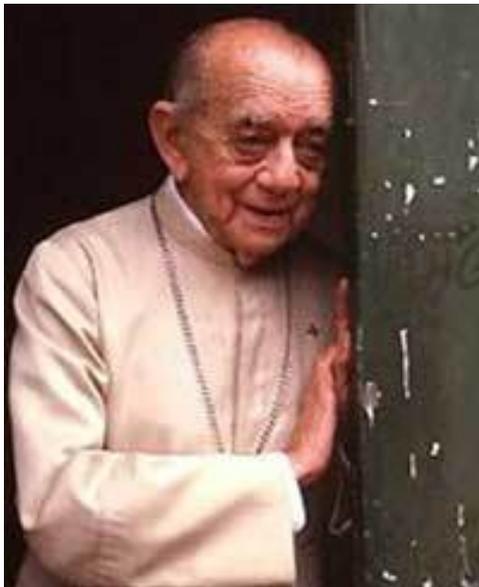


E-BULLETIN #92

"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)

item 172

Dom Helder Camara: one of my three top (male) heroes



My top three (male) heroes are Jesus of Nazareth, Dom Helder Camara, and Francis of Assisi, in that order...

(He's one of three 20th/21st century Catholic Archbishops I admire, each of whom chose slightly different routes in opposing violent regimes. The other two: Pope Francis, and Archbishop Oscar Romero).

Dom Helder Camara addressed a packed **Melbourne Concert Hall** on May 15, 1985. After a rapturous welcome, he stilled the crowd by saying 'I'm just Christ's little donkey...' When a baby in the balcony cried he stopped, looked intently towards the sound, and with the tears glistening in the spotlights said: 'We want to make the world safe for you, little one!'

In his playful, down-to-earth, simple way he told us: 'Friends, we have 40 times the nuclear potential needed to kill *all* life – not just human life – on our planet.' 'Let us be Christians not only in name, but by our lives.' 'The perpetrators of violence who are sinners, yes, but we're all sinners. Help us Holy Spirit!' 'Vatican 2 insisted that the whole church, not just its hierarchy, are the people of God... So we priests must work not just *for* the poor, but *with* the poor... Alone we are weak; together we are a force...'

Many (like Jose Comblin introducing *Into Your Hands Lord*, 1987) say he's the 'only Catholic bishop who has a true audience in the non-Catholic world'.

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Dom Helder Camara (1909-1999) was for millions the male counterpart of Mother Teresa: a tireless servant of the poor.

He was born into a poor Fortaleza family (his parents had 13 children, but five of them died very young in a croup epidemic). Ordained a priest in 1931, until 1947/8 he was an educator. But his appointment as auxiliary bishop (1952) and archbishop (1955) of the diocese of Rio de Janeiro led to his developing a high profile – with weekly TV and daily radio programs. He denounced the city's social and racial divisions. With the help of Presidents Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961) and Joao Goulart he initiated many programs to help the poor,

acquiring an international reputation as the 'bishop of the favelas' – and making many powerful enemies, not least of which was the US government. A socially progressive Latin America did not fit with US policy in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. On March 31, 1964, President Goulart was overthrown in a military coup supported by the US.

The next day Helder Camara arrived in Recife as Archbishop. He said to the diocese: 'I am a north-easterner talking to north-easterners... In imitation of Christ I have not come to be served, but to serve.' He avoided wearing the bishops' purple sash, and quickly abandoned the pretentious palace for three rooms in the outbuildings of a parish church. He ate at the taxi-drivers' stall across the road and hitched lifts around the city instead of running an official car. He gave away church land for the landless, set up a credit union, took students out of seminaries to form small communities in the parishes, and set up a theological institute in which future priests studied alongside laypeople, even receiving lectures from women.

He was one of the few bishops critical of the military's reign of terror. Progressive priests, social activists, trade union leaders, members of Congress, writers and journalists were tortured and/or imprisoned. Accused of being a 'communist subversive', Helder Camara was exiled in his own country; for 13 years from 1970, the government banned him from public speaking and forbade even the publication of his name in any media. Although under constant threat of assassination he refused a bodyguard or even a lock on his door.

One night a frightened family sought Dom Helder. One of theirs had been arrested and was being tortured in the police barracks. The bishop phoned the chief of police: 'This is Dom Helder. You are holding my brother.' The policeman, surprised, stutters: 'Your brother, Eminence?' 'Yes, despite our different names, we are sons of the same Father.' The chief made all sorts of excuses and ordered the release of the man...

One of Dom Helder's collaborators, Father Henrique Pereira Neto, was barbarously assassinated in Recife, after being tied up, dragged along the ground, shot three times, and hung from a tree... Another priest, Father Tito de Alencar, was given electric shocks, kicks, and blows with a rod. His torturer asked him to open his mouth to 'receive the sacrament of the Eucharist'. When he did they inserted an electrified wire... Helder: 'It's absolutely terrible. I go regularly to hospitals or prisons, or the morgue, to collect or identify collaborators who had disappeared – priests or laypeople...'

But internationally, he was a 'star' – receiving over 80 invitations a year (accepting only four or five). 'And I go not to attack Brazil, but injustice everywhere.' Nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize, he missed out (once to Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho). So the 'People's Peace Prize' was created for him – worth two and a half times as much (which he donated to agricultural projects in his diocese). He was also awarded the *Pacem in Terris* ('Peace on earth') Award (named after a 1963 [encyclical](#) letter by [Pope John XXIII](#) that urged all people of good will to secure peace among all nations). And many doctorates – often from prestigious universities (Harvard, Louvain, the Sorbonne etc.). 'It's never for myself: I'm simply the representative of the people *sem vez sem voz*, with no hope and no voice...'

