

Sergio Méndez Arceo: a voice beyond the chorus



Luis Borboa.

Pope Pious XII appointed Sergio Méndez bishop of the city of Cuernavaca.

Sergio Méndez Arceo, Christian, priest and socially involved bishop, a free man who broke untrodden ground in the Mexican Catholic church, died at 84, on February 6, in Mexico City.

Sergio Méndez Arceo was always committed to the defense and support of the poor, persecuted, displaced, and to the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed peoples of Latin America.

Deemed the only free-thinking bishop of the Mexican Catholic Church, open to any initiative on behalf of liberation from within or outside the Church. He was harshly criticized by the Church itself since his actions contradicted its traditionally conservative and institutional spirit. The bishop, however, never considered himself a rebel, "I have never been rebellious. I have been free, not rebellious."¹

Méndez Arceo was born in Mexico City on October 28, 1907. He completed his first ecclesiastical studies in the Council Seminary of Mexico. In 1927 he travelled to Rome to study at the Pious Latin Pontifical College and at the Gregorian University of Rome where he took a degree in Sacred Scripture and a Doctorate in Philosophy and History. At 27, he was ordained in the chapel of the English College in Rome.

He delivered his first mass in Mexico in the Cathedral of Zamora, Michoacán, and remained in the city as assistant to the parish of St. Joseph. He was appointed spiritual director of the Minor Seminary of Mexico, and professor of ecclesiastic history, Latin, Greek, and Greco-Roman history in the Major Seminary in 1940.

Until then, Méndez Arceo moved with satisfaction along the paths of the traditional Church, "with authority and even authoritarianism, with ecclesiastic pomp and the exquisiteness of a cultured bourgeois gentleman."² As a model ecclesiastic governor within a conservative clergy, it was no wonder that Pope Pious XII, relying on Méndez Arceo's ability to maintain harmony in his diocese, appointed him bishop of the city of Cuernavaca, Morelos, in 1952.

Henceforth, as a result of diverse experiences in the Church, he became a socially involved bishop. Two of his basic endeavors were his participation in the Rome 1962 efforts of Vatican II and the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín, Colombia in 1968.

Vatican II represented a change in the church's stance. Summoned by Pope John XXIII to question the church's role in a modern world, after three years of regular conferences, Vatican II replaced a static church with a church in motion. It also accepted that the church should serve humanity through history, that it be open to dialogue and religious liberty, enter into a dialogue with the sciences, in an atmosphere of liberty and creativity.

¹ Videla, Gabriela, *Sergio Méndez Arceo, un señor obispo*. Mexico, Editorial Nuevomiar, 1984, p. 81.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

According to Méndez Arceo, the results of the council would reveal "the direction of his possible participation in the church's destiny,"³ and would be fundamental to an understanding of the conclusions of the second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, whence the model for a people's church and base communities arose. The Latin American church transformed itself in Medellín by adopting the principles of Liberation Theology which unequivocally chose the defense and liberation of the poor.⁴

The changes begun by John XXIII did not put Méndez Arceo on the path to renewal but rather confirmed his adherence to it. A determined promoter of the poor peoples' church, his loyalty to ecclesiastical principles would never prevent him from clearly expressing his differences of opinion with the powers dominant in the Catholic hierarchy.

His interest in sustaining a critical conscience led him to develop friendships with officials and intellectuals, believers or non-believers, such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, Alfonso Reyes, Ignacio Chávez, Silvio Zavala, Francisco Julião, Salvador Allende, Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega.

“Méndez Arceo expressed regret for the Pope's lack of understanding for the popular Christian movement”

