary, Marco Rene Revelo, opposes him and was pointedly absent from yesterday's concelebration. It is Bishop Revelo that the bishops have elected to attend the Puebla conference. But Archbishop Romero will also be there, albeit without a vote, as a member of the papal commission for Latin America. In his homily yesterday, he asked his people permission to go to Puebla. Those of us who saw their faces and heard their applause do not doubt that he takes with him their support and their hopes.

«James R. Brockman, S. J., an associate editor of *America*, filed this report from San Salvador.»

