

LIBERATION CINEMA

BY ROBERT A. SIRICO

A dear friend of mine with impeccably libertarian credentials recently wrote these speculative words to me: "I've often wondered what I would do if I were a theologian in some Latin American country confronting the frequently terrible consequences of the country's feudalism. I had been taught to call the economy 'capitalism,' for which there was no remedy except that touted by the communists. I'd probably try to work out some improbable modus vivendi between my Christianity and their Marxism!"

The result, of course, would be liberation theology.

I thought of these words as I viewed the movie *Romero*, produced by my brother Paulist, Father Ellwood Kieser, who has labored in Hollywood for some 30 years in an attempt to live out the ideal of the founder of our order, Isaac Hecker, by "presenting old truths in new forms." I felt a deep sense of pride as I saw emblazoned across the black screen in scarlet letters the words *Paulist Pictures*, knowing that this was the first time a Catholic production company had produced a major motion picture. It is a respectable, though flawed, accomplishment.

The movie relates the tragic and heroic story of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated while celebrating Mass almost 10 years ago. By all accounts Romero was a quiet, frail, and conservative churchman, initially thought to be a good compromise candidate not likely to rock an ecclesiastical boat already racked by external pressures and internal dissension. He ended up directly challenging the government of Carlos Humberto Romero (no relation). His assassins have never been brought to justice.

The movie, which stars Raul Julia (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*) in the title



Raul Julia as Archbishop Romero: a complex man in an over-simplified situation

role, is intense, at times moving, but overall too didactic. It lumbers along, inexorably, in a heavy, almost smothering manner, from one tragic scene to the next, causing me at times to feel as though I were watching it under water. The movie never allows the viewer to come up for air. The film's redemption is Julia, who is superb in playing this timid, sincere, and tortured soul caught in the conflagration among death squads who kill his priests and catechists, governmental troops who desecrate the Blessed Sacrament, and an aggressive band of guerrillas who themselves do not shy away from murder in their attempt to gain control of the country. Julia convincingly allows his character to evolve into a virtual Old Testament prophet figure. Not enough good can be said about the subtlety and restraint he brings to his performance.

There is more to this film than Julia's performance, however. While *Romero*

succeeds in portraying the courage and complexity of the archbishop, it fails to display the same complexity when dealing with the volatile political context from which his heroism emerged.

It would have been impossible for this film not to have had a political slant, and writer John Sacret Young (co-creator of TV's "China Beach" series) surely gives it one. The script is intent on placing a relatively undefined liberation theology into the mouths of the film's most sympathetic characters. The guerrillas, and a number of hard-working priests in various relations to them, are portrayed as basically idealistic and decent folk who have been driven to the use of kidnapping, torture, and murder by the true villains: greedy capitalists in collusion with the military.

Every single statement in the film in favor of the free market—of the aspirations of the Salvadoran

people to North American living standards, of the role of the entrepreneur as a producer who brings capital into the country for its overall benefit—is articulated by the most sinister, cynical, and bloodthirsty characters in the film. Thus, solidarity with the poor comes to mean solidarity with socialist revolutionaries while the free enterprise of the North is axiomatically identified with the feudal interests of the South.

And here is where the film, and liberation theology itself, is for me most frustrating. After all, what would the actual liberation of the poor from unjust social and economic structures mean if not a generally prosperous economy and a large middle class? And where do such societies exist if not in North America and those areas of the world that emulate its basically, though inconsistently, free-market arrangements? How is it that

when a Romero (correctly) opposes repression in Salvador he is cheered as a prophet by the popular culture but when a John Paul II opposes it in Nicaragua he is characterized as a reactionary?

The real liberation of Salvador is not advanced by a denial of mistaken U.S. interventions or by an uncritical defense of what Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy has recently termed "totalitarian regimes of the right." But neither is anything gained by a romanticized view of self-identified Marxist guerrillas, or, for that matter, priests who collaborate and sympathize with them.

The film's gaping philosophical lacuna is seen when Romero reprimands one of his gun-toting priests. The priest defends himself by saying, "I'm a priest who sees Marxists and Christians struggling to liberate the same people." The archbishop replies, "You lose God just as they have."

My concern here is not the use of violence *per se* in response to longstand-

ing oppression. Such force can be a moral imperative under certain circumstances and with specific preconditions, which Pope Paul VI outlined in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. No, my problem is much less with the tactic than with where groups like the FMLN want to take Salvador. Marxists haven't lost God because they use violence to liberate people, but because they use violence to enslave people.

With all of the ample historical evidence at hand, it continues to amaze me that this point is missed. Can anyone make a plausible case that the Marxists of Nicaragua, along with *their* clerical allies, have liberated that sorry land?

Art should point beyond itself to broaden the viewer's perspective. While *Romero* may succeed at this, to some extent, in its portrayal of the archbishop himself, it fails to enlarge our view of the situation in Salvador. It fails with regard to Salvador precisely because it over-

simplifies the ideological war being waged there even while it provides a compelling, indeed vivid, view of its physical dimensions. The problems of Latin America in general and Salvador in particular, where religion, economics, and politics (ecclesiastical and secular) collide into each other like cars in a Boston roundabout, will not, I'm afraid, be rendered any more comprehensible by the appearance of *Romero*.

