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Liberation pioneer commemorated in Mexico

by Raymond Plankey

MEXICO CITY and CUERNAVACA, MEXICO -- Admirers celebrated the life and work of Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo in events in Mexico City and Cuernavaca, marking the 20th anniversary of his death.

Dubbed the "Red Bishop" after right-wing youth threw red paint on him after he attended the 1972 Christians for Socialism Conference in Chile, Méndez Arceo was a recognized leader among those promoting progressive theological thought and pastoral action in Latin America. During his 30 years as bishop of Cuernavaca (1953-83), he welcomed often controversial figures like Fr. Ivan Illich to locate there, creating an incubator for liberation theology and a port of entry into Latin America for thousands of American and European missionaries.

Emerging liberation theologians such as Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff made frequent pilgrimages to Mexico to see him. He always advised them to not become too associated with his image because he was considered more radical than they were. Méndez Arceo took seriously the social justice imperative of the Gospel and cautioned both the capitalist and Marxist worlds of their need to fully integrate its radical message into any human ideology promoting progress in Latin America.

Though four bishops have succeeded him since his resignation in 1983 and his death on Feb. 6, 1992, Méndez Arceo's impact is still evident in the church in Mexico and throughout Latin America.

In an early indication of his intent to restore the church to its roots, Méndez Arceo began his tenure as bishop by both modernizing and restoring the cathedral in Cuernavaca to its original 16th-century Franciscan simplicity. Centuries of elaborate ornamentation and side altars were removed and 17th-century murals were uncovered. With the coming of liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council (1959-65), Méndez Arceo welcomed mariachi music and vernacular Spanish to Sunday worship.

In 1992, he met with Cuernavaca's Bishop Luis Reynoso Cervantes and the architect who had first

worked on the restoration to consider the finishing touches of his restoration effort. He said, in passing, that a bishop should be buried under the main altar of his cathedral. Two weeks later, Méndez Arceo died of a massive heart attack. The bishop remembered the conversation and arranged for Méndez Arceo to be buried under the main altar, an area that was then a rough, stonewalled basement with dirt floor, but was later transformed into the beautiful Chapel of the Resurrection.

The 20th anniversary of his death was marked with celebrations held Jan. 27 through Feb. 12 in both Mexico City and his own diocese of Cuernavaca. These coincided with the global assembly of the Oscar Romero Faith and Solidarity Network in the Americas (SICSAL), attended by 22 delegates representing committees from 22 countries of Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, Australia, Japan and the United States.

Bishops Raúl Vera López of Saltillo, Mexico, and Gregorio Rosa Chávez of San Salvador, El Salvador, recalled other bishops who, along with Mendez Arceo, had been prophets of Latin America: Oscar Romero of San Salvador, Juan Gerardi of Guatemala and Samuel Ruiz of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico.

SICSAL honored Méndez Arceo by making a 70-mile pilgrimage from Mexico City to his tomb in Cuernavaca on Sunday, Feb. 12. Many gave personal testimonies about the importance of Méndez Arceo's efforts to promote "St. Oscar Romero" and the emergence of the Romero Faith and Solidarity Network.

Herbert Hermes, emeritus bishop of Cristalândia, Brazil, and originally from St. Benedict's Abbey in Atchison, Kan., also expressed his admiration for Méndez Arceo. Hermes has served for 50 years in the northeast of Brazil and is one of a small informal group of progressive Latin American bishops who meet annually, led by Pedro Casaldáliga, emeritus bishop of São Félix do Araguaia, Brazil.

The Sergio Méndez Arceo Foundation organized events in four parishes in Cuernavaca. Fr. Angel Sanchez, president of the priests' association of Cuernavaca; Fr. Hernan Leemryse of Chile; and Gabriela Videla, author of the Méndez Arceo biography *Un Señor Obispo*, participated in a roundtable discussion regarding the 1972 Christians for Socialism Conference.

A special Mass was concelebrated Feb. 6 in Ocotepc, the village near Cuernavaca where Méndez Arceo lived after his retirement until his death.

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