

Liberation correspondent: Homilies of Moise Sandoval

Mario T. Garc | Jun. 16, 2009

Santa Barbara

Moises Sandoval, in my opinion, is one of the most important Latino Catholic writers in the United States during the last third of the twentieth century.

In addition to his pioneering history of Latino Catholics in the United States, *On the Move: A History of the Hispanic Church in the United States* first published in 1990 and reissued in 2006, Sandoval served as editor and chief correspondent for *Maryknoll* magazine and *Revista Maryknoll* from 1970 to his retirement in 2000.

In his countless editorials and articles in these journals as well as many other venues, he has written extensively on Latino Catholics in the U.S., on Catholics in Latin America, and on Third World Catholicism. There is no question but that Sandoval in his work has been guided not only by his own personal Catholic upbringing and experience in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado as well as traditional Catholic social doctrine, but also by his study and witness of Liberation Theology that came into prominence as part of the Latin American Catholic response to the reforms of Vatican Council II and in particular to the challenge for the Church to better respond to the modern world.

My paper is not biographical nor is it a comprehensive analysis of all of Sandoval's writings. Rather, as the title suggests, it is focused on what I consider to be Sandoval's homilies or sermons in the form of his many editorials written in *Maryknoll* and especially *Revista Maryknoll*, a bi-lingual edition. A homily, according to the dictionary, is the act of preaching and a sermon is a "discourse of religious instruction or exhortation spoken of or read from a pulpit." Using this definition, I maintain that Sandoval's editorials represent homilies using the journals as his pulpit. In these homilies, he not only introduced some of the context of each month's publication, but also more importantly provided a personal reflection on the gospels from a liberationist perspective on a variety of social and political issues. In this way, Sandoval exercised a type of secular priestly mission.

Let me also preface my presentation by noting that it is not inclusive of all of Sandoval's many editorials, but instead includes a representative sample from the 1970s to the 1990s. My study of Sandoval's work is part of a larger project to edit a select collection of his writings both in these journals as well as in other publications and unpublished matter.

In my analysis of these editorials/homilies, I identify several themes that directly and indirectly are linked to his interpretation of Liberation Theology. As you know, Liberation Theology developed by Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez as well as other theologians both in Latin America and among Latinos in this country, such as Fr. Virgilio Elizondo, is centered on the Church returning to its roots as a Church of and for the poor and oppressed. It calls for a preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Every other aspect or tenet of Liberation Theology flows from this. I am not a theologian and will not go into the various nuances of this theology that many of you know better than I. But there is no doubt in my mind that Moises Sandoval is a liberationist and a practitioner and exponent of Liberation Theology. Some of the key themes found in his homilies include the condition of the

oppressed; on the poor; on social sin; on social justice; on human dignity; on inculturation; and on a self-sacrificing praxis. For this paper, I will only focus on Sandoval's reflections on the oppressed, the poor, on social sin, and on praxis.

tttttII

Let me begin on Sandoval's pronouncements on oppression. The issue of oppression was particularly important to him with respect to repressive and authoritarian governments in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. This was especially the case in Central America such as in El Salvador where the military-controlled administrations through death squads terrorized their own people. In a February, 1980 editorial, for example, Sandoval noted that there existed throughout the world many contemporary Christian martyrs due to political oppression. "The nuances of the dilemma changes," he wrote, "but the Christian's is as Jesus predicted: he or she who truly follow Him is liable to crucifixion." While these present-day martyrs could be found in all places of the world, Sandoval in particular brought attention to Latin America where he believed American citizens possessed a special responsibility due to their government's support of oppressive regimes. Of this he stated:

"We Americans have some responsibility for what is happening there. Our money, our enterprise and policies have helped bring to power some of the dictators persecuting the Church. We have furnished economic and military aid and trained some of the generals now in charge of torture. Our justification is that we must support any regime that takes our side in the struggle against communism. Yet, in supporting tyranny we erase the vision of America as the champion of freedom and offer suffering people no hope. But it is not too late to change."

