

salvage something in the open season on humans.

I do not mean salvage our lives; I mean our humanity. Our sense of one another, of compassion — our very sanity.

I hope I am inching toward the contents of your letter. You discuss quite freely and approvingly the violence of a violated people, yourselves. You align yourself with that violence, regretfully but firmly, irrevocably.

I am sobered and saddened by this. I think of the consequences of your choice, within Nicaragua and far beyond. I sense how the web of violence spins another thread, draws you in, and so many others for whom your example is primary, who do not think for themselves, judging that a priest and poet will lead them in the true way.

I think how fatally easy it is, in a world demented and enchanted with the myth of short cuts and definite solutions, when nonviolence appears increasingly naive, old hat, freakish — how easy it is to cross over, to seize the gun. How easy to conclude: the deck is stacked, first card to last, in favor of the Big Sharks; the outcome of the game, of life itself, is settled before the cards are dealt. Why then is taking a few lives (of dubious value at best, torturers, lackeys, police) preferable to the taking of many lives of great value, students, the poor, the victimized and defenseless, the conscientious, those easily identifiable as gospel brothers and sisters? There is, after all, a long tradition of legitimate self-defence.

It may be true, as you say, that "Ghandi would agree with us." Or it may not be true: It may be true, as you imply, that Merton would agree with you. It may be true that Christ would agree with you. I do not believe he would, but I am willing to concede your argument, for the sake of argument.

You may be correct in reporting that "those young Christians fought without hate . . . and especially without hate for the guards" they shortly killed (though this must be cold comfort to the dead). Your vision may one day be verified of a Nicaragua free of "campesino guards killing other campesinos . . ." The utopia you ache for may one day be realized in Nicaragua: ". . . an abundance of schools, child care centers, hospitals and clinics for everyone . . . and most importantly, love between everyone." This may all be true; the guns may bring on the kingdom. But I do not believe it.

One religious paper here published your words under the following headline: "When they take up arms for love of the kingdom of God." How sublime, I thought, how ironic. We have had "just"

wars of the right, a long history of blood, the blood of colonials and natives and slaves and workers and peasants. But we are through with all that. Now we are enlightened. We are to have "just" wars of the left!

So the young men of Solentiname resolved to take up arms. They did it for one reason: "on account of their love for the kingdom of God." Now here we certainly speak within a tradition! In every crusade that ever marched across Christendom, murder — the most secular of undertakings, the most wordly, the one that enlists and rewards us along with the other enlistees of Caesar — this undertaking is invariably baptized in religious ideology: the kingdom of God.

The power of such language we know too well. Religious battle cries induct hearts and minds as no secular slogans can. Religious ideology raises its flag in every nation, even as it denies the final authority of every nation. It offers to transcendent longings a task that is simple and forthright: kill. It offers a slogan that is as immediately tactile and hot as a fired gun: kill for the kingdom. And perhaps most important of all, it offers a way out: out of anger, out of frustration, out of poverty, out of political stagnation, out of the harsh and dreadful necessity of love. God wills it! The kingdom requires it!

Blood and iron, nukes and rifles. The leftist kill the rightists, the rightest kill the leftists; both, given time and occasion, both torture prisoners. Always, you understand, inadvertently, regretfully. Both sides, moreover, have excellent intentions, and call on God to witness them. And some god or other does witness them, if we can take the word of whatever bewitched church.

And of course nothing changes. Nothing changes in Beirut, in Belfast or in Galilee, as I have seen. Except that the living die. And that old, revered distinction between combatant and noncombatant, which was supposed to protect the innocent and helpless, goes down the nearest drain; along with the indistinguishable blood of any and all.

Alas, I have never seen anyone morally improved by killing; neither the one who aimed the bullet, nor the one who received it in his flesh.

Of course we have choices, of course we must decide. When all is said, we find that the gospel makes sense, that it strikes against our motives and actions or it does not. Can that word make sense at all today, can it be something more than utopian or extravagant? The gospel is after all a document out of a simpler age, a different culture. It may even be our duty

to construct for ourselves another ethic, based on our own impasse or insights or ego. And go from there, with whatever assurance we can muster, amid the encircling gloom.

