

WORLD & NATION

Unknown assailant murders Guatemalan bishop

GUATEMALA CITY (CNS) — The bishop who led Guatemala's Catholic Church in a quest for the truth of what happened during this country's civil war was murdered April 26.

Auxiliary Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera of Guatemala City was killed by an unknown assailant at about 10 p.m. as he returned to his home at St. Sebastian Parish in downtown Guatemala City.

The 75-year-old archbishop was alone. His killer reportedly struck the bishop twice in the head with a chunk of cement, disfiguring his face. Church officials said the killer left the scene of the killing, changed his bloodied clothes, and returned to a site near the crime 10 minutes later.

The bishop's body was found around 11 p.m. by the parish vicar, Father Mario Orantes, whose suspicion was aroused when he saw that the house lights were still on at that hour.

Pope John Paul II condemned the murder as an "abominable crime that has cost the life of a true servant of peace."

He offered "heartfelt condolences" to Guatemala and said he had been deeply moved by news of the bishop's slaying.

"I denounce in the strongest way this act of violence, which represents an attack against peaceful coexistence and offends the sentiments of this beloved nation," the pontiff said in a telegram.

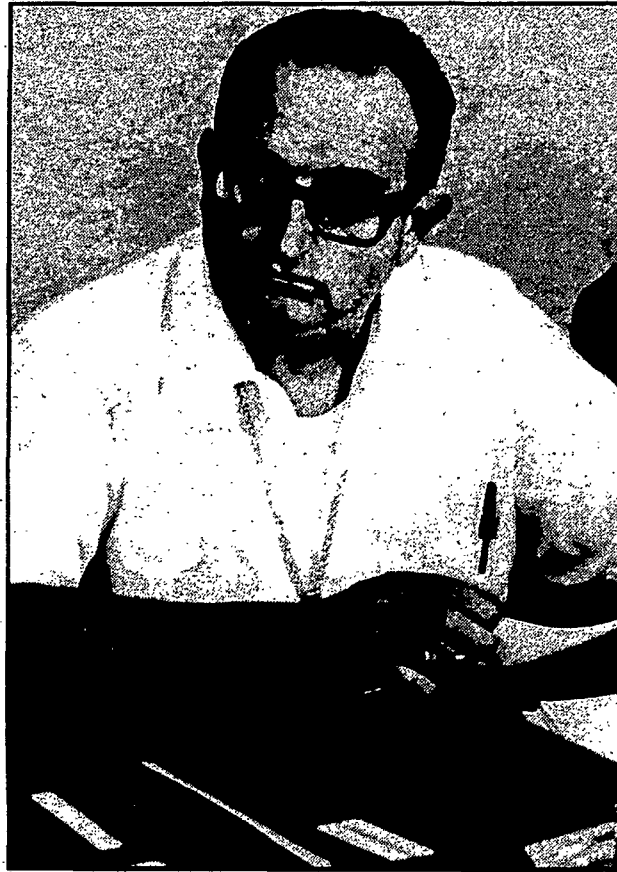
He described Bishop Gerardi as a man who never tired of working for harmony among all sectors of the population and who "generously dedicated his life and episcopal mission to the pacification (of Guatemala) and the defense of human rights."

The pope said he hoped the murder would demonstrate the uselessness of violence and help convince people to adopt dialogue. He said dialogue was the only way to settle differences and assure the victory of peace and justice over "any obstacle or provocation."

The pope added that he hoped the killing would not interfere with the application of peace accords in Guatemala.

"In these sad circumstances, I fervently pray to the Lord that he may concede eternal glory to this zealous pastor and faithful son of the church," he said.

Bishop Gerardi coordinated the activities of the Human



Guatemala City Auxiliary Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera, seen in this undated file photo, was murdered in Guatemala City April 26. The bishop coordinated the newly released report on the atrocities of Guatemala's long civil war.

Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, as well as the church's Project for the Recovery of Historic Memory. On April 24, the project made public its 1,400-page final report; assigning blame for the rampant violence that characterized Guatemala during its 36-year civil war.

Ronald Ochaeta, director of the Archdiocesan Human Rights Office, said he had "no idea about a motive" for

Bishop Gerardi's killing.

"We can't conclude yet that it came as a result of the historic memory project, but public opinion could be saying that," Ochaeta said, acknowledging that the style of the killing was similar to the assassination of political activists during the war.

Ochaeta said his office had received calls of support from throughout the world. He said the Guatemalan bishops were to meet April 27, and that the bishops would "decide how the church is going to respond. This is too grave a case for the human rights office to handle alone."

Many Guatemalans, accustomed to political assassination as a way of life, believed the timing of the killing — two days after release of the rights report, "Guatemala: Never Again" — was more than a coincidence.

"It seems like some people haven't changed their way of thinking or acting," said Carmen Peña, a lawyer for the Conference of Guatemalan Religious. "Death still follows those who denounce violence and speak the truth."

Alfonso Portillo, runner-up in 1996 presidential elections, said, "Logic says this was not common crime. I hope I'm wrong about this, but it's obvious that some sectors are not very happy about the truth."

Ochaeta said Bishop Gerardi's killing "strengthens our work in the human rights office. His spirit of conciliation will continue to inspire our work, inspire us to work for peace. The martyred blood of the bishop is an incentive for us to continue our work."

Bishop Gerardi was born in Guatemala Dec. 27, 1922. He was ordained a priest in 1946 and first served in the Diocese of Vera Paz, from 1967 to 1974. There he laid the groundwork for the Indigenous Pastorate.

He was transferred to the Diocese of Santa Cruz del Quiche, where he helped shepherd the Guatemalan church through the worst attacks on religious during the war.

He escaped an assassination attempt in 1980, and in June of that year closed his diocese to protect priests and religious who were in danger. At least 20 priests and hundreds of religious were killed during the violence.

After government authorities denied him re-entry to the country in 1982, Bishop Gerardi lived in exile for two years, before returning to Guatemala City as auxiliary bishop in 1984.



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