

Ron Hennessey heard the cardinal's prayer and ignored its implications. He immediately wired Maryknoll for emergency funds and set about distributing whatever assets he could lay his hands on. He purchased a pair of front-end loaders and two dump trucks—all the mission could afford—to open roads to the most devastated areas. He assigned several Maryknoll Brothers to coordinate relief efforts and asked Bill Woods to fly in supplies to isolated communities, landing on whatever open stretch of real estate he could find. The lowan threw open the doors of the Maryknoll Center House in Guatemala City to a score who had lost their dwellings, a charity that he undertook only after obtaining unanimous agreement from his housemates. Maryknoll answered his request for funds by appealing to its donor base and was able to send almost a half million dollars worth of corrugated metal roofing to be distributed to the homeless.

International aid began pouring into the country from around the globe, each country's embassy attempting to direct its assistance to projects that not only alleviated human suffering but presented a positive profile for Guatemalans and international observers to admire. President Kjell Laugerud set up the Committee for National Reconstruction (CRN) to coordinate the delivery of the foreign aid. Former president Carlos Arana Osorio, taking a page from the book of his mentor, Tacho Somoza of Nicaragua, tried to gain control of the CRN in order to siphon off for his own benefit whatever resources he could lay his hands on, much as the Nicaraguan had done after his country's 1972 devastating earthquake. Laugerud fought off Arana Osorio as best he could, naming Colonel Ricardo Peralta Méndez as head of the CRN. Peralta Méndez was a respected army officer with promising political ambitions, a nephew of the former Jefe Máximo, Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia (1963-66), a man who could call on his uncle's still powerful political base for backup when needed to out-muscle Arana Osorio.

Laugerud's lack of political gratitude fueled Arana Osorio's enmity and turned the Jackal of Zacapa into an implacable antagonist. Local reconstruction committees that had developed under Peralta Méndez's tutelage became the targets of a new wave of death-squad activities godfathered by Arana Osorio, one of which, the Secret anti-Communist Army (ESA), specialized in the kidnapping and assassination of union leaders, students, politicians, and professionals "who may have demonstrated the slightest interest in altering the status quo."¹

Chapter 24

A WARNING AND THEN SOME

During the night of 4 February 1976, Guatemala shook from head to toe. Sixteen of its twenty-two departments (provinces) felt the effects of a massive earthquake that rivaled those that leveled the country's ancient capital, Antigua, in 1717 and again in 1773. The modern version left thirty thousand dead, seventy-seven thousand injured and over one million homeless. The vast majority of those affected were the very poor, those who lived in dwellings with walls made of unstable mud adobe with heavy tile roofs, located on mountainsides and quake-prone ravines.

Cardinal Casariego led his countrymen in prayerful contrition, claiming the disaster was divine punishment inflicted by a disappointed Father on His disobedient children whose sins merited no less. Since the poor were the quake's main victims, they interpreted the churchman's prayer as a condemnation of their life ways, a thought that many Maya shared. Some, however, were puzzled by the seeming contradiction: the cardinal was wont to say in his Sunday homilies that God must love the poor very much since He had created so many of them. His was not an original concept!

The prelate also blamed the tragedy on those priests and nuns who had cast off their cassocks and religious garb to get more personally involved in responding to the social needs of Guatemala's poor, a current that had evolved from the Second Vatican Council. As far as the cardinal was concerned, one could leave the sanctuary only to evangelize and sacramentalize; all other undertakings were fraught with temptation, generally sexual. He, like his predecessor, believed that poverty, hunger, sickness, death, and its concomitant ills were part of a divine plan to give the oppressed a running start on gaining heaven, and as such, these burdens should be embraced, not contested. It was a theology he did not practice.

