

11-2001

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Recommended Citation

Rios, Mario C.M. (2001) "In Search of the Truth...The Case of Bishop Girardi," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 45 : No. 6 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol45/iss6/20>

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In search of the truth... The case of Bishop Girardi

*Interview with Bishop Mario Rios, C.M.
Auxiliary Bishop of Guatemala City*

We are at the threshold of an important ecclesial event, the Synod of Bishops, with theme: “The bishop, servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the hope of the world.”

In *Vincentiana* we want to highlight the work being done by our confrere Bishops in the world.

We know that you have developed an important work in Guatemala, in a unique social and political situation, very similar to other countries of Latinamerica. In fact, the most noted event in the last years has been the murder of Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi Conedera, on April 26, 1998 at the entrance of his residence in the Parish of St. Sebastian (Guatemala City). You are his successor now as Coordinator of the Office of Human Rights as well as of Social Pastoral Office.

1. Please give to the readers of Vincentiana a brief synthesis of the case of Bishop Gerardi, starting from his commitment on defense of human rights, his violent death, and the sentence that has recently been pronounced.

Bishop Gerardi was the Bishop of Vera Paz; then he was transferred to the Diocese of Quiche; finally, he was named Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Guatemala. He was known for his Pastoral work with indigenous people and his defense of human rights. He attended primary school under the case of the Daughters of Charity in St. Mary’s school in the City of Guatemala. That is why it seems to me very normal that he would dedicate himself to the poorest and marginalized people: the indigenous.

In his position as Auxiliary Bishop of Guatemala, he founded and coordinated the Office of Social Pastoral and Human Rights for the Archdiocese of Guatemala. From this post, his most important work was the creation of REMHI (Interdiocesan Project for the **Recovery of** Historic Memory) which consisted of a strong criticism of the abuses of the Guatemalan army in the armed conflict, during which time the doctrine of “National Security” was applied . REMHI was presented in the Cathedral of the City of Guatemala on April 24, 1998. Fifty hours later, Bishop Gerardi was brutally murdered at the entrance of his own house, in the Church of Saint Sebastian, in Guatemala city.

This was a crime that had all the signs of a political crime, categorized as an “Extrajudicial Execution,” in this crime were involved three co-actors and one accomplice, all have been sentenced to 30 to 20 years in jail.

The sentence, *although not yet definitively confirmed, is still* very significant to show Guatemala and the world that there is hope for a new and different Guatemala, where we will never again have to lament such a tragic incident as this one.

2. How was this sentence reached without any precedence in the history of Guatemala?

The sentence was arrived as though the work and effort of the judges, the Special Prosecutor and his team; through the collaborators on the part of the Archdiocesan Office, thanks to the support of other churches, of friendly countries and also through the different Non-Government Organizations.

3. What was your most difficult moment in this process?

It was when they had to exhume the remains of Bishop Gerardi so that the experts designated by the ODHAG (Office of Human Rights of the Archdiocese of Guatemala) were able to perform their investigation to prove that they were not dealing with a “common crime”, but with a “political crime,” that is to say, of an execution outside of the law (committed by Government persons by means of a carefully planned plot, carried out completely and in a hidden way), which makes it almost impossible to get to the truth. ***I still believe that there is no such thing as a perfect crime.***

4. What was the role of Bishop Mario Rios after the murder of Bishop Gerardi?

It has not been easy to continue the task begun by Bishop Gerardi. Besides being the Vicar General, Pastoral Vicar, Pastor Saint Sebastian Parish and Rector of Saint Catherine Parish, I have coordinated the Offices of Social ***Ministry, and of Human Rights for the Archdiocese of Guatemala***, helped greatly by the Legal Department that has tried to discover the truth in the crime committed against Bishop Gerardi.

5. What do you think should be the mission of the Bishop in the face of Human Rights violations?

To get to know the roots of the local reality in order to face the challenges that are presented, to work with the preparation and support of the persons that

collaborate in the knowledge, promotion, defense and vindication of human rights.

6. What do you think should be the mission of the “Vincentian Bishop” in the reality of today’s world ,especially with the poor?

It does not matter what congregation to which he pertains-even though the formation received and the ambiance in which he lives conditions his mission-he should establish priority for his pastoral work, putting all in the hands of God and feeling sure that God is the Lord of History.

7. Please share with the confreres and laity that read Vincentiana, something of your personal reflection with regard to this tragic event of the death of Bishop Gerardi?

If the Lord has called us, we have to renew our promise every day, up to our last day, in the way that he wants us to do it. No one knows God’s ways. He ***goes about*** leading us through many persons and events. He give us the grace and strength that is needed to confront all difficulties and contradictions. ***We have to consistent in everything*** with the help of his grace.

Curia General C.M. – Rome, 20 June. 2001

(ARTHUR KOLISKY, C.M., Translator)