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Dom Helder Camara was a prophet, rather than a revolutionary or theologian. Within the body of this frail man, there beat the ardent and joyful heart of a troubadour, who, like Francis of Assisi, blessed all people. He often said, "*In the heart of a priest, there cannot exist a drop of hatred. We share the same Father, we are blood sisters and brothers, in the blood of Jesus Christ.*"

He articulated the suffering of the poor, espousing pacifism (rather than 'passivism'):

'The seven capital sins of the modern world: racialism, colonialism, war, paternalism, pharisaism, alienation and fear.'

'For me, [humans] are not divided into believers and atheists, but between oppressors and oppressed, between those who want to keep this unjust society and those who want to struggle for justice.'

'Charity is not justice... Aid is necessary, but not enough. Until... international trade policy [is addressed] the poor countries will continue to get poorer, to enrich the wealthy countries more and more...'

'Capitalism which puts profit before people, is intrinsically evil.' 'But a radical version of Catholic social policy is as anti-communist – because we are non-violent – as it is anti-capitalist.' 'I never saw Cuba as a solution... Changing orbits isn't really liberation – becoming a satellite of Russia rather than of the U.S.'

'28% of incomes in Brazil go to 1% of the population; 80% of the cultivated land belongs to 2% of landowners.' (1970, UN Commission for Latin America). 'Paul VI was right to say "The earth was given to us all, not just to the rich." 'In our continent more than two-thirds live in sub-human conditions.'

'Read the encyclicals, especially *Populorum Progressio* which encourages the wealthy to stand in solidarity with the poor.' More people know Dom Helder's famous quote than anything else about this great man:

When I give to the poor they call me a saint; when I ask 'Why are they poor?' they call me a communist!

The 1985 Garth Hewitt song says it well:

***And Fortaleza, your most famous son
has shown us all the way,
Dom Helder Camara,
he had the right words to say,
He said when you feed the hungry
they'll call you a saint,
but never ask the question why...
Why are they hungry?
They'll call you a communist
for asking the question why.
For they're hungry from our opulence,
and they are homeless from our greed,
as the rich world makes its living
from the poor world on its knees.
And a nation roams the streets tonight,
you can see them everywhere,
One hundred million children
like an army of despair.***

**Rowland Croucher and others
JOHN MARK MINISTRIES - Australia
January 7, 2013**

flowers of Brother Marian



For many years every autumn, on November 1st, when it is already chilly, gray and rainy, the flowers of Brother Marian enriched our Pallottine graves in Oltarzew. Marian Nowotnik would plant different coloured flowers annually. He appreciated the beauty of them all. The multi-colored flowers provide us a window into his life and personality.

Brother Marian acutely understood the age old wisdom of St Benedict: *ora et labora*. And at the same profound level he understood his fraternal vocation in the SAC. He devoted his life to that work in the garden, and to prayer. You would inevitably find him either working or praying.

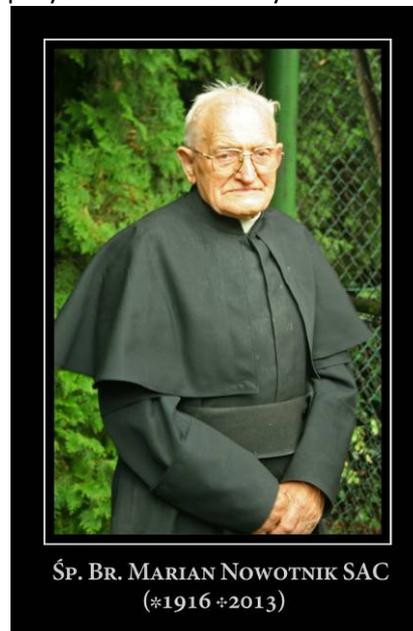
He worked constantly and systematically. Before lunch and after lunch, he stayed on the farm. Even at 90 years old he still had no problem working, although he admitted that he was no longer 70! His work always looked beautiful, and was very carefully crafted. Those flowers were a great reflection of his hard efforts. And he not only cared about his Brothers' graves but also for the entire seminary.

If my Brother was not in the garden, you could find him praying. Despite all the long hours labouring with his hands he never missed out on our Pallottine prayers. He was never late for prayers. He came early and sat in the same place. He prayed for all the seminarians. He was often seen with a rosary in hand, strolling through the garden, or kneeling in the church.

He was always full of life and had a great sense of humor. I liked to listen to him sharing stories with the clerics, and we always had a good laugh. He often had a smile on his face - and I will always remember that about him.

He had a fire in his eyes when the seminarians did not feel like working, or when they performed their duties carelessly. Adjusting their work he would moan under his breath, sometimes even shout, but none of us was offended because of the overwhelmingly caring and sensitive person he was.

When I think of his life, it seems to me that he was, for us Pallottines, a delightful flower donated to us from God. A few days ago it pleased the Giver of life to take this flower to Himself. Eternal rest give to him O Lord....



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12.10.13
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you commented...

on #91

Thanks for the newsletter and its concentration on mission, ministry and Pallottines
CF 30.10.13