

**T**RADITIONALLY the Christian church has supported the "establishment" — the elites which derived political power from their control over the life-giving resources of nature. Never more so than the Roman Catholic Church in South America where — except for a few honourable cases of renegade priests pitting themselves against the authorities in the interests of their congregations — the church has been a profound force for conservatism.

The Archbishop of San Salvador has changed all that. And for his courageous stand against the land-owning class which rules the tiny central American state of El Salvador, the Most Rev. Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdames has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The nomination may cost him his life. His religious status grants him no immunity against the assassin's bullet in a country where priests have been hounded and murdered for articulating the human rights of the exploited peasants.

**O**VER NINETY per cent of pre-school Salvadorean children suffer from malnutrition.<sup>1</sup> The statistics make it easy to argue that the main problem is "over-population" — El Salvador's population growth rate of 3.5% is indeed high. But as Richard Gott has reported, *the real problem is one of land distribution.*<sup>2</sup>

Over 90% of the farms are smaller than 10 hectares, and are crowded into about one-quarter of the available farmland. The rest, including the most fertile land, consists of large estates owned by a few wealthy families.<sup>3</sup>

Fifty families own 80% of the land,<sup>4</sup> but traditionally the top 13 families have ruled the country. In the 1960s the Party of National Conciliation was created by the army to preserve the privileges of the landed oligarchy.

These interests have now been extended to the creation and control over industries in the urban sector. Unemployment is very high as a result of the steady flow of peasants from the countryside, where land is increasingly being given over to export crops, chiefly coffee and cotton.

Thus, through their military "front" men the land monopolists keep a dictatorial rein on the political life of El Salvador.

**T**HERE HAS been no substantial trouble in the countryside since 1932, when 20,000 peasants were massacred because they dared

# THE PRIESTS WHO HAUNT A CROOKED SYSTEM ...

The Archbishop of San Salvador has emerged as the champion of the peasants whose only crime, he says, "is to express their dissatisfaction at the lack of work and a small piece of land out of which to earn a living." FRED HARRISON reports on the schism between church and the central American state of El Salvador.

## The Roots of Corrupt Power

to challenge the system.

The army has administered the country since then. There have been serious disturbances (in 1969 and 1976) as a result of military conflicts with Honduras: the aggression between the two neighbours has been over territorial claims on the border. The trouble centres round the need for land. But internally, the power-holders have met with little resistance.

Until the priests strayed from their biblical texts and started preaching economic justice...As a result, they have been threatened and murdered, and some have been expelled.

**The regime knew** how to silence the politically independent journalism of *La Crónica*: the newspaper was shut down in April 1977.

**They knew** how to silence opponents at the elections: rig the results.

**They knew** how to silence the peasants: unleash the National Guard (the fiercest of the security forces) onto them, and refuse them jobs on the estates.

*But how do you close the pulpits?* The religious leaders

would not be silenced, and so the campaign against them has been intensified.

**A MILD** attempt at land reform was tried by General Carlos Romero in 1977. During the presidential elections he promised to distribute 1,200 hectares from one estate to peasants.

The landowner was not going to be dispossessed: the plan was to *buy* the land from him. But the political implications, in terms of the distribution of power, were not lost on the ruling families. The act was the thin end of the wedge which could only erode their power.

The landowners, some of whom were implicated in the funding of massive election rigging which brought Romero to office, organised themselves into the National Association for Private Enterprise. About \$2m were channelled into a fund to fight the agrarian reform.<sup>5</sup> The so-called "reform" was abandoned.

The same thing had happened to an attempt in 1975 to introduce a land reform law. This, too, was squashed — despite the fact that the law was phrased in such a



◆This photograph shows Portuguese soldiers in the fortress at San Salvador: it was taken in 1914, when the news broke of the oppression of the Baptist mission there by the colonial authorities. Today, San Salvador is "independent"—but the oppression continues in the guise of neo-colonialism....

way that, in the words of the Christian Democrat party, "It will take between 100 and 200 years to be carried out".<sup>6</sup>

**O**PPPOSITION to the monopolists, ineffective in the rural sector, has been no more potent in the towns. Some urban workers have formed themselves into guerrilla groups, but these have squabbled among themselves.

The army, then, has had to be equipped with the minimum of hardware to carry out its repressive duties. But equipped they have to be, to intimidate the isolated groups of peasants who through hunger and frustration occasionally try to kick over the traces.....

How the peace is maintained was described by reporter Alan Riding when he visited a sugar mill on one of the big estates: "...the peasants worked under the watchful eye of uniformed guards armed with shotguns. Outsiders definitely were not welcome."

Periodically, then, it is necessary to go shopping among the suppliers of military weapons. In December 1977 the British Government agreed to supply £850,000 worth of armoured vehicles. Protests by Labour and Liberal MPs elicited weak claims from Government Ministers that El Salvador had given an assurance that the arms would not be used to support any armed attempt by Honduras to settle its territorial claims over the British colony of Belize.

No sooner had Foreign Minister Dr. David Owen uttered his words than El Salvador made it plain that it would not accept any such restrictions. Reluctantly, the Labour Government cancelled the

shipment. Omitted from its calculations were the morality of arms sales to bolster repressive regimes, and the unquestionable intention to use the weapons against El Salvador's own citizens.

**N**EVERTHELESS, the dictators are coasting along comfortably but for the unrelenting difficulties posed by Jesuit and Catholic priests.

◆The Latin American Confederation of Catholic Priests accused the El Salvador Government of massacring almost 1,000 people in February 1977.

◆In June 1977 the White Warrior Union (right-wing terrorists), threatened to turn 47 Jesuit priests into "military targets" unless they quit the country. Their "crime": being "Marxist agitators".

◆Fathers Higinio and Jose Alas received their death warrants in the post: a black card with a cut-out of a white hand embossed on it. Father Alfonso Navarro was not so lucky - there was no warning of the lethal burst of machinegun fire which sent him to the grave.

◆Several priests have been arrested and tortured, providing them with first-hand evidence of

the tyrannical treatment meted out to the peasants which had been exposed in pastoral letters.

When Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdames became Archbishop of San Salvador early in 1977 it was believed that he would serve as a pastoral rather than political leader. Instead, however, he systematically denounced the murders, torture and the frequent "disappearance" of trade unionists and church officials.

He uses the pulpit and the Catholic radio station to keep up the pressure on the tyrants who use torture to silence potential opponents. (The use of torture against prisoners was attested to by the International Commission in September 1978.)

The reaction has been a campaign of vilification and slander.

Still he will not be silenced, hoping that his appeals for a reasonable, reformist response from the landowning class will result from the recognition of human rights for everyone.

*Truly a saint among sinners.....*

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>Alan Riding, *Financial Times*, 21.8.75.
- <sup>2</sup>*Guardian*, 2.3.77.
- <sup>3</sup>Edward Mortimer, *The Times*, 23.11.78
- <sup>4</sup>David Watts, *The Times*, 7.3.77.
- <sup>5</sup>David Watts, *The Times*, 18.7.77.
- <sup>6</sup>Alan Riding, *op. cit.*

## CHAMPION OF THE POOR

IN A LETTER sent to the Nobel committee in Oslo, 118 members of the British Houses of Lords and Commons state of the Archbishop of San Salvador: "He has consistently and uncompromisingly denounced the numerous arrests, detentions, tortures, disappearances and killings in El Salvador today. Almost alone he has become the champion of the poor and the defenceless. As a result he is subject to daily vilification in the Press and elsewhere as insane, subversive, as a man who 'sells his soul to the Devil'."