At this point, Arana, feeling betrayed, turned to activities that heretofore had been taboo even for the army's most criminal element, kidnapping for ransom members of the nation's wealthy elite, smuggling arms for whom ever could pay the price irrespective of their social ideology, and shepherding shipments of illegal Colombian drugs through Guatemala into Mexico for delivery to the United States. The anticommunist hero of U.S. Colonel John Webber's 1966-67 terrorist Zacapa campaign quickly fell out of favor with his former Pentagon sponsors.

Ron Hennessey wrote letters home praising Laugerud's attempts to see that the international aid got to the most needy sectors of the nation's poor. He also expressed disappointment that a new union federation, the National Committee for Trade Union Unity (CNUS), attempted to politicize the disaster by calling for strikes while criticizing the president for not providing adequate housing for the urban homeless, as well as for what it saw as ineffective attempts to punish those who speculated in basic commodities. When Laugerud responded by ordering the CNUS to call off the strike and get back to the task of rebuilding the country, the federation pointed out that the presidential order to shoot looters was being used as cover for the murderous death squads. As a result, the honeymoon between the new administration and the trade unions dissolved on the rocks of mutual recriminations.

The devastation wrought by the earthquake, as well as the social upheavals that resulted therefrom, meant that Laugerud would lose control over the government during the last two years of his presidency (1976-78). A cabal of hard-liners led by General Romeo Lucas García, Laugerud's minister of defense, took behind-the-scenes control of the army, the power fulcrum that Arana Osorio had so avariciously coveted but had forfeited by going beyond the recognized rules of the game. Antagonizing the U.S. government, whether from the left or the right, was a no-no that could not be sustained.

Two months after the earthquake, during the second week of April, Father Bill Woods received a note from U.S. ambassador Francis E. Meloy inviting him to talk about the Ixcán colonization project. The invitation excited Woods; he believed the ambassador's interest would translate into moral and financial support, as well as protection for the colonists from the military. The priest

spent several hours pulling together a series of photographic slides he could show the ambassador to impress him with the effort already invested and the potential for further resettlement in the Ixcán. About 6:30 p.m., Woods headed for the ambassador's private residence.

Three hours later, as Hennessey was getting ready to retire, Woods returned. Coming through the door into the large parlor, the Texan attempted to sound unconcerned. He walked over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a half glass of Scotch. Without turning around, he asked, "Ron, do you know what the ambassador wanted? What he really wanted?"

Hennessey remained silent. Woods sat down in a chair across from the Iowan and stared into his glass. After a few seconds, he looked up and sighed. "He wants me to get out of the country as soon as possible. He says my life is in danger from the five top military men in the government. He also said that the U.S. government couldn't do a blessed thing about it . . . Can you believe that?"

Hennessey watched the priest sitting across from him. The Texas bravado was gone and Woods actually looked smaller, his shoulders hunched forward, averting his gaze from the superior's eyes. Ron felt sorry for his friend.

"He told you that the suspicions of your collaborating with the guerrillas goes all the way to the top?" Hennessey asked.

"That's what he said. They told him that I don't obey Guatemalan laws, that I charge colonists too much for the airplane trips, and that I'm running arms from Cuba to the guerrillas."

Hennessey waited. "Who's 'they'?" He finally asked.

"General Romeo Lucas García, the minister of defense, is the most determined to get rid of me. Then there's General Rubio Coronado, the minister of agriculture, and Colonel Sandoval Torres, the commandant in Quiché. He included General Vassaux, the minister of *gobernación*, and President Kjell Laugerud himself, but he seemed to think the latter two were not as gung ho as the first three. But all five say I'm running stuff into the Ixcán from Cuba for the guerrillas. Can you believe that shit?"

"I can!" Hennessey replied. "You and I know the guerrillas are active in the Ixcán . . . Your illegal flights into Belize must have been discovered—probably monitored . . . What if one of your kidnapped colonists succumbed to torture and said you were involved with the guerrillas? . . . Maybe the ambassador is right?"

