

Document Profile: "The Catholic Church in El Salvador"

Title: The Catholic Church in El Salvador

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Description and Content Summary:

At the time of this pamphlet's release in 1981, El Salvador was in the midst of a civil war (1979-1992). Ever since the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, land and wealth were accumulated by a small upper class known as the "Fourteen Families" who controlled an oligarchical military regime. This oligarchy was disbanded in 1979 when a younger group of military officers successfully led a coup to bring about social and economic justice. This new government initially had the support of the National Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario) (MNR), but the government failed to control the extreme right and was opposed to the left. As a result the MNR stopped backing the government and formed the Revolutionary Democratic Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario) (FDR) with the guerilla left and the Communist Party. The FDR served as the political wing to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) (FMLN), which formed out of many leftist guerilla groups to fight against the government and right-wing groups after the assassination of former Archbishop of San Salvador and renowned humanitarian, Oscar Romero, on March 24, 1980. This event marked the beginning of the Civil War.

According to this pamphlet, the Salvadoran Catholic Church's position on the conflict was often misused and misinterpreted. The publisher of this pamphlet, The Institute on Religion and Democracy, attempts to articulate the position of the Salvadoran Catholic Church.

The pamphlet emphasizes that only the archbishop of the Salvadoran Church, Monsignor Rivera y Damos, and those who speak for him reflect the positions of the church. Many sources claimed they spoke for the Church while spreading ideas contrary to the Monsignor's beliefs. The FDR claimed that the Catholic Church supported their uprising; however, the Church denied this. The People's Church, a small group that publicly backed the FDR, pretended to represent the church in other countries to raise money. The Socorro Juridico, the legal aid office of the Archbishopric of San Salvador, issued statements using Monsignor Rivera y Damos's name that framed the Civil War as a one-sided massacre inflicted by the right. The Monsignor did not approve of this and denounced the Socorro Juridico. All of these actions spread false associations with the Salvadoran Church.

Ptacek presents the Salvadoran Church as a mediator for peaceful change. He claims the Church recognized the extreme abuse of power by the right, which was still present in the newly formed government, and supported the end to the presence of the extreme right in the military. He also makes sure to separate the Catholic Church from the guerillas. Monsignor Rivera y Damas believed Salvadorans did not want a communist system and "the conquest of power for its own sake" (Damas). The Church opposed military aid to the guerillas because Damas believed violence would never unite Salvadorans. The Church's goal was to create a dialogue between the government and the left in attempts to end the violence, hold free elections, and promote reform.

In this pamphlet's view, the Catholic Church's stance was courageous as they tried to balance the two extremes of the Salvadoran political spectrum to end the war peacefully and justly. The author believes Americans should at least hear the Salvadoran Church out for what they have to say and believe, not what others say the Catholic Church in El Salvador believes.

Significance:

This pamphlet presents the ideal solution of the Catholic Church in El Salvador: a peace accord between the warring parties. The use of the Church's word by conflicting parties throughout the war

prompted the creation of this pamphlet. The Catholic Church of El Salvador wanted to make its position very clear, as both political sides were heavily militant during this period. The Church was clear in its desire to remain politically neutral in the conflict, choosing not to support the left due to the use of guerilla warfare, while also not supporting the radical right, because it recognized the abuses of the feudal system that existed under that regime. There was hope that the government in power at the time would see to the wishes of the people, and find a compromise that didn't involve war.

Founded in 1981 and based in Washington, DC, the Institute on Religion and Democracy is a Christian think tank that aims to promote conservative Christian views. Written shortly after its foundation, this pamphlet had the goal of informing an American audience about the ideological position of the Church in El Salvador amidst confusing reports of violence and social unrest coming from the country at the time. In the years preceding the publication of this pamphlet, there were several instances of abuse and torture of both the clergy and citizens.

This pamphlet aims, in part, to discredit the Liberation Theology movement of the left in order to establish its own, more conservative view on the role of the church and the direction of the revolution. The views of the People's Church, which also claimed to represent Salvadorans at this time, are absent.

It is important to note that the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero occurred in the year before the publication of this pamphlet. Romero belonged to the group of religious leaders who lobbied for the poor and the oppressed. He had called for an end to the conflict but was shot while celebrating Mass. The consequences of his activism could have been a motivator for the neutrality of this pamphlet, which does not take a strong stance in either political direction.

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