

Slain religious were not leftists

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The United Nations last month released a report regarding human rights abuses by the U.S. government.

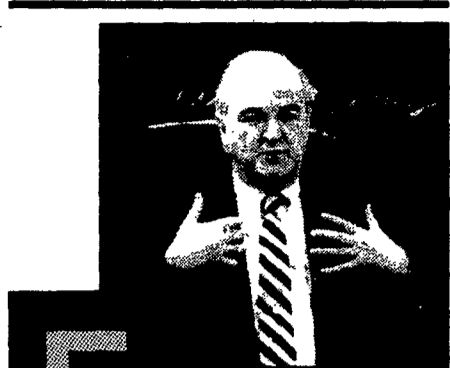
Those atrocities touched the Catholic Church in painfully direct ways. In the spring of 1980 Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass. Later that same year four churchwomen — three sisters and a laywoman — were brutally raped and murdered.

Nine years later, in the fall of 1989, six Jesuit priests on the faculty of the Catholic university in San Salvador, their housekeeper, and her daughter were taken from their beds in the middle of the night and shot to death.

The U.N. report places the blame for these killings squarely where critics of U.S. policy in El Salvador always knew where it belonged: on the military and on the late right-wing political leader Roberto d'Aubuisson, whom Robert E. White — former ambassador to El Salvador — has called a "pathological killer."

However, the U.S. government at the time was more concerned about containing Soviet influence in Central America than in defending justice and human rights in that troubled region. It looked the other way and continued to send massive economic and military aid to the perpetrators.

A cable from Ambassador White (one of the few truth-tellers in this



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whole wretched business) to then Secretary of State Alexander Haig Jr., expressed incredulity that the Reagan Administration had actually complimented the ruling military junta in El Salvador for its "investigation" into the churchwomen's deaths.

As White later testified, "The Salvadoran military knew that we knew, and they knew when we covered up the truth, it was a clear signal that, at a minimum, we tolerated this."

Worse than that, the Reagan Administration actually tried to pass off some of the blame for the murders on the victims themselves.

Thus, Jeane Kirkpatrick, the incoming ambassador to the U.N., called the women leftists. And Secretary of State

Haig even suggested that the women, who were raped and shot point-blank in the head, might have run a roadblock and that "there's been an exchange of fire."

From whom? The sisters?

Evidence uncovered and now released in the U.N. report establishes that the murders were committed by the Salvadoran National Guard, on orders from above.

The sisters and the laywoman were not leftists.

Neither was Archbishop Romero. In the case of his murder in early 1980, White later testified before Congress that he had transmitted overwhelming evidence linking Roberto d'Aubuisson to the killing.

President Reagan's own new Ambassador to El Salvador, Deanne R. Hinton, disclosed evidence in a secret cable in December 1981 that d'Aubuisson had "chaired" the meeting where Archbishop Romero's murder was planned. According to the cable, some of the participants at the meeting actually drew lots for the privilege of killing the archbishop.

And yet, before d'Aubuisson died of cancer last year, he was invited to the July 4 celebration at the U.N. Embassy with other Salvadoran politicians.

Massachusetts Congressman Joseph Moakley, chairman of the House Rules Committee, has also raised questions about the pattern of cover-up that continued into the Bush

Administration — particularly regarding the slaying of the six Jesuits and the two women in 1989.

The U.N. report indicates that the Bush Administration completely mishandled the case.

Advance warning was given to the prime suspect, General Rene' Emilio Pone, before he was questioned, and, according to testimony recently aired again on CBS's "60 Minutes," a witness to the killings was intimidated by U.S. government agents during their questioning in Florida. All the while, critical evidence was being withheld from Congress.

The Clinton Administration and the Congress are expected to follow up on the U.N. report and to examine the growing evidence of a cover-up by the Reagan and Bush Administrations.

But what moral sanctions will be imposed on certain well-known Catholics who had publicly joined in the attacks on the victims, blaming Archbishop Romero, the churchwomen, and the Jesuits for "politicizing the Gospel"?

Their implied message was that they asked for it.

Well, the message is an outrage. The archbishop, the sisters, the laywomen, and the Jesuit priests who were murdered in El Salvador in the 1980s were martyrs. No other word for them can be used.

To call them anything less is to desecrate their memories and to make a mockery of our Christian faith.

Readers overwhelmingly favor grandparents

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

The ballots are in and the results are overwhelming: grandparents should be allowed to register their grandchild in a parish school — even if the child's mother is not an active Catholic.

At least that is the position of almost all of the readers who responded to my recent column seeking advice on how a parish should handle this situation.

The grandparents in this case were longtime and active parishioners. Their daughter had returned home to live with them after an unsuccessful marriage, bringing her pre-school daughter with her. While not actually becoming the child's legal guardians, the grandparents had become very involved in her care, including her religious upbringing.

When the grandmother took the child to register for kindergarten at the parish school, she was told that only the mother could do so. However, since the mother is somewhat dis-



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affected from the church and not involved in the parish, the grandmother was told that the little girl would not be allowed to enter the school's kindergarten.

Here is how several readers responded:

"The mother of the child appears to be reaching out for help," Eileen

DePerna wrote. "She wants her child to be raised a Catholic. She herself needs the church. This is not the time for the church or school to be turning their backs. The need is now."

"Do the Christian thing," Lou Ann Monemorano advised. "When people come to the church for help, they shouldn't be turned away (and turned off) from the church."

"I think this parish is missing the forest for the proverbial trees," Susan LeDoux stated. "The girl lives with an active parish family already. The fact that the girl's mother is not registered or active in the parish does not erase the fact that this child is being raised within a family structure that values the church and parish. I wonder why the mother is estranged from the church — could it be nitpicking such as this? Surely rejecting her child will keep her further from the church."

"My vote is that they should bend the rules and let Grandma enroll her, because that way she is more apt to grow up a good Catholic," noted Alice Geiger, who added that she herself practically raised three of her own

grandchildren because her own daughter had to work.

"I believe we, as Christians, have a responsibility to all children," argued Michael Povenzano. "Here lies an opportunity to minister to this child. The grandparents are to be commended for taking the responsibility of this child's spiritual welfare. This is an unique opportunity to demonstrate Christ's love for all."

"I hope that whoever is in charge of the final decision will listen for the Holy Spirit," pleaded Elaine Larsen. "Accepting this child could have spiritual benefits we cannot imagine."

Certain practical considerations must be taken into account here. Does the mother truly support her child's getting a Catholic education? Is there enough room in the kindergarten for every applicant, or would letting this little girl register mean that someone else could not?

Still, it's good to see that the reaction of so many Christians is to bend the rules and try to be as accommodating as possible.

Jesus would be proud.

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