Woods was shaking his head before the superior had finished speaking. "Look, Ron, the settlers would get the impression that I was pulling out because things are too hot. Some would start to leave, the army would kill those who stayed behind, and we could kiss good-bye everything the people have worked for over the last six years. Please! Don't even think of asking me to leave!"

"Well, you'd better see what you can do about correcting this misunderstanding and do it quick. This whole thing is escalating too fast if the embassy is concerned . . . Why don't you try to see all five and put your cards on the table? Tell them the truth. Belize! Your radio call to Washington! Everything! . . . It can't be worse than your present predicament!"

The Texan stared at his superior for a few moments. "Maybe I should ask Bishop Victor Hugo Martínez to go with me? It'd look good to have a bishop sticking up for me."

"Bill, . . . it would be easy for me to pull you out of the Ixcán. But I'm more worried about the colonists than I am about you. Since these guys have warned the embassy, it's not likely that they'll move against you, . . . at least, not for a while . . . But the colonists are a different matter. The army could wipe them out tomorrow and we'd be the only ones to complain . . . You have to stand with them, . . . be their witness!"

The two priests sat looking at each other in silence. Finally, Woods spoke up: "I'll go see those jerks right after Holy Week. I've got to be in the Ixcán for the Holy Week liturgies. As soon as I get back, I'll get Victor Hugo to come with me and we'll see all five."

Hennessey nodded. "Just don't approach them with a chip on your shoulder. You're not very good at hiding your feelings . . . And by the way, I'm going with you to the Ixcán for the weekend. I want to hear what the settlers have to say."

Back in the capital on Easter Monday, Woods set about getting Bishop Victor Hugo Martínez to write to the five high-level accusers, requesting an appointment with each. Woods wrote a sample of the letter he wanted the bishop to sign. But the bishop refused. The prelate told the priest that his letter "was not political enough and smacked of breaking confidence," meaning that Woods had been too open about repeating the ambassador's message.

The Texan rewrote the letter in a more ladino tone and the bishop sent it off to the ministers of defense, agriculture, and the interior. Woods then wrote a letter to President Kjell Laugerud, telling him about the Ixcán project, denying any contact with the guerrillas, stating that he had no "political ideals," and asking for the president's support. He also wrote to the commandant in Quiché, but since he had already had a run-in with Colonel Sandoval, he knew the commandant wouldn't see him. His letter was short and to the point. No ladino niceties.

President Laugerud honored Woods's request and granted him an interview. The president listened attentively, the Texan told Hennessey later, but offered no help, suggested no solution. Woods went alone to see the minister of agriculture, General Rubio Coronado, but he met with the minister of *gubernación*, General Vassaux, in the company of Bishop Victor Hugo Martínez. The two cabinet members were noncommittal, however, and the visits nonproductive. The minister of defense, General Romeo Lucas García, never bothered to answer, while Colonel Sandoval Torres in El Quiché responded by asking the head of Civil Aeronautics to ground the priest's three planes because Woods continued "to fly in a manner that endangered innocent lives." The head of Civil Aeronautics complied with the colonel's request by canceling the airworthiness certificates of the three planes, even though volunteer pilots who assisted the Texan used two of the planes.

In August, after unsuccessfully appealing the grounding of his planes since May, Woods went home to Houston on vacation and to obtain some needed dental attention. He returned to Guatemala during the first week in October, but Hennessey did not see much of the Texan during the succeeding weeks. At one point, it occurred to the Iowan that he should ask Woods to come in to assess the status of his relationship with the government and the army. But when Hennessey learned that Woods had finally managed successfully to appeal the grounding of his planes to the president, he concluded that there was no need for immediate action. He was wrong!

During this same period the superior had several other matters that concerned him. The conflict in Nicaragua between Somoza's National Guard and the Sandinistas had been heating up and the Iowan was apprehensive for the safety of Maryknoll personnel stationed in areas where fighting was heaviest. The Maryknollers in El Salvador were pressing him to make a more spirited defense of Bishop Rivera y Damas in San Salvador against the intrigues of

Cardinal Casariego. As a result, Hennessey had hardly seen Woods since the Texan's return to Guatemala more than a month earlier.