t

And as he usually did at Easter, Sandoval in 1982 linked the Easter message with a hope that the oppressed peoples of Latin America would successfully achieve their liberation. He equated the suffering of the people to their particular "calvario" and that from this perspective their resurrection might seem impossible. Yet he saw in their suffering the peoples' commitment to their salvation. "It is a wonder," he observed, "that in the middle of massacres in El Salvador, genocide in Guatemala, the disappearance of thousands in Argentina, and the squashing of the poor in Brazil, that there still exists such optimism." More importantly, he stressed, that the people of Latin America were discovering that real power did not emanate from the barrel of a gun, but as a result of the unity and sacrifice of the people's struggle. "In this struggle for justice," he added, "victory will be celebrated by those with a superior morality." Sandoval reminded his readers that the road to peace and freedom that Jesus had promised was not through force but through sacrifice for humanity. "Easter," he concluded, "is only for those who have carried their cross in the struggle for the liberation of their brothers and sisters."

The metaphor of the passion of Christ—the viacrucis—is a repeated theme in Sandoval's homilies. He noted that the crucifixion of Jesus was not past history, but a contemporary reality of what Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth." "The Christ who is crucified today," he noted, "is the one without power, the poor, the refugees, the campesino and among those who give voice to the voiceless such as Monsignor Oscar Romero, assassinated on March 24 six years ago. Many die of hunger, others due to violence and situations due to the greed and indifference by those who hold the power over the people's destiny. No, the crucifixion of Christ is not of the past; it occurs every day." But what should the Catholic, the Christian, do about this, Sandoval rhetorically asked. For one, he suggested, there can be no bystanders to these crucifixions. People could not simply wash their hands of this as did Pontius Pilate by saying that they are too far away from this Calvary or that they cannot get involved in politics or that their country has the right to defend its vital interests and for this reason justify the militarization of Central America. On the contrary, Sandoval preached, the Christian has to

unequivocally embrace life and justice. "As the Gospel and the life of our missionaries show," he concluded, "God does not call on all of us to accept a heroic commitment" un compromiso heróico. Each person has their limits and capacities. But our faith at a minimum calls on all of us to accompany those who carry their cross."

If Sandoval in his homilies paid attention to the oppressed in general in Latin America, he especially called attention to particular examples such as in the case of Central America in the 1980s. In October 1981, he noted that a few months earlier thousands of Salvadorans had attempted to cross the River Lempa seeking refuge in Honduras. The Salvadorian military refused to let them cross and massacred many of them. "Such atrocities that Christians protest to the heavens," he with passion reacted, "are committed using arms sent by the United States under the pretext of fighting communism. However, the Salvadorian people do not want to replace one system of injustice with another". The minimum that a Christian can do is pray for our crucified brothers and sisters. But it is also essential to raise our voices that peace and justice cannot come about by murdering women and children."

In his Christmas editorial later that year, Sandoval observed that on that first Christmas a chorus of angels sang "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of good will." However, in El Salvador and Guatemala and in far-away Afghanistan, instead of this chorus being heard there were the sounds of machineguns, the cries of the sick, the malnourished, and of the widows and mothers of the disappeared. Let me quote from this homily:

"It is easy to wash our hands of the suffering in Afghanistan, but not of the Salvadorans and Guatemaltecos. We cannot forget, even in the joys of Christmas, that almost all of the arms that kill the innocent in those countries come from here, in the U.S., and that the politics that prevents negotiated peace emanates from Washington.

"Perhaps such thoughts are not appropriate at Christmas, but we should at least think about and pray for these suffering people and we should commit ourselves if not today than tomorrow to bring about the peace that we as followers of Christ need to prioritize."

As part of the Catholic/Christian response to the oppression of the people of Central America, Sandoval further brought attention to the need for self-determination for the people of that region. He applauded Nicaragua under the Sandinistas for moving in that direction, but noted that this was still needed in El Salvador and Guatemala. Self-determination to him meant peace and democracy and the elimination of authoritarian governments that repressed their own people. "Self-determination is the issue in Central America," he wrote in George Orwell's 1984. "Though U.S. policy claims to seek democracy, its vision falls short of democracy's meaning: 'people's power'". Both the U.S. and Russia assert the right to interfere at will in their "sphere of influence." The worst crime that countries on the periphery can commit is to proclaim nonalignment. That is why the Central Intelligence Agency is financing an army of "contras" attacking Nicaragua and Russians are fighting in Afghanistan.

