

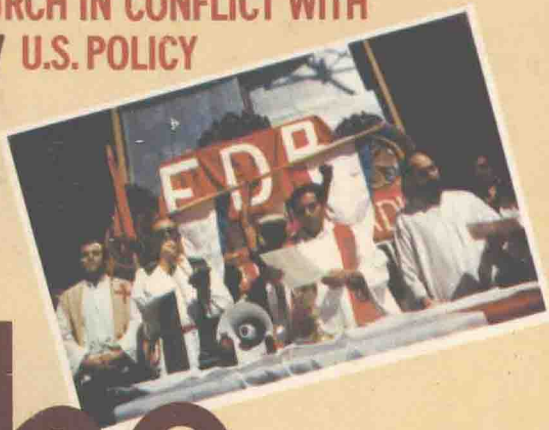
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TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC'S UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS
HAPPENING IN LATIN AMERICA" —JACOBO TIMERMAN



Penny Lernoux

WITH A NEW
PREFACE

THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN
LATIN AMERICA—THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH IN CONFLICT WITH
U.S. POLICY



Cry Of the People

CRY OF THE PEOPLE

The Struggle for Human Rights
in Latin America—

The Catholic Church
in Conflict with U.S. Policy

Penny Lernoux



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CRY OF THE PEOPLE

Penny Lernoux is a prize-winning journalist and an expert on the Latin American Catholic Church. She has lived in Latin America since 1962. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Southern California, she has written on Latin America for *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *National Catholic Reporter*. Ms. Lernoux has received numerous awards, both for her journalism and for her books, including the Sidney Hillman Foundation Book Award for *Cry of the People*. Her other books are *In Banks We Trust* and *People of God*.

From the heart of Latin America, a cry rises to the heavens ever louder and more imperative. It is the cry of a people who suffer and who demand justice, freedom, and respect for the fundamental rights of man.

**III General Conference
of Latin-American Bishops,
Puebla, Mexico,
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TO THE POOR PEOPLE OF LATIN AMERICA

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The list would be incomplete without mention of the many bishops, priests, nuns, and lay Latin Americans who have contrib-

uted to this work with their insights and, especially, their example.

And finally, events are moving so quickly in Latin America that each day brings more changes. Therefore, with few exceptions, the period covered by the book ends in mid-1979.

PREFACE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION

Since *Cry of the People* was written three events of profound significance have occurred for Latin America and U.S. military and economic interests there. The first was the successful Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in July 1979, putting an end to the Somoza family's brutal, forty-three-year reign. The second was the slaying in 1980 of San Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, whose martyrdom symbolizes the new alliance of Latin America's powerful Catholic Church with the impoverished masses. The subsequent rape-murder of three American nuns and a lay worker in El Salvador heightened opposition to U.S. military intervention in Central America among Americans of all religious persuasions. The third event—Ronald Reagan's election as President of the United States—has accelerated the polarization of Latin America through the resurrection of cold war policies from the 1950s. However ineptly applied, President Carter's human rights policy did save lives, placing the U.S. Government on record against torture and murder. The moderation and compromise implicit in that policy have since disappeared in the vortex of Central America's political hurricane.

Contrary to charges by Reagan's advisers that the Carter administration "lost" Nicaragua, there was little that Washington could do to prevent Anastasio Somoza's ouster, save perhaps to send in the Marines, and even Reagan has been loath to test that alternative in a similar situation in El Salvador. By mid-1979, when a general strike paralyzed Nicaragua, and all its major cities rose up against Somoza, the dictator's days were numbered. Five important Latin-American nations, including Mexico, severed

relations with his government. Led by Venezuela, the Andean countries of South America opened talks with a Sandinista provisional government in Costa Rica. A month later Somoza and his family fled to Miami as Sandinista columns converged on Managua to be welcomed by 200,000 jubilant Nicaraguans. Somoza—the longest-reigning despot in Central America, the West Point graduate with so many influential friends in the U.S. Congress—had failed to survive a popular revolt despite the best-armed military in the region. The implications were not missed by other Central American dictators: If Somoza could fall, what were their odds of survival?