Now it was 20 November and the Iowan lay in bed, unable to sleep, recalling the ins and outs of Woods's year-and-a-half odyssey, the visits to his colonists by the guerrillas, the murder of the ladino colonist, the assassination of El Tigre de Ixcán, the kidnapping of more than threescore settlers, their probable torture and deaths, Ambassador Meloy's warning, and now, earlier in the day, . . . the disappearance of the airplane Woods was flying with four American volunteers aboard.

As fatigue pressed in on him, the Iowan tried to convince himself that Woods and the others were safe. The Texan had survived so many close calls with undersized runways and prolific jungle undergrowth that had left him with only a single scar, a permanently twisted nose that Hennessey had come to believe that Woods was exactly what he claimed to be, indestructible. Finally, a fitful sleep gave the superior some relief.

At 5:10 a.m., on the morning of 21 November 1976, Hennessey woke with a start. He looked at his watch. What was it that was bothering him? Suddenly it all came back: Woods, his plane and passengers, all unaccounted for. He headed for the Center House radio room. He'd never forget that morning as long as he lived.

"TG5RW, calling TG5RW. Do you read me?" Hennessey called again and again, but received only crackles and hums for his pains. Finally, at 6:45, each of the ten Ixcán colonization centers began reporting in. None had any word of Woods or his passengers.

At 7:05 a.m., Charlie Huegelmeier picked up the telephone in Hennessey's office. As he listened to the caller, his face blanched. He hung up the receiver and turned to Hennessey. "That was Aeronáutica Civil. The mayor of San Juan Cortzal in Quiché sent a telegram this morning advising that Woods's plane crashed yesterday. Everybody on board is dead."

The Iowan shook his head, took a deep breath and stood up. "Good God! How many times did Woods tell me that everything would be all right? . . . We both knew he'd be easy prey in his plane if they ever wanted to get him. It never occurred to me that he'd continue to fly others around . . . How

am I going to break the news to Phyllis Gauker . . . and to the families of the others?"

"I'll go out to the airport and talk to Phyllis, Ron." Huegelmeier answered. "Richard Puig's wife was on that plane and he should be coming here soon to assist at Sunday Mass. You'll have to break the news to him. "I'll try to dig up the U.S. addresses for the other two."

After Huegelmeier left for Aurora Airport, Hennessey called Aeronáutica Civil to find out what he could about the disposition of the bodies, only to be told that the air force had claimed jurisdiction over the matter. "What's the air force got to do with a private plane with private passengers aboard?" he inquired.

"You had better ask the air force commandant, padre. What he says is theirs is theirs. Maybe because the passengers were foreigners? *Quién sabe?*"

When Hennessey called air force headquarters, he was told that the air force was involved because a helicopter had been needed to extract the bodies from the remote area where the crash had occurred. "The remains of the dead are being flown to Santa Cruz del Quiché right now; padre, and should be there in fifteen minutes. We'll have them here in the capital about noontime."

About 11:45 a.m., Hennessey called the air force again and was told that the bodies were even then on their way to the capital, and that he would be informed of the time of arrival when it became definitive. Three subsequent calls received the same response. Finally, at 4:00 p.m., the answer was that the arrival would occur at 4:30 p.m.

Hennessey, accompanied by the director of Funerales Reforma, was at Aurora Airbase at 4:20 p.m. Colonel Roberto Salazar, commandant of the air force, presented himself on the tarmac and, showing much concern, informed the priest that he personally had been to the site of the crash and could verify what had happened: "Padre Woods was unqualified to fly in bad weather. He ran into some clouds and rain over San Juan Cortzal, got disoriented and flew into the side of a mountain. Neither he nor his passengers ever knew what happened. I'm sorry, padre!"