"Too often our leaders have given aid and comfort to brutal dictatorships in exchange for a 'suitable investment climate.' Now, phony distinctions are made between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, as if tyranny by another name would be more accepted."

Sandoval further noted that Archbishop Romero had pleaded with President Carter not to send military aid to the Salvadorian government in 1980 just before Romero was assassinated because such support would only be used to persecute the people. Romero's words proved to be prophetic and yet the U.S. under the Reagan

administration wanted to send additional aid. In words that themselves sound prophetic today with respect to the increased American military presence in Afghanistan, Sandoval observed: "With the rationale that U.S. credibility is at stake, the [Reagan] Administration pursues victory at any cost. That's the real Vietnam syndrome, not the failure to show resolve."

As part of his homilies against oppression and authoritarian governments, Sandoval also signaled out the plight of "los desaparecidos" the disappeared. He reminded readers in 1986 that this had been going on for years in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Colombia, and many other countries. "No one knows if these people are alive or dead, where they might be buried. No trace is left of them." He pointed out the case of El Salvador where the notorious death squads carried out such actions. Although the Salvadorian government backed by the U.S. denied that such atrocities had occurred, Sandoval noted that this was widespread knowledge and had been observed by Maryknoll missionaries and correspondents. "What is going on cannot be denied," he countered. "The agony of the people cannot be silenced. As one campesino said: "Our God cries with our children." The Christian here in the U.S. has the option to be complicit or raise their voices in protest."

Finally, Sandoval lamented the many deaths as a result of oppression not only in Latin America but also throughout the world. Commenting on the meaning of All Soul's Day on November 2 "Día de los muertos" he reflected that one form of death involves family members and friends, but that another form are the unsung martyrs who are killed by repressive governments such as a youth in Chile, innocent civilians in the U.S. bombardment of Libya, and a child in Guatemala. These latter deaths had a profound meaning because these victims nurtured their people's struggle to overcome injustice. These types of deaths should not be in vain, Sandoval proposed, and should remind others of repressive governments such as the military junta in Chile or that death also came in the form of poverty. "Jesus Christ came into the world to give life: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the fullest (John 10:10)," he concluded this homily. "Life is more than biology; it is the freedom to enjoy all of God's blessings for humanity". To follow Christ is to struggle for life, a life filled with peace and justice instead of weapons of death."

As a result of oppression in Latin America, thousands of political refugees left countries such as El Salvador to seek refuge in the United States especially in the 1980s. Tragically, the response of the Reagan administration was to deny them refugee status and to falsely maintain that these "feet people" instead represented economic refugees or "illegal aliens" with no right to asylum. Yet under international law including the definition of political refugees by the United Nations, the people fleeing El Salvador and Guatemala met the criteria of political refugees. However, the Reagan administration refused to comply with international conventions because of its support for the repressive governments in Central America. To admit that the Salvadorians, for example, constituted legitimate refugees would be tantamount to criticizing client states and Reagan was not about to do this.

In a 1987 piece, Sandoval informed that in Honduras a citizen of that country, Elpidio Cruz, had opened up his home to six Salvadorian families fleeing their country. When Honduran officials demanded that Cruz turn over these families for deportation, he refused. For this, Cruz was murdered but his family continued to shelter the refugees. Using this story as his lead-in, Sandoval observed that according to the U.N. Commission on Refugees, at no other time in modern history had there been so many political refugees throughout the world, some 16 million. These included 500,000 Salvadorans and 200,000 Guatemalans. "Sadly," he wrote, "when these refugees arrive in our country and in other ones as well they do not receive the generosity and welcome that Elpidio Cruz exhibited, but instead they encounter racism and injustice." He pointed out that the U.S. was not only at fault but also countries such as Mexico who likewise turned back the Central Americans. "Perhaps we cannot all be like Elpidio Cruz," Sandoval exhorted his audience, "But we can and should raise our voices in protest and support members of Congress such as Senator [Edward] Kennedy and our bishops who call for justice for the refugees."

