Peter M. Sánchez

Priest Under Fire: Padre David Rodríguez, the Catholic Church, and El Salvador's Revolutionary Movement. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2015. Pp. 308. Hb, \$44.95.

The revolutionary movement of El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s had a major impact throughout the hemisphere on scholarship, politics, and policy far out of proportion to the diminutive size of the country. The primary reason why it captivated the imagination of so many people especially on the left was that it promised to create a new form of socialism rooted in liberation theology and in Christian base communities. This socialism would represent a fundamental break with all previous existing models, including the Cuban, which many considered to be distorted by authoritarianism. Several scholars, especially Anna Peterson, Carlos Cabarrús [*Genesis de la revolución*], and Leigh Binford [*El Mozote*], have published highly valuable studies that focus on the development of the *iglesia popular* (popular church) and its impact on the Salvadoran left.

Peter Sánchez's study *Priest Under Fire* provides a fascinating addition to the literature on liberation theology and the Salvadoran Left. It offers an in-depth biography of David Rodríguez. In many ways, Rodríguez was an exceptional representative of the *iglesia popular* in that he joined the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (Popular liberation forces) in 1974; several of his fellow clergy who did so were assassinated by the military or death squads. Most clergy, influenced by liberation theology, did not join guerrilla organizations. During the civil war most fled into exile or withdrew from engagement in social struggles. Moreover, he had to leave the priesthood in order to pursue a relationship with a woman and their child. Yet, in other ways Rodríguez does exemplify how the movement ratified and impelled forward at Medellín in 1968, had such a decisive impact on otherwise fairly ordinary clergy. Rodríguez had, however, studied in Mexico and Spain where he was introduced to varied perspectives within the church. But, when he started out as a parish priest he was quite traditional. Indeed, he was the chaplain for the Fifth Infantry Brigade of the army and had no qualms about serving in that position.

The impact of Medellín on Rodríguez, according to Sánchez, was not immediate, or, at the very least did not directly lead to his radicalization. Rather, according to this finely written and carefully wrought biography, his personal upbringing also played a major role in his conversion during the 1970s. He grew up in the household of a relatively wealthy landowner who had substantial sugar cane fields, a traditional sugar mill and employed many seasonal laborers. Although it is quite possible that Rodríguez idealized some of his youth—it is hard to imagine that cutting sugar cane could be all that festive (as opposed to

the *trapiche*—milling activities), it does seem quite probable that his father was far more benevolent than most other *hacendados*. He recalls that his father's laborers were served the same food as his family ate, which, in the Salvadoran rural context was quite extraordinary and undoubtedly did shape Rodríguez's egalitarian ethos. Regardless of the specific balance of influences, Rodríguez's egalitarian and compassionate style inspired a great deal of confidence among the local peasantry who soon began to complain about hacendado practices, especially those that fraudulently denied them income. For example, on some coffee plantations, *hacendados* did not use scales to weigh the coffee but rather bins that siphoned off ten per cent of the coffee pickers' earnings. Such practices deeply irritated Rodríguez. When personal entreaties to the hacendados did not work, he lent his support to the organized protest of campesinos.

His biography lends considerable weight to the widely accepted understanding that the repressive response of the oligarchy and the military regime radicalized the peasantry and its liberation theology-inspired supporters such as Rodríguez. Indeed, he, faced with harassment from the traditional church and from the local authorities for his pro-*campesino* activities, quickly moved towards membership in the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación. Rodríguez's trajectory from traditional priest to guerrilla seem logical enough, as he realized that reasonable social change was not possible under the existing regime. Yet, as noted above guerrilla option was somewhat exceptional. Beyond the repressive roots of radicalization, Rodríguez opted to join the guerrilla organization out of concern for his safety in addition to the FPL's marked opening to Catholicism. Although there is no reason to doubt that he considered safety to be key, one does wonder why the FPL would not have provided him with security, simply because he was a key ally of the campesinos.

The explanation rooted in a notion of self-defense does recall the experience of catechists in the northeastern department of Morazán, that eventually became a guerrilla stronghold. Despite a collective memory that similarly highlights repression as the key cause of radicalization, in fact, the Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (CEB) activists had neither been arrested nor executed at the moment in 1974 when thirty of them opted to join the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). They joined, it seems, in the expectation of future repression on the one hand, and due to the revolutionary opening to their Christian beliefs and practices on the other. That proposed unity of Marxism and Christianity, also discussed at length by Rodríguez (through his biographer) was a decisive innovation in the Salvadoran left and as such needs more interrogation. Although there is absolutely no doubt that liberation

theology strongly legitimated the participation of peasants in mass organizations especially the Bloque Popular Revolucionario, it is not at all clear that either the egalitarian CEB experience or the theology that informed it contributed significantly to the organizational development of those organizations and especially of the FPL or the ERP. One can certainly argue that the exigencies of clandestinity and then warfare militated against the non-hierarchical social forms that characterized much of the CEB experience (including collective farming, apparently not part of Rodríguez's experience). Yet, the question remains, what then did it contribute to the ideology and practice of the Salvadoran left as it was understood by its leadership, particularly during the civil war (1981–92)? *Priest under Fire* suggests a great deal precisely because Rodríguez himself experienced his own transformation as a merging of the two ideological currents.

Following the civil war, Rodríguez had problematic relations with the increasingly bureaucratized FMLN (the party that emerged from the united guerrilla organization), though he served as a congressional deputy during several periods. This latter section of the biography is fascinating for those scholars or students who wish to understand that political transformation and the struggles of people, like Rodríguez, who sought to maintain fundamental principles of egalitarianism and social justice in a radically transformed, neo-liberal world.

This biography will provide students with an excellent introduction to the *iglesia popular* in El Salvador. Yet, like all biographies it has its limitations. First, there is relatively little archival research to substantiate or enrich the vast autobiographical testimony (buttressed by over one hundred interviews). Second, although the book does an excellent job of linking Rodríguez to broader developments in Salvadoran society and politics, understandably it does not pursue the inevitable silences in his testimony. There is, to cite a key example, no discussion of the intense dispute within the *iglesia popular* about the response to the Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno that emerged from the coup of October 15, 1979. That split pitted Msr. Romero and the outspoken Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría, who had hopes that the government and its progressive program could avoid civil war, and those like Rodríguez (and the FPL) who saw it as part of a US backed counterinsurgent maneuver. Although by late December Romero and Ellacuría came to see the junta as a tragic failure, the split has largely been silenced in the writings on the period. Indeed, there is no mention in the book of any communication between Rodríguez and Ellacuría despite the fact that the latter had been the former's teacher. If there was no communication, that might have been worth noting. Notwithstanding this limitation,

Priest Under Fire is an excellent addition to the literature on liberation theology and politics in El Salvador and throughout the continent.

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