"*Gracias, mi coronel,*" responded Hennessey, wondering why the air force commandant would trouble himself to go to the remote crash scene of a small, private airplane with five civilians on board.

As soon as the five clear-plastic body bags with their contents were off-loaded from the transport plane and placed in two aging black Cadillac hearses, Hennessey accompanied the mortician to the funeral parlor to begin the identification process. The director advised him that the mortuary could do nothing with the corpses until he had the medical reports in hand and the names of the deceased were listed in San Juan Cotzal's civil register. He then suggested that Hennessey think about going to El Quiché to expedite matters.

Hennessey decided to act on the mortician's suggestion. He did not need to be reminded that Guatemalan bureaucracies tend to move slowly in the best of circumstances, and that an isolated rural town like San Juan Cotzal would more likely be at the less efficient end of the bureaucratic spectrum. At 8:00 p.m., two friends of Richard Puig and an employee of Funerales Reforma picked up Hennessey and Howard Gross, the U.S. consul general, and headed for El Quiché.

The two-hour drive out the Pan American Highway and then off onto a switchback mountain road into Santa Cruz del Quiché was a quiet one, with little being said among the vehicle's occupants. It was late, all were tired, and their errand had unpleasant implications for both the regional superior and the consul. Hennessey presumed that Gross was acquainted with Ambassador Meloy's warning to Woods seven months earlier, but felt that the diplomat's silence was an indication that he did not want to discuss the possibility of high-ranking Guatemalan officials being involved in the deaths of five U.S. citizens. Furthermore, the Iowan guessed that some of his Maryknoll colleagues would now accuse him of having made too little effort to control Woods or of having failed to assign the Texan outside the country.

When the five men arrived in Santa Cruz shortly after midnight, the coroner was waiting for them. A long discussion ensued regarding the doctor's mistaken belief that there was one more male and one less female passenger aboard the fatal plane than was actually the case. It took all of Hennessey's patience and diplomatic skill to maneuver the coroner into changing his report. The error was the result of having found two extra passports in the plane's wreckage belonging to volunteers who had not made the flight.

About 2:30 a.m., Monday morning, Hennessey and Gross, believing that the five-hour trip to San Juan Cotzal was too difficult to make at that hour, decided to return to Guatemala City and hire a helicopter to make a direct flight after sunrise.

By 10:00 a.m., the regional superior and the consul general, accompanied by the same two friends of the crash victims, were on their way to San Juan Cotzal in a rented civilian helicopter. Bad weather forced the pilot to land short of his destination and the last twenty kilometers were accomplished in the back of a pickup truck.

The four men arrived at the town during siesta time and were told to entertain themselves for the next two hours. The Mayan mayor, fearful of contradicting the military's version of events, had refused to write up a report. Instead he had been drinking heavily since the previous day and was now too drunk to inscribe the correct names of the deceased in the town's civil register and write up his version of the crash. Twenty-five quetzales worked customary bureaucratic miracle, however, and the ladino town secretary was soon busy preparing the official documents.

Hennessey took advantage of the five hours he was forced to wait for the documents to discuss the crash with the parish priest and several local Mayan residents. Padre Julio Méndez, the Guatemalan pastor of San Juan Cotzal, told the Maryknoller that he had left town for Nebaj at 11:00 a.m. the day of the crash. "There wasn't a cloud in the sky when I left here, Padre Ronaldo, nor had there been any all morning long. Padre Woods could not have flown into a cloud."

Several locals confirmed the pastor's observations. None of them were aware of the air force version of the accident that had Woods flying through clouds and into the mountainside at approximately 10:30 a.m. Some of the respondents claimed to have seen the plane go down, and although their accounts differed as to whether or not it was trailing smoke, all mentioned that the sky was clear. Several men stated they had seen the bodies transported in a pickup to Santa Cruz the day of the accident, and not the following day by helicopter as the air force had claimed.

Why did the air force need those extra hours? Hennessey asked himself. What were they trying to hide . . . or find?