Unfortunately, the refugee problem continued to escalate until the Central American peace accords in 1992. In the meantime, despite the reactionary Reagan policies, many Americans especially sympathetic Protestants, Catholics, and Jews on their own and in defiance of the U.S. government provided refuge to countless numbers of Central Americans. This became known as the Sanctuary Movement. In many of his articles in the journals, Sandoval wrote about this movement especially the efforts by Catholics such as Bishop John Fitzpatrick of Brownsville and the charismatic Fr. Luis Olivares at La Placita Church in Los Angeles. In a 1986 homily, he added:

t

“Those who have positively responded to the refugees have recognized that in this world there can or should not be any strangers. We are all children of God.”

t

And quoting from Leviticus in the Old Testament as did others such as Olivares, Sandoval inserted this scriptural passage: “When aliens reside with you in your land, do not molest them. You shall treat the aliens who reside with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for them as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt.”

Sandoval finished: “Only with such a prophetic vision can we resolve the problems that confront us: war, hunger, and injustice, and construct a society that makes it unnecessary for one to abandon their lands and become foreigners.”

At the same time that political refugees were streaming into the U.S., so also were even larger numbers of undocumented Mexican immigrants. While the Sanctuary Movement did not include these immigrants, their needs due to poverty and unemployment in Mexico were just as great. Fr. Luis Olivares in L.A. recognized this and did what the rest of the Sanctuary Movement did not; he included undocumented immigrants as part of La Placita’s sanctuary. So too, at least discursively, did Moises Sandoval. In a 1979 homily entitled “The Unwanted Immigrants,” he first reported that two years earlier more than a million immigrants had been apprehended trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. At the same time, he noted the historical contributions of immigrants to the country. “The inscription on the Statue of Liberty was not idle rhetoric,” he asserted. “‘Give me your poor’ was indeed the policy of the United States.” Yet Sandoval acknowledged that this welcoming policy no longer applied especially to Latino immigrants. To prevent such migration the militarization of the border had commenced using Vietnam War technology such as attack helicopters and electronic sensory devices. “The psychology of Vietnam is also evident,” he added, “the idea that force is the only way to effectively solve the problem.”

In his homily, Sandoval stressed that Christians had to have another response to the immigration issue. “The Scriptures and the teachings of the Popes enjoin everyone from treating the immigrant in any manner except as a brother [and sister],” he proposed:

t

“There is no such person as an ‘illegal alien’ in the eyes of the Church. Pope Paul VI made clear that the rights of persons to immigrate out of need to escape persecution precedes the rights of nations to regulate entry or exit over their borders.”

Sandoval challenged the mistaken notions that undocumented immigrants crossed the border in order to take

jobs from Americans or to take advantage of American welfare. On the contrary, he argued that such immigration was the result of U.S. economic intervention in Mexico that led to investments in agri-business that in turn drove many campesinos off their lands or made them unable to compete against agricultural monopolies. This was also happening in other parts of Latin America and he used the example of multinational U.S. sugar companies in the Dominican Republic that took over the most arable lands and forced many from the countryside to leave their island and go to the U.S. without documents. "Thus much of the blame for the immigration crisis can be laid at our door," he ended. "How can we close that door on the victims?"

In this context, several years later in 1993 following the passage of Proposition 187 in California that aimed to deny public services to the undocumented, Sandoval in his Christmas message utilized the occasion of the birth of Jesus to preach about the Christian response to immigration. "Twenty centuries after the birth of Jesus," he wrote, "the question is the same as confronted the people of Bethlehem on the first Christmas Eve (La Nochebuena): Do we receive these strangers or do we reject them?" Sandoval added that as long as the world's wealth was so unevenly divided between the West and the Third World that millions of poor and oppressed people in the underdeveloped countries would choose migration over starvation and deprivation. He instructed those who could provide shelter or posada for the undocumented to understand two basic principles. First, that everyone has the right to migrate if it is necessary to survive. Second, that the wealth of the world does not just belong to a small minority and that every person can legitimately claim their fair share. These two principles, he proposed, needed to guide the debate over immigration. He returned to the Christmas story: "can there be that peace that the angels proclaimed as long as we label millions of our fellow human beings as 'illegals'?"

Writing in Spanish to his readers of Revista Maryknoll, Sandoval especially pointed out that Latinos were equally at fault as others for not following the Gospel message that related to contemporary immigrants. "How sad [Que Triste!]," he quoted Archbishop Patricio Flores of San Antonio, "How sad that too many times it is Mexican Americans who express criticism filled with prejudice toward these poor people." He complemented Archbishop Flores by adding: "When Hispanos in the U.S. do not support the human rights of the immigrants, they are neither good Hispanos or good Christians." He further admonished: "The preferential option for the poor is not a burden we can refuse. The Gospel on this is very clear: those who do not support the hungry or those who suffer oppression will not be saved."