Father Kieser is a quintessential Paulist in his commitment to confronting the popular culture with the challenge of the gospel on its own turf and in its own idiom. He inspires me to emulate that talented commitment, though I think I'll do it with a different understanding of politics and economics than that indicated in *Romero*.

Robert A. Sirico is a Paulist priest on the staff of the Catholic Information Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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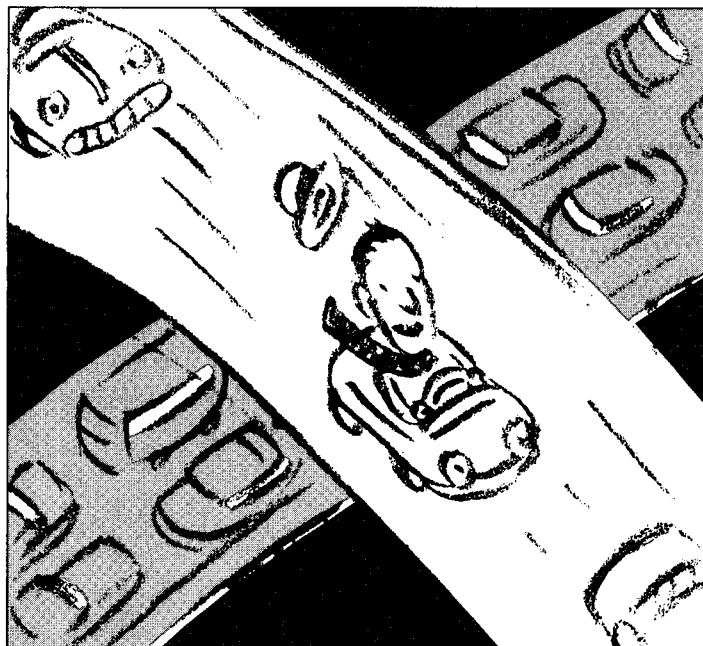
BY PETER SAMUEL

For most of the last century, the road running from Washington, D.C., to Leesburg, Virginia, was privately owned and operated. It still bears the name Leesburg Pike, from the days when staves barred the traveler's way until the toll was paid. Now, more commonly known as Route 7, the state highway runs on the roadbed cut and filled by the Leesburg Turnpike Company in the 1780s.

Just south of Route 7, the first modern-day private toll road corporation plans to build another highway linking Washington to Leesburg. An extension of the government-run Dulles Toll Road, it is likely to be the first completely commercial thoroughfare to open since the demise of private turnpikes in the late 19th century.

At the center of the project is Ralph Stanley, the 37-year-old founder and director of the Toll Road Corporation of Virginia. Stanley, a Republican activist and former head of the Urban Mass Transit Administration, lobbied hard for legal permission to start his company. In 1988, the politicians in Richmond passed the Virginia Highway Corporation Act, establishing a legal framework for private road companies and repealing a 1950s ban on charging tolls for profit.

Stanley's company jumped its major administrative and political hurdle last July 20, when it received a permit from the Virginia Commonwealth Transportation Board for a Dulles Toll Road Extension connecting Dulles Airport to Leesburg, a little colonial town on the fringe of the expanding greater Washington area. The company must also file a detailed financial plan, including projected tolls and return on capital, with the State Corporations Commission,



which regulates utility companies. Once the firm gets its certificate of authority for the project, all governmental obstacles will be behind it. Stanley hopes that by then he will have acquired the remaining land needed for the project and have capital in place to break ground in early 1990.

A former Reaganite privatizer, Ralph Stanley happens to believe in private transportation. Moreover, some of the Richmond politicians, especially Gov. Gerald T. Baliles, have advocated making use of the private sector to build public facilities. But necessity, not ideology, has been the mother of the private turnpike's reinvention.

The demand for road space on the outskirts of Washington cannot be satisfied by traditional state means. In the 1960s and '70s, road building was sadly neglected, and politicians are now under pressure to make up for the lost decades. The prospect of gridlock in suburbia has become the number-one political issue out here.

Another major factor in the success of Stanley's proposal for a private toll road

is the existence nearby of the successful, albeit state-owned, Dulles Toll Road. Completed in 1985 by the Virginia Department of Transportation for some \$55 million, this 12-mile expressway consists of lanes running parallel to the long-established Dulles Airport Access Road. The Dulles Toll Road has been such a success that the Virginia Department of Transportation is making a tidy profit and is planning to widen the road from four toll lanes to six.

The department is also considering a privately financed subway line in the median of what will shortly

be a 10-lane road system. The government of Virginia, responsive to political pressures, is trying to look after today's voters. But beyond Dulles Airport, in the farmland that is sprouting its first housing estates, the consensus is that major new highways should be built by private enterprise.

Stanley's strategy has been to form a consortium of people with established track records. He has one of the East Coast's largest highway building contractors, Kiewit Eastern Company, as a shareholder and almost certain builder of the road; the well-known Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade and Douglas Inc. and Vollmer Associates as consulting engineers and traffic planners; and Goldman Sachs and Wheat First Securities Inc. as financial advisers and possible underwriters.

By setting up shop virtually on site, Stanley has been able to deal directly on a daily basis with two very important interest groups—landowners and environmentalists. There are 17 landowners in the 15-mile corridor over

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