

# COLUMNISTS

## Archbishop Câmara advocated for poor

Bishops are often either demeaned or scorned. They are demeaned by Catholics for whom bishops are nothing more than instruments of papal teaching and policy. They are scorned by other Catholics who slip easily from contempt for the behavior of some bishops to an implicit rejection of the episcopacy itself.

These latter Catholics are nonetheless readily moved by a bishop whose personal and pastoral behavior are unmistakably reflective of the Gospel. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago, always leaps to mind.

Another such good bishop has just passed from the scene. Helder Passoa Câmara, former archbishop of Recife in the poverty-ridden northeast of Brazil, died on Aug. 27 at age 90. Archbishop Câmara was one of the earliest proponents of liberation theology and of the so-called preferential option for the poor and had been an outspoken critic of Brazil's military dictatorship.

A leading figure within the Latin American hierarchy, he insisted that private charity toward the poor, while important in itself, fails to address the systemic causes of poverty. Câmara advocated such fundamental social changes as land redistribution and wider access to education. For that he was de-



essays in  
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

nounced as "the Red bishop" and "Fidel Castro in a cassock."

To which the archbishop gave this famous response: "When I fed the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked, 'Why are they poor?' they called me a Communist."

Helder Câmara may have better understood the thinking of his critics because he was once one of them. He had been an active member of a Catholic fascist-leaning movement, known as Integralism, which was especially strong in France. He left the movement after several years because of its authoritarian spirit and its antipathy toward a more socially active mission for the church.

After becoming an auxiliary bishop in 1952, he befriended a young official in the Vatican's Secretariat of State, Msgr.

Giovanni Battista Montini, who would become Pope Paul VI in 1963.

With the future pope's support, Câmara became secretary general of Brazil's national conference of bishops (the world's largest) for 12 years, calling upon his fellow bishops to abandon their grandiose titles and to exchange their silver and gold pectoral crosses for bronze or wooden ones.

Paul VI named Helder Câmara archbishop of Recife in 1964, during the Second Vatican Council. When he arrived at his new post, Câmara replaced the archbishop's traditional gilded throne with a simple wooden chair, and took up residence in a sparsely furnished room.

Câmara took the lead in severing the Latin American Church's traditional alliance with the military and the wealthy landowners. He became a forceful advocate for the poor and the landless, encouraging them to form Bible study groups, abandon their traditional fatalism and begin to read the Gospel message as a call to liberation. These groups came to be known as base communities.

Archbishop Câmara's approach was subsequently endorsed at the celebrated Latin American Bishops' Conference meeting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. When the military regime began a

campaign of repression against activist church members, clergy and laity alike, the archbishop denounced it at home and abroad. He received death threats, and shots were fired at his residence.

Although nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, he was regarded as a non-person by the military dictatorship. But when Pope John Paul II visited Brazil in 1980, the pope publicly embraced the archbishop and said, "This man is a friend of the poor. He is my friend."

Unfortunately, the pope's genuine commitment to the poor has not always been reflected in his episcopal appointments. Upon Archbishop Câmara's resignation from office in 1985, he was replaced by a more traditional type of bishop, who moved back into the old episcopal palace and emphasized saving souls over social action.

Helder Câmara, however, continued his advocacy, criticizing multinational corporations and the industrialized nations, on the one hand, and the Communist powers, on the other.

Like so many other good bishops, Helder Câmara was truly a gift to the church.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## Jesus knew rejection

27th Sunday of the Year (Oct. 3): (R3) Matthew 21:33-43. (R1) Isaiah 5:1-7. (R2) Philippians 4:6-9.

Some unpublished letters appeared on sale recently in London. They were written years ago by Winston Churchill to an heiress. One of the century's great statesmen knew what it was to be rejected. He had proposed marriage to Muriel Wilson, the daughter of a wealthy shipping tycoon. She rejected him. Winston pleaded and pleaded, but in vain.

Elizabeth Barrett married the poet Robert Browning against her parents' wishes. In fact, they objected so strenuously to her marriage that they disowned her. As everyone knows, the marriage was a beautiful, happy relationship. In spite of the hurt of being rejected by her family, however, Elizabeth Barrett Browning continued to write regularly to them. She told her father and mother how much she continued to love them. She received no response.

Then, after total silence for 10 years from her parents, a large package arrived. Elizabeth Barrett Browning eagerly opened it. The box contained all the letters that she had written them since her marriage to Robert. Not one had been opened.



a word  
for  
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Parents can be vindictive at times — as can children. And the pain of rejection can be devastating. Divorced people will often tell you that losing someone you love to divorce is even more painful than losing them to death — because of the additional hurt of rejection. Rejection — what a terrible, terrible word!

Yet Jesus knew what it was to be rejected. After the parable of the tenants, Jesus said, "Have you never read in the scriptures that 'The stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?'"

"The stone that was rejected..." What stone is that? Jesus was talking about himself. Jesus was rejected. Remember that the next time you are turned down

for a promotion, the next time somebody higher up in the pecking order snubs you, the next time you have a spat with someone you love and they walk away leaving you feeling cold and alone. We worship a triumphant Lord; but before he was triumphant, he was rejected.

Everyone who has ever walked this earth has been rejected at some time in his or her life. And that included Jesus. That is what the cross is all about. Before it was on our altar it was on his back. We cherish the cross as the symbol of our salvation — but before it was the symbol of salvation, it was the symbol of rejection, it was the symbol of pain, it was the symbol of failure.

But, of course, that's not the end of the story. Jesus was also triumphant. "The stone rejected has become the cornerstone — the Lord did this and it was wonderful in our eyes." This is the message we need to hear in our times of rejection: Trust God! Don't give up on life. Don't cave in to despair. Trust God. God takes the stone that was rejected and makes it the very cornerstone.

In 1888, G. Campbell Morgan, having passed the doctrinal examination for the Wesleyan ministry, had to face the trial sermon. In an enormous auditorium,

there sat three ministers and 75 others who came to listen.

Morgan was not up to the task. He was rejected for the ministry that year. Morgan wired his father: "Rejected." His father wired back, "Rejected on earth. Accepted in heaven. Dad." Morgan became one of Christendom's great preachers.

So on the gravestones of many can be written: "Rejected on earth. Accepted in heaven." Trust God. Be faithful to him and he will be faithful to you.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

Monday, October 4

Jonah 1:1-2:1, 11; Luke 10:25-37

Tuesday, October 5

Jonah 3:1-10; Luke 10:38-42

Wednesday, October 6

Jonah 4:1-11; Luke 11:1-4

Thursday, October 7

Malachi 3:13-20; Luke 11:5-13

Friday, October 8

Joel 1:13-15, 2:1-2; Luke 11:15-26

Saturday, October 9

Joel 4:12-21; Luke 11:27-28

## TO LIFE!

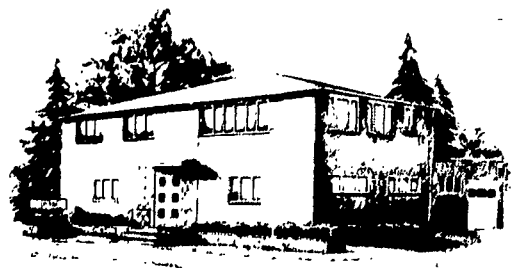
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This special section focuses on individuals and groups dedicated to life, and explores developments in such issues as abortion, warfare, capital punishment, euthanasia and aid to the poor.



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