In addition to speaking out on the oppression of political refugees and immigrants, Sandoval likewise condemned racism and discrimination against Latinos in the U.S., the class exploitation of working people in general, and the second-class status of women. Of the first, he wrote: "The Hispano people in the United States experience its own Calvary of discrimination and inequality but, at the same time, lives a new era of resurrection. Little by little it advances to new heights where it displays its leadership." On class issues, Sandoval noted in 1989 how difficult conditions were to working people in the U.S. and pointed out that wages for workers had been reduced 14% from what they had been in 1973. He also noted that conditions for workers were even worse in the poor countries of the world. At the same time, however, Sandoval reminded others that in Genesis, God after creating the world saw that His work was good. "This privilege also pertains to all workers," he commented, "even though their labor is more humble. He observed that in his pastoral *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II had affirmed the dignity of work. Unfortunately, employers did not heed such words and continued to exploit their workers as beasts of burden. "We have to humanize work," Sandoval concluded, "especially that of the poor. No one can wash their hands of this struggle. Those who do not participate in the search for a solution are complicit."

Finally, Sandoval addressed the issue of the oppression of women. He pointed out the heroic struggle of women such as Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina in their effort to force their government to provide information on "los desaparecidos" and to prosecute those officials responsible for the "Dirty War" of the 1970s. He further acknowledged similar efforts by women in El Salvador as well as women in the United States against the arms race. Despite such expressions of women's empowerment, Sandoval noted the continued

second-class position of many women throughout the world where many did not even possess the right to vote. This had to change, he stressed, and called on all social institutions to integrate women. To his credit, Sandoval included the Catholic Church in this call and observed that despite the fact that more women held positions of responsibility in the Church, they still were excluded from participation in major decision-making. "Without the role of women we cannot create the new world that the Gospels address," he wrote. "The woman is not only the heart of the family but of society. She rejects hatred, war, and exploitation. She defines herself by love, sacrifice for others, and for her search for peace. It is time for her to determine her own destiny."

tttttIII

Besides the oppressed, liberationists, such as Sandoval, embraced a preferential option for the poor. In a number of his editorials/homilies, Sandoval focused on the poor and what the Christian response should be. First and foremost, he reminded his readers that the preferential option for the poor is rooted in the origins of the Church and specifically in the Jesus story. Jesus was born to a poor family; he was poor; and he administered to the poor. In his 1982 Christmas homily, Sandoval expressed this theme. "Christmas is a fiesta of the poor," he advanced. "The angels announcing Jesus' birth appeared to the shepherds, the most humblest of the poor. God chose a poor woman, Mary, to give human birth to His Son and to care for Him along with her husband, Joseph, a carpenter. Because Jesus was born in a manger, he brought dignity to those who society has marginalized."

If the Church needed to be of and for the poor, Sandoval further expanded this core concept of Liberation Theology to modern nation-states. In his view, no nation, whether capitalist or socialist or in-between, could legitimately call itself a democracy if it allowed poverty to prevail. He noted that the word democracy was a highly abused one because every nation including dictatorships proclaimed to be democratic and yet millions of people throughout the world lived in poverty and lacked democratic rights. "Just as a Gospel that does not stress a preferential option for the poor is not a Gospel," Sandoval stressed, "so too a government that does not assist the poor and the weak is not a democracy."

Moreover, Sandoval castigated the United States and the developed nations for believing that they could exist in a world filled with poverty. Indeed, even U.S. capitalism could not be held as a model of development and progress when in 1988, as he noted, some 33 million of its own people lived in poverty. "So too there is little to admire about the global economy," he added, "when the large masses of the world's population lives in misery and the number of poor increase each year. This means that something has to change." Part of this change involved the U.S. and other wealthy countries recognizing that they could not prosper as long as worldwide poverty existed. He clearly had in mind a relationship of overproduction and under consumption in the world economy. Sandoval observed that the U.S. Catholic bishops understood this and in a pastoral letter that year had emphasized this inter-connection. "It is not possible to isolate ourselves from the misery of Latin America or other parts of the Third World," Sandoval paraphrased the bishops. But combating universal poverty involved more than simply reacting to natural disasters in the poor countries such as earthquakes and droughts. "We have to oppose all forms of exploitation that denies bread to the hungry," he countered. This also included opposing the vast amount of money going into the arms race. "We have to be a voice of the defenseless, whether minorities here in the U.S. or in the Third World," he proclaimed. "We have to awaken from our complacency."