Fittingly, Somoza ended his days in Paraguay, where the title for endurance passed to General Alfredo Stroessner, who could now claim the most durable dictatorship in the hemisphere. Aging and fat, the once terrifying figure of Somoza became an object of scorn, boozing his way through a series of sexual scandals that shocked even amoral Asunción, the capital city. He was eventually dispatched by a bazooka in broad daylight a few blocks from his Asunción mansion, in what was thought to be an Argentine guerrilla operation sponsored by the Sandinista government. Despite the constant presence of heavily armed guards, Somoza suffered the same fate as his father, whose assassination had haunted him for years. Not even the most reactionary groups mourned his passing. As pointed out by Latin America's newspapers: "He who lives by the sword dies by the sword."

In Nicaragua, meanwhile, the victors' ebullience was soon tempered by recognition of the harsh realities of a war-shattered nation. Forty thousand children had been orphaned; 200,000 families were homeless. One third of the nation's industry lay in ruins, and the vital coffee and cotton export harvests had been seriously damaged. The new government was also saddled with a \$1.6 billion foreign debt from the spendthrift dictator, Somoza having absconded with a \$65.5 million loan from the International Monetary Fund intended to cover interest payments. As in other nations, the Nicaraguans found that the hardest part of the fight is after the revolution.

Struggling to keep the economy afloat with loans from sympathetic European and Latin-American governments, the Sandinista regime has been beset by the natural, if frustrating, snafus

caused by guerrillas-turned-bureaucrats. Serious, if equally predictable, differences have emerged between the private sector and the government, even though the former still controls 60 percent of the economy, and the Sandinistas have been able to reach agreement with some of the toughest foreign investors, including U.S. banks and the banana giant, Standard Fruit. Dissenting newspapers and radio stations have suffered periodic censorship. And the creaky judicial system inherited from the Somoza regime has been slow in processing the 7,000 former National Guardsmen charged with war crimes, though the number of cases pending was reduced to 4,300 by April 1981, and 1,500 prisoners were pardoned. Cultural differences also have led to misunderstandings between the nervous regime in Managua and the English-speaking Miskito Indian minority in the eastern department of Zelaya. "Nicaraguans have had no experience of the give and take of an open society," explained a U.S. consultant for an international aid agency. "It's not surprising that both government and opposition think they have to browbeat each other."

But if the imagined utopia has failed to materialize, there are many signs of a new, more democratic order. Contrary to predictions by right-wing critics, no leftist strongman has emerged to claim the country. On the contrary, pluralism is alive and well in Nicaragua, as admitted by U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo. "The most dreadful theses about this country have not come to pass," he said. "Nicaragua is an acceptable model of a country after a revolution—and that's crucially important for the whole region."

A literacy campaign conducted by Sandinista youths taught nearly half a million people to read and write, reducing the illiteracy rate from 50.2 percent—among the highest in Latin America—to 12 percent, second only to Cuba. Through community action programs, Nicaraguans paved streets and built electrical lines and houses. Managua's downtown area, destroyed in the 1972 earthquake and never rebuilt by Somoza, is being converted to a complex of sports arenas and parks. In the squalid slums ringing the capital, markets, community centers, and health centers have sprung up; tin and cardboard shacks have been replaced by solid family homes built by their occupants with free cement, bricks, and timber supplied by the government. In the

countryside, where the majority of the people live, more than sixty thousand peasant farmers have benefited from land reform; and, for the first time in Nicaragua's history, peasants and small farmers have access to low-interest government loans and modern technology. Minimum wages have been raised in rural and urban areas and rents halved. Education is free, transport subsidized. Despite gargantuan economic problems, the Sandinista government succeeded in transferring 12 percent of the nation's wealth to the poorest 70 percent of the population within a year and a half of Somoza's overthrow. Said a Managua mother: "There are problems, but we realize a new Nicaragua needs time to be built. The important thing is that we are free."