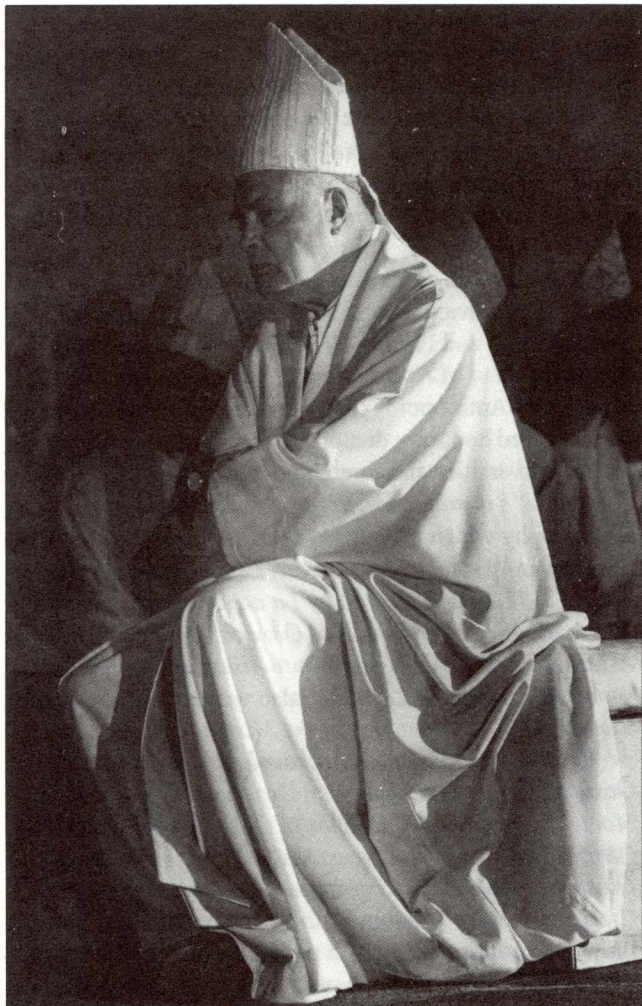
In 1960 he allowed activities in the monastery of St. Mary of the resurrection, directed by the Benedictine Gregorio Lemerrier, where psychoanalysis was undertaken in a religious setting and liturgical renovation was promoted.

He also authorized the foundation of the Intercultural Training Center (CIF), which later became the Intercultural Documentation Center (CIDOC), directed by the Austrian priest, Ivan Illich. Here, priests and Catholic lay clergy participated in the study and analysis of the Catholic church and education.

Don Sergio backed both of these experiments when they were attacked and their leaders forced to appear before the Holy Office, where they were defeated by the forces of intolerance and their projects cancelled.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴ The progressive posture of Medellín was vehemently criticized and opposed by the most conservative elements in Latin American Catholicism. As of 1972, they decided to reestablish the Church-state alliance and launched a conservative offensive to silence the critical voices of priests and laymen.



Luis Borboa.

I have been free, not rebellious.

Institute, the Ibero-American University and the National University, among others.

In 1976, in his efforts to "evangelize the outsiders," he participated in a public dialogue on ideological pluralism, Christianity, Marxism, and social change with representatives of the Mexican Communist Party. His homily broached the possibility of Christian participation in the Mexican Communist Party in pursuit of common objectives.

That same year he attended the Meeting of Progressive Bishops, in Ecuador, where he was detained for several days by the authorities along with 16 Latin American bishops. He denounced Latin American government complicity with imperialism. Under the pretense of preserving national security, they persecuted the Church when it "set out to promote human dignity."⁹

He traveled to Cuba again in 1978 and, with Ernesto Cardenal and Alfonso Camin of Spain, he signed the

Havana Declaration, which identified the similarity of Christian and socialist aims.

Because of his defense of the Cuban socialist system, and of the Sandinista revolution, the Conference of Mexican Bishops and conservative groups from the private sector unleashed an intensive campaign against what they considered to be a dangerous move towards Marxism.

In 1979 he was denied authority by the Presidential Council of the Mexican Episcopal Conference. The reproof was ratified by the Vatican; however, Don Sergio was able to show that no act of his merited dismissal from his post as bishop. Students, townspeople, and sectors of the progressive Mexican and Latin American church came to his defense.

The incident did not slow his activities in support of Latin American liberation movements. In 1979 he visited Nicaragua as a guest of the Sandinistas. In 1980 he condemned the murder of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero. In 1981 and 1982 he promoted the First and Third International Oscar Arnulfo Romero Meetings in the cities of Mexico and Cuernavaca.

In 1983 he criticized the attitude of Pope John Paul II during his visit to Nicaragua where, in spite of popular demand, he refused to pray for the youths murdered by the Contras. Similarly, Méndez Arceo expressed regret for the Pope's lack of understanding of the popular Christian movement.

He retired from the Diocese of Cuernavaca at 75, in a ceremony held on March 15, 1983. It was there that he read the letter of resignation which he had tried unsuccessfully to deliver to the Pope in person during his 1982 trip to Rome.

After his resignation, he continued his efforts on behalf of peace in Central America. He traveled to Nicaragua, Cuba, Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Madrid, Portugal and Holland, where he took part in ecclesiastical, cultural, and political events. He was in the United States on several occasions to give lectures at universities and to discuss with Catholic groups the role of American Christians in Latin American liberation processes.

After his death, more than two thousand people bid him personal farewell at a ceremony held in the Cathedral of Cuernavaca. Members of base communities, independent workers, former political refugees, progressive clerics and nuns, artists and intellectuals, all united to say goodbye to the bishop, to the man who always defended his right to dissent, and for whom justice was the foundation upon which the peace of peoples really rests ✠

Elsie L. Montiel
Assistant Editor.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.