But the poor were not just abstractions or statistics. They were real people. They were the poor campesinos in Latin America, for example. "In all of the world the worker most oppressed is the campesino," Sandoval asserted. "This is true whether in the underdeveloped world or in the industrial one." He lamented that the life of the campesino still often resembled that of a slave and for that reason did not exceed 50 years in most countries. The roots of such poverty and suffering, according to Sandoval, had to do with the economic system, namely capitalism. More and more land was concentrated in fewer and fewer hands living little for the campesinos who unable to compete were forced in many cases to abandon the countryside and migrate to the outskirts of urban areas where they only found more misery. Those who remained had to work for very little on the new corporate

plantations. Agrarian reform to assist the campesinos often led to nothing since governments such as in Latin America were controlled by large and powerful landowners who understood that to give lands to the campesinos would deny agri-business the needed cheap labor. Unfortunately, such conditions also existed in the U.S. where both blacks and Mexican farm workers still labored for exploited wages as well as being exposed to harmful pesticides, inadequate housing, and worst of all having to resign themselves to endless poverty. Sandoval called on the Church to do more in taking the lead both in Latin America and in the U.S. to alleviate the plight of the campesino and farm worker. "If the Church does not prioritize these poor people," he reiterated, "then it cannot pretend to follow the gospels."

If campesinos and farm workers represented the lowliest of all the poor, the non-agricultural working poor did not fare much better. In a poignant and personal homily in May, 1981, Sandoval noted the death of his father, who had only a fifth grade education, after a life of hard work in a variety of jobs too often not honored or respected by those better off. "Like José Eusebio Sandoval, my father," he wrote, "every person quests for work that develops talents, enhances human dignity and provides for economic needs." Using the occasion of the celebration of May Day, Sandoval expanded his discourse to include the struggle of miners and factory workers in Chile. "Chile, of course, is only a microcosm," he added, "just as José Eusebio Sandoval was only one of billions of workers who sweat and toil, the vast majority never achieving the security they seek." As he usually did in his editorial/homilies, Sandoval connected these social conditions with the role of the Church and Catholics. "In that struggle [of the working poor]," he maintained, "the Church sides with the poor. May 1, also the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker, [and] asks Christians to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who identified Himself with the cause of the poor, not to the exclusion of the rich, but uniting all to gather as brothers and sisters in the spirit of justice, equality and peace."

While Sandoval appealed to the Church and to better-off Catholics to do their part for the poor, he did not see this relationship as a one-sided one. He understood like one of his heroes, César Chávez, that the poor in their humble dignity had also much to give to others. The poor could teach much about life and virtues. "The poor countries have every right to preach to the rich ones not because they are poor but because living a life of injustice they have a responsibility to call for justice. The martyrdom that the people of Central America have suffered offers a rich experience of the kind that U.S. Christians can learn much from." In addition, the poor could teach humility to the rich and a humility connected to God. Such a perspective, he believed, was not impossible for the rich but still more difficult due to their egotism and arrogance as if they did not need God. "We can learn much from the poor," he observed. "In a society such as ours of extreme consumerism, we can learn from the poor that we don't need so many material things in order to be free. We can also learn that hope can overcome many of our conflicts and problems. Imitating the faith of the poor, we can come to a further understanding that given all of our human limitations that we need as much God's love as that of our fellow human beings."