Or on the other hand, we can bow our heads before a few truths, crude, exigent, obscure as they are. The outcome of obedience we cannot know, the outcome of disobedience we can deceive ourselves about, indefinitely and sweetly. Thou shalt not kill. Love one another as I have loved you. If your enemy strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the other. Practically everyone in the world, citizens and believers alike consign such words to the images on church walls, or the embroideries in front parlors.

We really are stuck. Christians are stuck with this Christ, the impossible, unteachable, irreformable loser. Revolutionaries must correct him, set him aright. That absurd form, shivering under the cross winds of power, must be made acceptable, relevant. So a gun is painted into his empty hands. Now he is human! Now he is like us.

Does it all have a familiar ring? In the old empires, the ragged rabbi must be cleaned up, invested in byzantine robes of state, raised in glittering splendor to the dome of heaven. Correction! correction! we cry to those ignorant gospel scribes, Matthew and the rest. He was not like that, he was not helpless, he was not gentle, he was under no one's heel, no one pushed him around! He would have taken up a gun if one had been at hand, he would have taken up arms, "solely for one reason; on account of his love for the kingdom of God." Did he not have fantasies like ours, in hours out of the public glare, when he too itched for the quick solution, his eyes narrowed like gun sights?

How tricky it all gets! We look around us at our culture: an uneasy mix of gunmen, gun makers, gun hucksters, gun researchers, gun runners, guards with guns, property owners with guns. A culture in which the guns put out contracts on the people, the guns own the people, the guns buy and sell the people, the guns practice targets on the people, the guns kill the people. The guns are our second nature, and the first nature is all but obliterated; it is gunned down.

And who will raise it up, that corpse with the neat hole in its temple, ourselves? It is impossible, it is against nature.

Christ asks the literally impossible. And then, our radical helplessness confessed, he confers what was impossible.

Dear brother Ernesto, when I was underground in 1970 with J. Edgar Hoover's hounds on my tail, I had long

hours to think of these things: At that time I wrote: "The death of a single human is too heavy a price to pay for at the time, many among the anti-war left were playing around with bombings, in disarray and despair.

I am grateful that I wrote those words. I find no reason eight years later to amend or deny them. Indeed, in this bloody century, religion has little to offer, little that is not contaminated or broken or in bad faith. But one thing we have: our refusal to take up bombs or guns, aimed at the flesh of brothers and sisters, whom we persist in defining as such, refusing the enmities pushed at us by warmaking state of warblessing church.

This is a long loneliness, and a thankless one. One says "no" when every ache of the heart would say "yes". We, too, long for a community on the land, heartening liturgies, our own turf, the arts, a place where sane ecology can heal us. And the big boot comes down. It destroys everything we have built. And we recoil. Perhaps in shock, perhaps in a change of heart, we begin to savor on our tongues a language that is current all around us: phrases like "legitimate violence", "limited retaliation," "killing for love of the kingdom." And the phrases make sense — we have crossed over. We are now an army, like the pope's army, or Luther's, or the crusaders, or the Muslims. We have disappeared into this world, into bloody, secular history. We cannot adroitly hold both gospel and gun; so we drop the gospel, an impediment in any case.

And our weapons?

They are contaminated in what they do, and condemned in what they cannot do. There is blood on them, as on our hands. And like our hands, they cannot heal injustice or succor the homeless.

How can they signal the advent of the kingdom of God? How can we, who hold them? We announce only another bloody victory for the emperor of necessity, whose name in the Bible is Death.

Shall he have dominion?

Brother, I think of you so often. And pray with you. And hope against hope.

Daniel.

ERNESTO CARDENAL, poet, guerrilla, priest and now cabinet minister.

He wanders through the lobby of the Inter-Continental Hotel in Managua, where most ministers are temporarily housed, in a coarse white shirt and blue jeans. He chats with the Sandinista youth in their green outfits, holding their guns as naturally as most kids hold their textbooks.

He has faith in Nicaragua's new revolution, where he hopes to revive the arts, dance, music and literature.

He prays — literally — for money to help make the new government run.

"I am praying for miracles," he said, "because I still believe in miracles."

"I would like to answer an open letter published by Father Daniel Berrigan in the *National Catholic Reporter*, which I did not wish to answer at the time, a year and a half ago, a little bit after the insurrectional attack on the Sandinista Front and after the destruction of our Solentiname community.

"Father Berrigan disagreed with me because I defended the armed struggle. I did not want to answer him at that time, because it seemed to me that it was a useless task to discuss the pros and cons of armed struggle, and I thought it was better to wait until the reality showed that we were right, knowing that this would happen soon, and now the reality has proven this.

