

Faith, power and the poor: Remembering Hélder Câmara

by [Kenneth P. Serbin](#) in the [September 22, 1999](#) issue

Dom Hélder Câmara, who died in Recife, Brazil, on August 27, was one of the great leaders of the 20th century. Like most bishops, he was a politician who built links to the rich and powerful. Yet he also had the rare gift of appealing to all groups, including students, revolutionaries and the press. For a while even conservatives liked Dom Hélder. He was Latin America's religious populist, capturing the hearts of the people through his charisma and piety.

Above all, the short and slender bishop devoted his energies to the poor. His struggle for Latin American development and human rights largely defined liberationist Catholicism. Also, his confidence in the laity—both men and women—counteracted the stern clericalism that had ruled the church for centuries. These attempts to change Brazilian society and the church made Dom Hélder many enemies, especially among the repressive military officers who ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. He survived that period and the many other secular and ecclesiastical storms of his era by anchoring himself in the spirituality and faith of the Catholic Church.

Dom Hélder underwent great personal and political transformation. He was born in 1909 into a middle-class family in Fortaleza, a coastal city in the rugged and deeply religious Northeast region of Brazil. The precocious seminarian took ordination at the age of 22.

He quickly became involved in the contentious politics of the 1930s by joining the Integralistas, a quasi-fascist organization crushed by dictator Getúlio Vargas in 1938. He later dissociated himself from the ideals of this movement and turned to the teachings of the French Catholic and humanist philosopher Jacques Maritain. Maritain influenced an entire generation of Brazilian clergymen and intellectuals who shifted to the left and became proponents of liberation theology.

During the 1930s the church transferred Father Hélder from the provincial Fortaleza to the capital in Rio de Janeiro, where his organizational talents flourished. In 1952 he was made a bishop. From then until 1962 he directed Brazilian Catholic Action, whose emphasis on lay activities and small-group meetings laid the groundwork for the renowned *comunidades eclesiais de base*, or grass-roots church communities.

At the encouragement of the Vatican, in 1952 Dom Hélder founded the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, one of the first such organizations in the Catholic world. The conference revitalized the Brazilian church, increased the bishops' concern for social and economic problems, and in the 1970s criticized the military regime's use of torture and antidemocratic rule. Dom Hélder was the conference's secretary general from 1952 to 1964 and continued to play an important behind-the-scenes role thereafter. He also helped found the Latin American Council of Bishops (CELAM).

In Rio Dom Hélder gained immense popularity among both the humble and the elite, even receiving an invitation to serve in the cabinet of President Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961). During this period he increasingly turned his attention from traditional church concerns to the growing social inequalities produced by Brazil's rapid economic growth. He became the "bishop of the favelas," intensifying the church's work in the burgeoning shantytowns and lobbying the government for development programs to assist the masses.

This new outlook strained Dom Hélder's relationship with the elite. Cold-war politics further deepened suspicions about his loyalties. While many bishops applauded the 1964 military overthrow of President João Goulart, Dom Hélder took a wait-and-see approach.

Just before the coup the Vatican transferred Dom Hélder out of Rio because of a rivalry with Cardinal Jaime de Barros Câmara (no relation), who was a staunch anticommunist. As the new archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Dom Hélder once again came into close contact with the poverty and exploitation of the drought-stricken Northeast. In the 1960s the region became a political and theological hotbed, leading U.S. leaders to fear it would explode into another Cuba.

Dom Hélder emerged as a spokesman for the underdeveloped world. At the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in Rome he successfully propagated the idea of a "church of the poor," and he began to speak out against the injustices of the world

economy. He and other progressive bishops took the conclusions of Vatican II a step further at the 1968 gathering of CELAM in Medellín, Colombia, at which they denounced "institutionalized violence" and promoted grass-roots church communities. The meeting led many priests, nuns and lay pastoral workers to engage openly in campaigns for human rights, social justice and the formation of grass-roots communities.

In Brazil military leaders and conservatives who had once admired Dom Hélder now branded him a "communist" and directed a smear campaign against him. Though he preached nonviolence, his followers came under attack from the security forces, and in 1969 a right-wing death squad brutally murdered one of his young priests.

A year later Dom Hélder did the unthinkable as far as Brazil's military leaders were concerned: during a speech before thousands in Paris he denounced the practice of torture in Brazil. The regime prohibited any further mention of Dom Hélder in the media. It also used diplomatic channels to prevent him from winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Vatican bureaucrats also tried to restrict the archbishop's movements. By now he was far too controversial to become a cardinal. Dom Hélder discreetly retreated from internal Brazilian politics and concentrated on making speeches abroad.

When the military left power and Dom Hélder retired as archbishop in 1985, the Brazilian bishops felt less need to play the role of what Dom Hélder had called "the voice of the voiceless." The church retreated to a more conservative position, partly under pressure from Pope John Paul II. The most direct attack on the liberationists came in the archdiocese of Olinda and Recife, where Dom Hélder's conservative replacement dismantled many of his programs and in various ways punished a number of progressive priests. It was one of the most painful moments for Dom Hélder and the history of progressive Catholicism in Latin America.

Yet throughout the long crisis in Olinda and Recife, Dom Hélder remained silent. In contrast with other, younger liberationist clergy who have harshly criticized the Vatican, he practiced obedience to the hierarchy, no matter what its political persuasion. In 1990 he even appeared at a seminar in Rio conducted by Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, who had earlier led the charge against liberation theologians. As he did throughout his life, Dom Hélder wore his cassock.

Though once comfortable with power, Dom Hélder renounced it to side with the poor. Even after retirement he initiated a campaign against world hunger. Yet his

most important commitment was to God and the church.