Finally, on the poor, Sandoval, like other liberationists, saw the poor not only as victims or as passive but also as agents of history for themselves through their struggles for liberation. These included those in Christian base communities throughout Latin America, in the favelas of Brazil, in the urban barrios of Peru, and in the countryside of Central America. These people did not want charity but justice. Yet the tendency was to reject and look down on their struggles because they represented poor and uneducated people rather than sophisticated intellectuals. Moreover, the idea of liberation scared the status quo. "There is no obligation to accept liberation theology," Sandoval insisted, "but if we aspire to be good Christians, we have the obligation to support the process of liberation. This comes from the gospels that is the basis of all theology."

tttttIV

Sandoval's homilies further addressed one of the most profound concepts of Liberation Theology—that of social sin. This means that sin is not just personal but social or institutional. What constitutes social sin? Racism, class

oppression, gender discrimination, poverty, war, these are all examples of sins that a society or system commits. Social sins cannot be erased or forgiven at confession; they need to be addressed from a broader process of social transformation. Sandoval acknowledged social sin in particular its relationship to U.S. capitalism. He noted that Jesus called for not only prayers for the victims of injustice but for changing the structures of oppression. He pointed out that in countries such as El Salvador innocent people were not only the victims of military dictatorships, but of structural injustice imposed on them by developed nations most notably the United States. Economic injustice killed more people than the civil war of that country. American capitalism led to people dying of hunger, illness, and misery. "The Christian should combat nonviolently these structures that monopolize wealth and resources, that exploit workers, that deny just prices for the products of the Third World, and that allows multinational corporations to manipulate the markets in order to gain excessive profits from the poorer countries." He stressed that the struggle against U.S. social sins should not be an external one but an internal one involving all Americans. This social sin—economic injustice—emanated from within the United States. "And like Christ came to give life," he opined, "we have the obligation to struggle for life for ourselves and others."

Sandoval agreed that individuals were responsible for their own sins such as those who abused drugs. However, social sin had to also be confronted including when powerful countries exploited underdeveloped ones. He pointed out the example of U.S. agribusiness taking advantages of campesinos in Latin America. "The Christian should oppose this type of poverty," he stated. He observed that there were many ways to combat poverty resulting from injustice. He reminded that St. Matthew in his gospel advocated feeding the hungry, visiting those imprisoned, assisting the sick, and clothing the naked. "But much more is needed than just these efforts," Sandoval added. "Injustice can only be eliminated through justice. It is not enough to give bread to those who hunger or medicine to the sick or visit the prisons. Our duty is to eradicate the causes of these conditions."

Sandoval stressed that the victims of social sins should not be held responsible. He used the example of the homeless and how the easy reaction was to blame them for being drug addicts, alcoholics, or having other addictions. Yet many of them were not at fault and were affected by unemployment, illness, or a broken marriage. "If we look closely," he observed, "we will find that any of the problems of the homeless are broader social ones rooted in our economic and political system. The causes of dislocation and marginalization in our country are analogous to the plight of the refugee: the internal politics of the refugee's home country and the external politics of the superpower." This was social sin and Sandoval called on Christians to work to change the structures responsible.

ttttt V

If Moises Sandoval in his homilies instructed others concerning the nature of oppression, poverty, and social sin, he also focused on Catholic/Christian praxis. As Paulo Freire stressed the need to observe, reflect, and act as the basis for liberation praxis, so too did Sandoval. Once a person is aware of the social problems affecting his/her life, they need to reflect on them, and then act. This is praxis. This is what the Christian base communities in Latin America and their counterparts in the U.S. did in order to fulfill the liberationist message contained in Liberation Theology. Hence, Sandoval called on his readers to accept this praxis for themselves through a process of self-sacrifice. Only by sacrificing for others, by giving of yourself for others, could poverty and oppression be confronted.

Praxis first and foremost was or should be a Christian response. As noted in his other homilies, Sandoval believed that the true Christian had no other choice but to engage in bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth. Here Jesus was instructive. "The example of Jesus shows us that we cannot be passive," he noted. "There is no desert where we can escape from the struggle. Passivity is not a virtue. We cannot believe that our faith can be isolated from the world and our fellow human beings. On Judgment Day, God will not ask us how many times we fasted or prayed. The Gospel says that He will ask us how many times we fed the hungry, cared for the stranger, helped the sick, and gave comfort to the imprisoned."