"My great friend, my friend and brother, Father Berrigan, can now come to Nicaragua and see the immense jubilation of the people for their victory, which the arms of the Sandinista Front have achieved. This was a saddened people, and now anyone who comes can see a smiling people, full of happiness and jubilation; a happy people in spite of such great suffering.

"Father Berrigan wrote to me in that letter that no principle — no matter how high it is — was worth the spilled blood of even just one child. I agree with this. But for the same reason I feel that no principle — no matter how noble — even the principle of staunch non-violence — is worth *more* than the blood of this one child.

"The struggle of the Sandinista Front was not for any principle — no matter how high — but to avoid the shedding of blood of those children who were assassinated by this dictatorship and those adolescents and those men and those women and those old people who day after day were assassinated.

"These arms were used not to kill, but to give life. And the struggle was a very uneven struggle. For as Bishop (Manuel) Salazar of Leon has said, it was a struggle of David against Goliath."

"One can't compare the weapons of common people in Nicaragua, with their .22 caliber guns or machetes and sticks and stones, to the heavy arms of Somoza's National Guard, supplied to him by the United States and Israel. And one also cannot compare the blood the Sandinista Front had to spill, which was only that of National Guard soldiers, whom the Sandinistas shot and killed in combat, to the numerous daily assassinations by the National Guard.

"The National Guard never held Sandinistas prisoner. The Guards instantly killed them. Other youths — not necessarily Sandinistas — were also killed daily for the simple crime of being young. These young people turned up later in gulleys or along the side of the road or in trash heaps with their eyes torn out and their genitals castrated.

"To avoid all this, the Sandinistas and all the people of Nicaragua had to fight. And here in Nicaragua, it has been demonstrated that the common slogan that violence always seeks violence. This war was found to end violence. The Sandinista Front has been very generous in its victory and is not killing any of those criminals who truly deserve death.

"The Minister of the Interior, Commander Tomas Borge, not long ago found one of his torturers in a jail. Tomas Borge was one of the tortured who most suffered under Somoza's regime. He found a National Guard prisoner whom he recognized as one of his torturers and he said, 'I am going to get my revenge from you,' held out his hand, and said, 'this is my revenge. I forgive you.'

"The same Tomas Borge has found some words of Carlos Fonseca Amado, the founder of the Sandinista Front, 'If one soldier of the National Guard is taken prisoner by us, we should not only respect his life and dignity, but is necessary to treat him as one of our own brothers, it is preferable to sin by being too generous rather than by being too rigorously just.' The important thing, as Fidel (Castro) once said, is not to eliminate the sin but save the sinner.

"According to Carlos Fonseca, 'If we let ourselves be ruled by a personal sentiment, by anger, by the feeling of vengeance, we will fall into the very sins against which we are struggling. If we want to construct a society inhabited by new men, we have to behave ourselves as new men. If we kill presidents, how can we differentiate ourselves from our enemies?' *The revolution of Nicaragua has shown how we can make a revolution that produces peace and brings happiness to the people, how one can use the violence that produces this peace and happiness.*

"Many journalists ask what will be the role of the Christians in this revolution. This is a badly formulated question, as if there were a difference between the Christians and the revolution, when a great part of those who had made the revolution are Christian. This is a revolution in which they now have positions in the government. The church is very involved in this revolution, understanding the church to be not only the bishops, but all God's people of Nicaragua.

"Those who have taken up arms have done it for compassion. They have not done it because of vested interests. They have done it for the benefit of others. And those who died have followed the precepts of Christ in giving their lives for others. In this Nicaraguan insurrection we have seen youth putting the gospel into practice and sharing their scarce food. For this we have made the revolution. "It seems to me that Christianity is, before

anything else, the relationship of man to man, and this is the message that Christ brought to earth. And this is what we here in Nicaragua have put into action. In what was first a celebration and ritual, this is now the least important part. The reality is much more important than the ritual. The reality is the love of one's neighbours."

My position as the cultural minister, is a surrendering of myself to others. It is

very hard for me because I have had a very different vocation, but I consider that I am pursuing God's will. And because of this, I am doing it. I wish to go on writing, but for now my task is that others should write, that others should sing, should paint, make music and theater."

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