

Catholic Throwback Thursday: Dom Hélder Câmara: Remembering the other “bishop of the slums”



“Without justice and love, peace will always be the great illusion.”

-Dom Hélder Câmara (1909-1999)

It's Thursday!!

Time to continue the Catholic twist to Throwback Thursdays.



Today we are rolling back the clocks to 1964:

Fifty years ago, on March 12, 1964, Hélder Pessoa Câmara was installed as Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Brazil. Known simply as Dom Hélder, he served in this capacity for twenty-one years during military regimes in Brazil.

Dom Hélder was known for his passionate advocacy for the Latin America's poor. Refusing to live in the bishop's residence, he was often referred to as the “bishop of the slums.” His 1971 book *“Spiral of Violence”* linked structural injustice with

rebellion and repression. He called for the young generation to step forward to break this spiral.

Nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize four times, Dom Helder was awarded the Pacem in Terris Award in 1975, and also received the Martin Luther King Prize that same year for his work on behalf of the poor and oppressed.



“When you live with the poor, you realize that, even though they cannot read or write, they certainly know how to think.”

Advocate for peace and justice:

One of my college professors, Rev. David W. Givney wrote in his book “The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future” (St. Mary’s Press, 2009):

“Like Merton, (Câmara) urged a personal conversion and interior change of heart as the necessary beginning for any really effective change in the structure of society.”

Quoting Dom Helder: “I accuse the real authors of violence: all those who, whether on the right or on the left, weaken true justice and prevent lasting peace. For me, my own personal vocation is that of a pilgrim of peace, following the example of Paul VI; personally I would prefer a thousand times to be killed than to kill.”

1976 International Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia:

I was young and impressionable when I first heard Dom Helder speak at a Social Justice panel during the 8-day International Eucharistic Congress in August of 1976. I stayed in the area with the family of an SSJ- friend and teacher for the week and attended all eight days of what would be a turning point in my faith life.

The theme of “The Eucharist and the Hunger of the Human Family,” had a daily focus on eight designated hungers: the hungers for God, bread, freedom and justice, the Holy Spirit, truth, understanding, peace and “Jesus, the bread of life.”

Also speaking that Monday and Tuesday on the themes of hunger for bread, and for freedom and justice were Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens (1904-1996), the Belgian Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussel (1961-1979) and leader at the Second Vatican Council; Jesuit superior-general Pedro Arrupe, S.J., along with the incredibly inspiring Dorothy Day, and “living saint” Mother Teresa who was just starting to become an international superstar for her work in Calcutta.

I was so inspired by the words of these men and women who spoke so eloquently, so emphatically, on the need for food and justice for all people, everywhere. The Gospel call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked resounded loudly and clearly in their messages. My love for the social teachings of the Church was born.

Dom Hélder, short in stature, standing no taller than my 5’1”, spoke perhaps most passionately of them all, waving his arms and loudly calling for all Catholics and people of good will to open their eyes to the plight of the poor. He pleaded for Catholics of the United States to stand up for the poor of Latin America.

I found an article in the archives of The Tablet which had some of Dom Hélder’s quotes from his talks at the Congress:

Dom Hélder spoke of *“the great scandal of the century . . . We are trying to reach other planets, leaving our own planet with over two-thirds of humanity in misery and hunger.... Why not discover Christ in the foreign worker? Why not discover Christ in our black brothers, our Indian brothers, our yellow brothers, our Latin American brothers—above the Chicanos and Puerto Ricans?”*

“Like my dear brother, Martin Luther King, I have a dream... When one person dreams alone, it is only a dream. When we dream together, it is the beginning of reality.”

The article noted that when Dom Hélder completed his remarks, he was in tears and was then embraced by Mother Teresa and Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, Vatican

secretary of state, who were on the stage with him. It triggered back for me the memories of those moments during a full-convention center standing ovation. How blessed I was to be there....



Blessed Pope John Paul II visited Brazil in 1980: Seen here with Dom Helder in Recife (Photo)

A storyteller:

A great storyteller over the years, one of Dom Helder's favorite anecdotes to share was when Mother Teresa asked how he managed to remain humble. He told her that he "had just to imagine himself making a triumphant entry into Jerusalem, not as Jesus but as the donkey who carried him."

According to his obituary, years later Mother Teresa reminded him of that very conversation, sharing that she had adapted his counsel to the conditions of Calcutta by thinking of herself as serving God as an old cow.



Dom Hélder and Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997)

(Photo: Belluschi)

Remembering Dom Hélder, 1999:

The periodical "Sojourners: Faith in Action for Social Justice" wrote of Dom Hélder at the time of his death in 1999:

“The gospel is so contrary to the way of the world that it has to be shown, not merely told. Dom Helder Camara is one who showed the way. Helder Camara was the Brazilian Catholic archbishop who became renowned throughout the world as the inspirer of Latin America’s liberation theology movement. Barely five feet tall, Dom Helder never embraced the pomp and ceremony of his rank. He wore a plain brown cassock and a simple wooden cross. As a young priest he served in the ghettos of Rio de Janeiro. It was here that he first began to speak of the unjust structures of poverty, saying, “When you live with the poor, you realize that, even though they cannot read or write, they certainly know how to think.” In 1955, Camara founded CELAM, the Latin American bishops’ council, the first organization of its kind in the world. In 1960, during the preparatory meetings for Vatican II, Dom Helder brought to Rome the agenda of a “preferential option for the poor.” He even suggested that the pope give the Vatican and all its art to the United Nations for its work with the poor, and live in a humble manner as bishop of Rome. Camara himself refused the episcopal mansion, choosing instead a modest three-room house behind the church in Recife, Brazil. When Mother Teresa asked him how he managed to maintain his humility, Camara replied that he had just to imagine himself making a triumphant entry into Jerusalem—not as Jesus, but as the ass. Dom Helder Camara died on August 27, 1999, at age 90, lying in his hammock surrounded by his closest friends. We offer these memories of Dom Helder from more of his “friends,” far and wide.

—The Editors”

Catholic Throwback Thursday:

Before I left for school this morning I grabbed a book from my home office that I remembered last night. It is entitled “Dom Hélder Câmara: The Violence of a Peacemaker” (Orbis Books, 1970).

I leave you today with the words of Dom Hélder from the back cover:

In the heavy hours

*when solutions do not come,
go spin a top:
it counterfeits a game,
it is a prayer:
the discovery
that not so very different
is the merry-go-round of life
and we know not when
it will run down and stop.*

*Often
a confident and childlike attitude—
mixture of play and prayer—
brings God's enlightenment.*

God rest this bishop of the slums. Amen.

