

El Salvador death toll: speculators cash-in on cemeteries

BECAUSE of President Reagan's militant support for the ruling junta in El Salvador, land reform in that strife-torn country may be abandoned.

The Junta is considering abandoning the reform because its "economic and social benefits are very much less than its cost."

This would please right-wing landowners, whose death squads are credited with murdering the one man who was determined to push land reform ahead: Agriculture Minister Enrique Alvarez Cordova.

But the prospect of abandoning land reform would also please the left-wing. They know that their only chance of securing support from rural peasants for communism is if the reform fails.

As the Archbishop — his predecessor, Oscar Romero, was assassinated last year — explained: "There would be more pressure for an insurrection if the reforms were not carried through."¹

So the shift in Washington policy has pleased the political extremists and intensified violent conflict. But a third group is also reaping the rewards of President Reagan's decision to turn this tiny Central American country into an intense ideological battleground: the land speculators.

Over 13,000 people have died in the past year, most of them murdered down back streets and in country lanes.

At least 500 of them died in the first two months this year, and as the bodies have been collected so the value of land suitable for cemeteries has soared.

Hugh O'Shaughnessy reports: "The mayors of San Salvador, the capital, and the neighbouring town of Santa Tecla, are trying to cut the cost of funerals and prevent speculation in land for cemeteries."²

REFERENCES

1. Michael Leapman, 'Salvadorean church speaks out against the left', *The Times*, 7.3.81.
2. 'Talks called to stop a war', *The Observer*, 1.3.81.

MAE WEST: NEVER SAY 'NO!'

SHE made her name with saucy suggestions like: "Come up and see me sometime," and: "I'm in Who's Who because I know what's what."

But Mae West wasn't talking about sex when she told reporters over the past few years: "I never could say 'No' to a good offer."

She was talking about her land deals.

The Hollywood sex queen made her first million out of films. When she died last November she left property worth \$1m.

Over the years, however, she amassed a fortune reportedly in the region of \$45m. — which she gave away

before her death, thereby evading California inheritance taxes.

During the '30s and '40s, she shrewdly moved into land dealing, buying large tracts mainly in the San Fernando Valley.

Although she owned a beach house in Santa Monica, and a ranch in the valley, Mae West preferred to spend most of her time in an apartment in Hollywood. A columnist reported her back in 1973 as explaining:

"I like this place. I moved in here the first day I arrived in Hollywood. Did it in my favourite colour: white. I owned the building once, but I sold it. I never could say 'No' to a good offer."

Priests confused by Pope's strictures



POLITICALLY-active Catholic priests in the Philippines were left confused by the Pope's visit.

For when he toured the sugar plantations near Bacolid City on February 20, he reiterated the message delivered in Mexico, the US, Poland, Zaire and Brazil.

The land, he declared "is God's gift to all humanity." It may not be used "in such manner that the benefits it produces serve only a limited number of people, while the others — the vast majority — are excluded from the benefits the land yields."

This was a rousing testimony, with serious implications for property rights and income distribution.

Ecologists adopt land tax policy

BRITAIN'S Ecology Party has adopted land value taxation as its policy for dealing with land speculation and for ensuring a fair return for the investment of labour and capital.

The policy was adopted at the party's spring conference at Malvern, Worcestershire, on March 1.

This is the second major ecology-orientated political party to adopt land value taxation. The first to do so was New Zealand's Values Party.

During the debate, however, many of the delegates demonstrated a misunderstanding of how the tax would operate. One of the delegates, Mrs Shirley-Anne Hardy, of Pitlochry, Perthshire, said afterwards: "People should study an idea first before opposing it."

She added: "However, because of a welcome appreciation that the land question is fundamental to so much of Ecology Party policy, it was decided that the issue should receive the widest possible discussion before our October conference. This should give people the chance to clarify their views."

The Pope urged landowners to be guided not "by the economic laws of growth and gain, nor by the demands of competition or the selfish accumulation of goods, but by the demands of justice."¹

But how were these goals to be achieved? Pope John Paul rejected the use of violence. Even more, however, he urged priests not to become involved in the political activities which might secure an improvement in the condition of the peasants.

Many priests and nuns were unwilling to accept the Pontiff's cautions without questions. One of them, Sister Christine Tan, is reported as stating: "I will study what he says, and then decide whether it is true."²

Added her colleague, Sister Pilar Verzoza, who had opposed the papal visit because it would help President Marcos: "We're certainly not going to be closing our eyes to the injustices around us."

Throughout his global visits, the Pope has been radical in word but conservative in his approach to the earthly action that is needed to engineer the changes that would be necessary if his ideals were to be realised.

There is no evidence, as yet, that his pontification has encouraged the landed élites to yield to voluntary reforms. Meanwhile, more priests are being radicalised by their experiences in the parish slums and by the rural poverty that afflicts the Third World.

REFERENCES

1. *The Tablet*, 28.2.81, p. 218.
2. 'Mission to the East', *Time*, 2.3.81.

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