The extent to which Nicaragua conserves that freedom depends in large part on the course of Washington's hostile policies and events in neighboring El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as the commitment of Nicaragua's most important regional ally, oil-rich Mexico (not Cuba, as General Alexander Haig insisted). In an ominous replay of President Nixon's economic blockade against Salvador Allende's government in Chile, the Reagan administration suspended the final \$15 million installment of a \$75 million aid package granted Nicaragua by Congress under the Carter government. The State Department also blocked a Nicaraguan request for the sale of twenty thousand tons of wheat, even though the Agency for International Development had approved the deal. (The Soviet Union donated the wheat to Nicaragua as soon as the U.S. embargo on grain sales to the U.S.S.R. was lifted.) Washington then threatened to ban Nicaraguan exports of beef and resin. Official Swedish sources also reported that U.S. pressure had prevented European governments from forming an aid pool for Nicaragua. Alfonso Robelo, head of Nicaragua's leading opposition party and an outspoken representative of the private sector, condemned U.S. attempts at economic strangulation as a serious foreign policy error. An equally concerned American diplomat recalled a significant parallel: "Twenty years ago in Cuba, we left no doors open."

The State Department originally directed its ire at the two thousand Cuban teachers sent to Nicaragua for the literacy campaign, although the U.S. Government had also been asked to participate, and refused. (A hostile Washington refused to lend

Nicaragua two helicopters to fly literacy volunteers in and out of the bush, whereupon Mexico gave them five helicopters for the job.) Shortly after Reagan's inauguration, the State Department launched a White Paper, purportedly authored by Salvadoran guerrillas, which documented Nicaragua's involvement in arms shipments to the rebels. But the paper failed to convince European governments or even right-wing military regimes in South America, not only because it was so poorly conceived (the authors could not even add correctly in their arms calculations), but also because it was so reminiscent of earlier White Papers, on Allende's Chile and on Vietnam, which were later shown to have been the work of the CIA. In fact, the threat from revolutionary Nicaragua stemmed not from real or imagined arms shipments to neighboring insurgents, but from its very existence—living proof that the people could rise up and overthrow their tyrants despite the proconsular attitude of Washington toward "our" countries in Central America.

Nicaragua's example was fundamental to the growth of guerrilla insurrection in El Salvador. In contrast to Nicaragua, where the State Department's catch-up policy cost Washington its influence with the Sandinistas, the Carter administration determined to get in on the ground floor in El Salvador by nudging the unpopular and ruthless General Carlos Humberto Romero from office. The reformist junta that replaced him soon disintegrated, however, under pressure from the hard-line military and its allies in the country's small oligarchy. The Christian Democrats' José Napoleón Duarte, one of the few moderates to uphold the increasingly right-wing junta, was named President, but real power remained with Defense Minister José Guillermo García and the army. As in Nicaragua, the death toll quickly mounted: between 1980 and mid-1981 some twenty-two thousand people were killed. Three quarters were victims of the security forces, according to Amnesty International. The majority had no guerrilla connections but were murdered because they belonged to a teachers' union or human rights group that objected to the butchery. Whole villages were destroyed, the survivors fleeing to the Honduran border, where they were massacred by Honduran and Salvadoran soldiers. In one such slaughter, at the Sumpul River in May 1980, more than six hundred men, women, and children were killed.

Survivors told how babies were thrown in the air and cut to ribbons by government troops.

By mid-1981 over 150,000 Salvadoran refugees were crowded into precarious camps along the length of Central America. Yet fighting intensified, with three guerrilla groups matching—and gaining on—the Salvadoran armed forces, despite the Reagan administration's hurried attempts to beef up the latter with \$35 million in U.S. weapons and fifty-six U.S. military advisers. Efforts by the West European, Canadian, and Mexican governments to encourage the junta to initiate peace talks with the broad opposition Revolutionary Democratic Front repeatedly failed due to Washington's intransigence. And the killing continued.

For all the similarities in the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan insurrections, both of which can be traced to a long history of poverty and repression, there were several crucial differences. Unlike Nicaragua, where the business community made cause with the guerrillas in shared hatred of Somoza, El Salvador's landowning and industrial elites joined the military. And whereas the Carter administration played the sidelines during the Sandinista revolution, Reagan's government defiantly placed itself in the middle of El Salvador's conflict as strategist, propagandist, financier, and supplier of arms for the military junta. Since Carter did not overtly aid Somoza, one can only speculate as to whether similar brashness in Nicaragua on the Carter administration's part would have caused the same widespread revulsion among Americans as Reagan's actions in El Salvador. In any case, the Nicaraguan struggle lacked the one essential feature of the Salvadoran war that has caused so much anti-Reagan feeling in the United States—the unprecedented persecution of the Catholic Church. While bishops were threatened in Nicaragua and two priests killed, the Somoza regime never declared open war on the Catholic Church. In El Salvador, on the other hand, the junta has attempted to exterminate every religious institution, group, and individual concerned with the suffering people and opposed to state terrorism. It is enough to possess a Bible or a picture of Archbishop Romero to be killed.