On 25 November, the Civil Aeronautics Board issued its report over the signature of "Natzul René Méndez H., Aircraft Inspector." The report stated, among other things, that "the pilot's compartment and the passengers' section were completely destroyed by the impact and fire . . . The accident was caused by bad weather . . . it was raining . . . It is conjectured that when Mr. Wood [*sic*] saw the pass filled with clouds, he

tried to go under them and ended up inside the clouds . . . he lost the artificial horizon . . . and crashed."²

On reading the report, Hennessey felt that his suspicions of foul play were vindicated. Not only was there the warning to Woods by Ambassador Meloy and the 24-hour delay by the air force in producing the bodies, while lying about their disposition, but now he had an official report diametrically opposed to accounts given him by numerous eyewitnesses. After dedicating some moments of meditation to the pros and cons of his next step, its dangers and benefits, the Iowan decided he could do no less than conduct his own private investigation of the crash.

In the week that followed, Hennessey spent three days at the accident's remote site examining the plane's wreckage. He knew the mountain setting was ideal for anyone interested in "disappearing" him to prevent discovery of incriminating evidence of wrongdoing. Nevertheless, he was able to salvage several important parts such as the broken propeller, engine rods, valves and pistons, and part of the landing gear, items that he felt might produce evidence as to the angle of impact, the speed of the plane at impact, and indications as to the cause of the crash. One thing that struck him as soon as he saw the wreckage, however, was that there was no sign of any fire at the scene.

Hennessey then returned to the capital and later to Huehuetenango to interview many close friends of Woods, his colleagues and assistants, trying to piece together the chronology of events that led up to his final flight. It was during these conversations that the Iowan heard of warnings against flying with Woods given by the air force commandant to several people, including to Dr. Joe Cain, head of the Direct Relief Foundation (a private U.S. charitable organization), to Ann Kerndt, an assistant to Woods and a passenger on the fatal flight, and to the governor of the department of Huehuetenango.

It was in late October, fully a month before the crash, that Colonel Roberto Salazar had advised the governor of Huehuetenango not to fly with Woods "because the priest is a careless pilot." Not a week later, Colonel Salazar told Dr. Joe Cain to disassociate his organization from Woods "because linking yourselves to that priest suggests that you may be party to his one-man rule in the Ixcán in opposition to this country's authorities."

In early November, Huehuetenango's governor, wanting to check on Woods and his project, obtained a ride on an air force helicopter to Centro Belén. But when the military left him stranded there for three days, he asked

Woods to fly him out. In the short flight to Huehuetenango, the governor told Woods of the colonel's advice. The Texan, either because he mistread the warning or had decided to disregard it, continued his flights in and out of the Ixcán, but not before mentioning the governor's account of the commandant's words to one of his colleagues.

Then, just a few days later at the Huehuetenango airport, Colonel Salazar ran into Ann Kerndt and gave her much the same subtle advice. He told Ann it was all right for her to fly with Woods between Guatemala City and Huehuetenango, but not to accompany him to the Ixcán. Ann, not versed in the subtleties of ladino communications, did not grasp the intent of the colonel's warning and flew on the fatal flight.

Hennessey was disgusted that reports of these warnings had passed between several Maryknollers but none thought them important enough to advise the Iowan of their existence.

On 3 January 1977, Hennessey conferred with Howard Gross regarding the official Guatemalan report, which the consul now knew from the Iowan's investigation to be false. The following day, Gross told Hennessey that he had seen both Colonel Alvarez, the head of Aeronáutica Civil, and Natzul René Méndez H., the report's author. Méndez H. had admitted that he never set foot at the site of the plane's wreckage; he had only flown over it in a helicopter with the commandant of the air force. Colonel Alvarez told Gross that he would order a revised report to eliminate any mention of fire in the wreckage. He also stated that he would look into the discrepancies between the official weather report from Huehuetenango's airport (the closest weather station to the site of the crash) that stated that the skies were clear on the fatal day and that of Aeronáutica Civil, which described overcast, rainy conditions. A new report was then issued, backdated to the day of the original report, eliminating all mention of fire, but continuing to maintain that the weather over San Juan Cotzal on the morning of the crash was overcast and raining. The evidence offered for the claim was the testimony of unnamed witnesses. Consul Gross was satisfied with Colonel Alvarez's cooperation.