In effect, Sandoval called on his readers and other Catholics to be missionaries in carrying out their praxis. He did not mean for them to join missionary orders such as Maryknoll, but that in their daily lives to commit themselves to support the liberation message by doing what they could to assist others and by speaking out on issues of justice. In so doing, Catholics could find inspiration in those who actually served as missionaries. "Whether in lonely altiplano outposts, remote Philippine villages or teeming Lima slums," he observed,

t

"The missionaries find that telling about Jesus is not enough. They have to be the "Word made flesh" Christ to those they serve. Each missionary is asked to embody Christ's love and compassion, and, perhaps at times, even the justifiable wrath and indignities of the Lord who turned over the business tables of a calloused world that puts profits before people and sends helicopters against frightened, stranded children. That's the challenge from the missionary and every Christian.

t

In accepting one's praxis, Catholics could also use the examples of recent martyrs such as Archbishop Romero and the four nuns, including two Maryknoll ones, assassinated in 1980 by the Salvadoran military. Sandoval did not mean that everyone had to literally give up their lives as martyrs, but that self-sacrifice is part of a Christian praxis. While he used the model of the martyred clergy, Sandoval called on both clergy and laity to join together in the struggle for liberation and justice. "Spreading the Gospel message," he stressed, "is the responsibility of all. The concept of mission does not just pertain to some clergy, members of religious orders, or lay people in another country but to all Christians. The struggle for justice is as much a challenge for the clergy as it is for the laity. The politics of changing our social institutions is the duty of all." And in what he called "The Great Challenge," Sandoval further encouraged all to heed Jesus' instruction for his followers to be servants of God. This challenge was particularly important in serving those regarded as marginalized such as the poor including immigrants.

In calling for people to follow a Christian praxis, Sandoval in particular appealed to his fellow Latinos to do so. He noted that many Latinos did not participate enough in public affairs. Perhaps, he suggested, this had to do with the toll of their daily labor or seeing themselves as a minority that did not possess the power to change social conditions. But this attitude had to change. Latinos could control their own destiny. As Christians, as U.S. citizens, or as residents of the country, Latinos could and should engage in civic life. This was the only way to bring about justice and peace. Indeed, he especially encouraged Latinos to participate in the nuclear disarmament movement because issues of peace and the arms race affected Latinos as much as any other group. Everyone had the duty to struggle for peace.

ttttVI

Although not comprehensive, I hope this paper has provided an appreciation of the intellectual and spiritual contributions of Moises Sandoval through his many editorials that I interpret as a form of homilies. In these writings along with his even larger body of journalistic articles and essays, Sandoval stands out, in my opinion, not only as an advocate and interpreter of Liberation Theology, but as one of the most significant liberationist writers in both the U.S. and in Latin America. His body of work not only involves an analysis of Liberation Theology as exemplified through his editorial/homilies, but his reportage represents a form of applied Liberation Theology in that his journalistic pieces shows Liberation Theology in practice through the lives of Latin Americans, U.S. Latinos, and other Third World Christians in Africa and Asia. As such, Moises Sandoval needs to not only be appreciated for his work and role as a leading Catholic liberationist and as one of the key

pioneers in the development of Latino religious studies, but as one of the major writers and intellectuals in Chicano/Latino history in the United States. Indeed, I would go even further and propose that he is one of the major Catholic intellectuals in the United States. Hence, he needs to be integrated into the growing field of Latino religious studies, into the larger field of Chicano/Latino Studies, and into U.S. Catholic Studies. I hope my essay contributes to this more than justified recognition.

ttttt ****

Mario T. García is Professor of Chicano Studies and History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has written extensively in the area of Chicano history including such books as Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920 (1981); Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology & Identity, 1930-1960 (1989); Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona (1994); co-author of Migrant Daughter: Coming of Age as a Mexican American Woman (2000); Luis Leal: An Auto/Biography; and ed., Ruben Salazar, Border Correspondent: Selected Writings, 1955-1970 (1995); and ed., A Dolores Huerta Reader (2008).

He has also researched and written on Chicano Catholic history and Catholic Studies. His work here includes, Padre: The Spiritual Journey of Father Virgil Cordano (2005); edited with Gastón Espinosa, Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture (2008); edited, The Gospel of César Chávez: My Faith In Action (2007); Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation in Chicano Catholic History (2008); and edited Chicano Liberation Theology: The Writings and Documents of Richard Cruz and Católicos Por La Raza (2009).

Source URL (retrieved on 01/29/2015 - 13:55): <http://ncronline.org/news/liberation-correspondent-homilies-moise-sandoval>