Twelve priests have been murdered since the violence began in El Salvador; many of the peasants assassinated by security forces belonged to Christian grass-roots communities (*comunidades*

de base). In July 1980, 128 National Security troops attacked the Legal Aid Office of the archdiocese of San Salvador, ransacking and confiscating files, including information on Archbishop Romero's murder. Repeatedly bombed, the Church's YSAX radio station was finally destroyed in September. Eyewitnesses reported that Salvadoran military in uniform were among the thirty to fifty people who participated in the two-hour operation. The following month the parish church of Aguilares, scene of some of the military's worst brutalities, was machine-gunned and sacked. Churches in other areas were strafed, their occupants sometimes killed. The archdiocese of San Salvador also reported that on several occasions communion hosts had been desecrated by attacking troops. The archdiocese's premises, its printshop and bookstores, various Catholic schools, and the residences of priests and nuns were searched, machine-gunned, and dynamited. Observed the Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States: "Priests, members of religious orders and lay persons who cooperate actively with the Church have been the object of systematic persecution by the authorities and organizations that enjoy the favor of the government."

The ongoing martyrdom of the Catholic Church in Latin America is one of the principal themes of *Cry of the People*. Since it was written, the list of religious martyrs has grown to more than 950, not including lay leaders. Most of the recent victims were in Central America, Bolivia, and Chile, but it is to El Salvador that American Catholics' attention has been drawn, not only because of the savagery of the repression, but also because of the deaths of one man and four women. When the last chapter of El Salvador's struggle is told, it may well turn out that those murders were the most damaging of the junta's many mistakes.

The man—Archbishop Romero—was gunned down while saying Mass in a San Salvador chapel in March 1980. According to Atilio Ramírez Amaya, the judge appointed to investigate his death, the assassination was planned by General José Alberto Medrano, founder of a paramilitary death squad called ORDEN, and Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, a former intelligence officer. The judge made these revelations in Costa Rica, where he had fled for his life. Robert White, former U.S. Ambassador to El

Salvador, confirmed to a congressional committee that there was “compelling” evidence of D’Aubuisson’s part in the killing, dubbed Operation Piña.

Because of who and where he was, Archbishop Romero’s sacrifice seemed to sum up everything that the resurgent Latin-American Church has been working toward since the historic meeting of bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, which placed the Church on a new course for social justice. A quiet, apparently conservative man, Romero changed almost overnight when he was catapulted into the strife-torn archdiocese of San Salvador. “When I became archbishop,” he said, “priests were being killed, accused, tortured. I felt I had to defend the Church. Then again, I felt that the people the Church has to serve were asking me to defend them.”

Romero represented no political party or ideology, only the people of El Salvador, the vast majority of whom are poor. His was the “voice of the voiceless.” Frequently threatened with death, Romero prophesied, “If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador.”

Although he opposed violence from any source, such opposition cost him his life. Many people in El Salvador believe that his last homily was his death warrant because he called on Salvadoran troops not to shoot their brothers. Observed Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez: “Before Romero the Church tended to say: these Christians died for political not religious reasons. Now it has been made clear that Romero died for religious reasons. He was killed not because he defended the rights of the Church, but because he defended the rights of the poor.”

Like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., Romero possessed a charisma that earned him international repute. Although his plea to Washington to end military support of the junta did not move the Carter administration, it was heard by the U.S. Catholic Church, whose bishops took an unusually strong stand against U.S. military intervention. That stand was the first step in a new direction for American Catholics, many of whom had been uninformed and disinterested observers of the martyrdom of their brothers and sisters in Latin America. What brought home the persecution, in a way that even Romero’s death could not, was the