The families of the four passengers, along with several of their senators and congressional representatives, however, were not at all satisfied with the official report, amended or not. One after the other appealed to Hennessey for information, his observations and interpretations, and other reports. The Kerndt family of Lansing, Iowa, brought strong political pressure on the

U.S. State Department, the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, and the National Transportation Safety Board to resolve some of the contradictory and false information coming from the Guatemalan government. But the State Department, not wanting to antagonize a friendly government and laboring through the last days of the lame-duck presidency of Gerald Ford, temporized. T.M. Kerndt, Ann's father, in a letter to Howard Gross, requested information on what Ambassador Meloy had told Woods back in April.

Gross, in his answer, dated 14 January 1977, replied: "I have learned that Father Woods knew several officers of the Embassy well . . . I understand that on one occasion Father Woods was told that his life might be in danger. However, the embassy has no evidence . . . that the crash was anything but an accident."³

On learning of Consul Gross's answer to Mr. Kerndt, Hennessey understood immediately the significance of Ambassador Meloy's invitation to Woods to visit him at his private residence—rather than at the embassy—to hear of the Guatemalan government's threats: official deniability. There were no entries in the embassy logbook to testify to Woods's visit to the ambassador. There were larger things at stake here than the investigation into the possible murder of five American citizens.

In the succeeding weeks, Hennessey was finally able to convince the Kerndt family—the most persistent doubters of official U.S. sincerity—that the antagonistic, defensive attitude exhibited by the Guatemalan authorities and the unwillingness of the State Department and the National Transportation Safety Board to challenge the Guatemalan report made it virtually impossible to obtain further information regarding the cause of the crash and that any additional attempts to push the investigation would only lead to increased frustration. The Iowan wrote that "only time and a tongue loosened by braggadocio or alcohol could shed more light on what caused TG-TEX [Wood's plane] to dive into the mountainside."

While many of Hennessey's efforts during the weeks following Wood's death were devoted to responding to unanswerable questions from both Maryknoll and the families of the four deceased passengers of TG-TEX, polarizing developments among El Salvadorean Catholics, both clergy and laity, began to impinge upon his time and energies. The lobbying efforts of Cardinal

Casariego and Nuncio Gerarda in Rome in behalf of Bishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero had finally proven successful in February 1977 when Pope Paul VI named Romero to the archbishopric of San Salvador. The Vatican's cooperation in giving San Salvador a prelate who was judged to be a right-wing ideologue was seen by the government as a green light. They began a campaign of repression against Church clergy and catechists who had spoken openly in defense of Liberation Theology. The consequences for the Iowan were almost immediate.

Two Salvadorean priests were arrested and tortured, after which one was expelled from the country, the other dumped unconscious on a street corner. The rectory of a third priest was the target of a bombing, while that of a fourth was machine-gunned. Three foreign priests, an American Maryknoller, a Belgian, and a Spaniard, were arrested, stripped naked, and chained to bare bedsprings, where they were subjected to continuous mock executions by officers pretending to play Russian roulette. The first Hennessey heard of the arrests was when he received a phone call from Bernie Servil, the Maryknoller, incarcerated in the main police station in Guatemala City.

"Ron, this is Bernie Servil and I'm here in the police station on Sixth Avenue. I was picked up by the National Guard in San Salvador and expelled. I wasn't given the chance to go back for some clothing and now I'm freezing. Can you bring me a sweater? Make that three sweaters! There are two others here who need them besides me."

"Bernie, what's going on? Never mind! I'll go by the embassy and get the consul to go over with me. I'll be there as soon as I can."

