

Ecuadoran bishop preaches doctrine of love and liberation

By Teresa A. Parsons

Among this year's nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize is a gentle, soft-spoken Ecuadoran bishop who seldom wears bishops' robes because he feels they divide him from people; who has refused to rebuild his diocesan cathedral in favor of building cathedrals in people's hearts; who has been imprisoned for championing the rights of landless Indians; and who considers himself at home among the poor and homeless of his native country.

His name is Leonidas Proano, but he is also known as "the evangelist of non-violence," "Bishop of the Indians," and the retired ordinary of the Diocese of Riobamba in southeastern Ecuador. At 76, he is also an acknowledged leader in promoting non-violent liberation throughout Latin America.

Bishop Proano brought his message to Rochester on Memorial Day, May 26. During his visit he marched in the peace contingent of the Memorial Day parade and visited with local peace and justice groups.

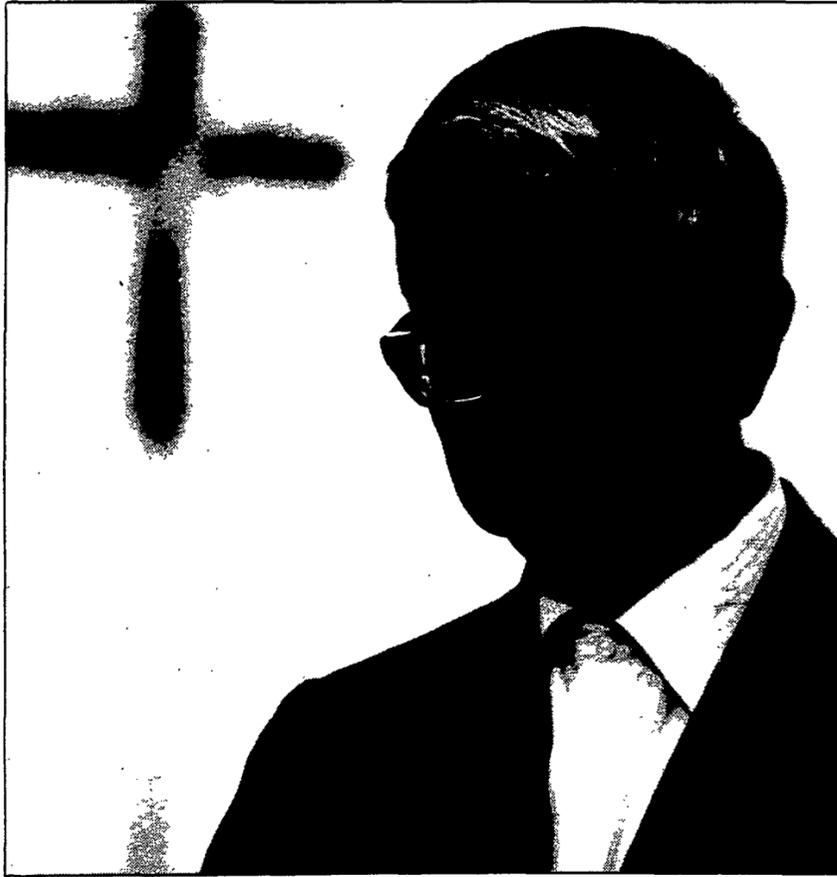
"When you speak of the theology of liberation, you speak of liberation itself," he told one such ecumenical gathering at St. Rita's in West Webster. "The people of Latin America are speaking of their own reality, of oppression and of overcoming oppression."

To most North Americans, that's a distant reality at best. But as the bishop pointed out, last month's Vatican statement on liberation theology began by reaffirming that all Christian people — not only the poor or those in the Third World — are called to work for the liberation of those who are subject to political, social and economic oppression:

"All of us who call ourselves Christian are called to live the example of Jesus, that we love one another," the bishop said. "It is on these words that the action for non-violent liberation is based. We are called to accompany the poor in their struggle. If we're going to follow the path of non-violence, we can't just sit with our arms crossed."

People from all realms of life can practice non-violent liberation, he said, by working to change injustice in the structures that surround them daily.

"To understand the process of non-violence, I believe it is necessary to see the situation of the poor," he explained. "In order for Christians to really form Christian conscience, they must be in contact with the poor and that reality must touch their hearts."



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Speaking through an interpreter, Bishop Leonidas Proano reminded nearly 100 listeners at St. Rita's Church in Webster that, as Christians, they are called to proclaim the dignity of all human life and to work for nonviolent change in the social, political and economic structures which cause poverty and exploitation around the world.

Once aware of those who are hungry, homeless, sick and exploited, he said, Christians must then look for the causes of those situations.

"The gospel and the word of God help us to discover clearly that the situation of poverty and exploitation is not of God's will," he said. "The cause of poverty in a country is its system of rich people."

That's essentially the story of how liberation theology originated. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Church in Latin America sought to break its ties with dictatorial

governments and reestablish itself among the poor and powerless.

Priests and religious offering material aid to the poor as a means of evangelization began to look beyond the "Band-Aid approach" and to reflect on the structural roots of poverty in their countries. As a result, they began to develop a "theology of liberation" which suggested that the spiritual education and liberation of people from sin was impossible without addressing their political, economic and social rights as human beings.

But once the poor are educated to that

reality, they begin to organize, a step which is seldom welcomed by those in power.

The bishop credited large multinational corporations and Third World governments for influencing much of the unfavorable reaction to liberation theology around the world and within the Church.

"When poor people start to break the chains of slavery and work together in unity against all the oppression ... there is a reaction from those who have the richness of a country or its government or institutions," Bishop Proano said.

During a 1976 conference, for instance, the Ecuadoran government arrested and imprisoned Bishop Proano along with 16 other Latin American bishops and 1980 Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolpho Perez Esquivel.

"Theologians have been the victims of a lack of confidence," the bishop said. "They have been the recipients of hostility in the political realm and even in the Church itself."

In its first document on liberation theology, released in September, 1984, the Holy See warned of "certain errors" such as endorsements of class struggle or the use of violence to effect social change. These concepts, it said, were "uncritically borrowed from Marxist ideology."

"But even the first document included the necessity of recognizing the dignity of each person and the necessity of liberating them from oppressive structures," Bishop Proano noted.

Although it does not mention Marxism by name, the second document, a 59-page statement released in March, 1986, and entitled "Instructions on Christian Freedom and Liberation," continues to warn against such Marxist manifestations as "collectivism."

But it also calls the Church to make use of Christ's "special option for the poor" and to "work out and set in motion ambitious programs aimed at the socio-economic liberation of millions of men and women caught in an intolerable situation of economic and social oppression."

The 1986 document also states that violence may be justified in cases in which people live under "obvious and prolonged tyranny" and when they have exhausted all other options.

Bishop Proano, who has consistently linked the need for non-violence and liberation, said that he personally disagrees with

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