When the Iowan and Consul Howard Gross showed up at the Sixth Avenue police station, the commandant was very courteous. "These men are being held for entering our country from El Salvador without the proper papers. When the legal questions are settled, they will be expelled to their native countries. We cannot allow anyone, including priests, to violate our immigration laws."

Hennessey and the consul were allowed to interview Servil and were told by the prisoner that he had his passport in his possession when he was received at the border by awaiting Guatemalan authorities. He had requested at the time that they stamp the document but they refused saying it was not necessary.

Unknown to Hennessey, Nuncio Gerarda had made a *sub rosa* agreement with the El Salvadorean authorities that they would expel "undisciplined priests"

to Guatemala, rather than torture and publicly humiliate them—or worse, kill them—from whence they would be deported for lack of proper documentation. Servil was the Iowan's first experience with the new agreement, the details of which he would soon obtain from Archbishop Romero and Bishop Rivera y Damas.

A few days after Servil's deportation, Hennessey received a call from another Maryknoller stationed in El Salvador, Larry McCulloch, who recounted to the Iowan that he had been labeled a "troublemaker" by the El Salvadorean military and had been denied reentry into their country after a short visit to his cousin employed at the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica.

Even as Hennessey discussed with his consultants what steps he should take in approaching the El Salvadorean government and Nuncio Gerarda regarding the Maryknollers' expulsions, fourteen El Salvadorean priests gathered at Apopa for an outdoor Mass. It was billed as a protest against the military and police repression of priests speaking out against the injustice of the country's social conditions. Six thousand people attended the Mass and listened to Father Rutilio Grande, chosen by his thirteen colleagues to give the sermon, declare, "It is practically illegal to be a Christian in this country . . . Christians are branded traitors, communists, marking them for threats, kidnappings, torture, and possibly, the ultimate sacrifice."⁴

On 12 March 1977, Rutilio Grande was machine-gunned to death along with two catechists on a rural road outside San Salvador.

Back in Guatemala, Hennessey received an invitation to participate in a Mass for the repose of the soul of the El Salvadorean priest and his two assistants. When he arrived at the Sacred Heart church in downtown Guatemala City, the Iowan found that only four other priests were willing to disobey Cardinal Casariego's prohibition against the liturgy. The Mass was a moving experience for Hennessey as he felt the courageous spirit of Grande blend together with that of Bill Woods, and he wondered if the same kind of trial would be asked of others in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Not if Cardinal Casariego could help it! On Sunday, the prelate ascended the cathedral pulpit to denounce the five concelebrants, calling them "disrespectful priests," willing to challenge "legitimate authority." He asked, "What does the Guatemalan Church have to do with the El Salvadorean Church, that we should celebrate Mass for them."

Not in living memory had a prince of the Church uttered a more a catholic statement.

The cardinal followed up his denunciation of the Iowan and his four colleagues by writing a pastoral letter to all the priests of his archdiocese. He cited "the recent case in El Salvador where several priests were expelled from the country for departing from their mission, getting mixed up in partisan and sectarian politics." He concluded his missive by advising his priests: "Stay out of politics or you will get what is coming to you, just like the priests in El Salvador."⁵

When Hennessey received a copy of the archbishop's letter, he could not believe that the cardinal was actually saying what it looked like he was saying. Because of the wording and juxtaposition of phrases, it seemed that the prelate was not only justifying torture and deportations, but also murder. "It can't be!" the Iowan told himself. He reread the letter. Then he read it again. Then he went to Charlie Huegelmeyer, his principal consultant and an excellent linguist, and asked him to translate the letter. "Tell me that the cardinal is not justifying the murder of Rutilio Grande for speaking out against social injustice," Hennessey begged.

Huegelmeyer read and reread the letter. "That's what he's doing, Ron. The guy is out of his gourd! This is going to have very serious consequences both in El Salvador and here in Guatemala." And so it would.