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Costa Rica's Second Archbishop, a Social Reformer, Proposed for Beatification

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Costa Rica's second archbishop, Víctor Manuel Sanabria, who made instrumental contributions to this country's groundbreaking social reform in the 1940s, could become Central America's third saint.

The cause for Sanabria's beatification was brought up during a visit to Rome by the Conferencia Episcopal de Costa Rica (Costa Rica Bishops' Conference, CECOR), which took place Feb. 13-18 and included a Vatican meeting with Pope Francis.

During the visit, Cartago Bishop José Francisco Ulloa promoted Sanabria's cause at a meeting with Cardinal Angelo Amato, prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. A first initiative on behalf of Sanabria took place in 1997, but did not make progress.

Two Central American saints

Central America has seen two religious leaders become saints in the last 13 years. The first was Pedro de San José Betancur (1626-1667), a Spanish Franciscan monk devoted to working with the poor. At the age of 23, Betancur left his native Canary Islands, arrived in Cuba, then moved to Honduras, and finally settled in the southern Guatemalan city of Antigua, where he died.

In Guatemala, his work with the poor—mainly indigenous and homeless people—led him to establish the Orden de los Hermanos de Nuestra Señora de Bethlehem (Order of the Brothers of Our Lady of Bethlehem). Affectionately known as Hermano Pedro (Brother Pedro), he was canonized in 2002, during an open-air mass held in Guatemala City by Pope John Paul II.

The second person from the region to become a saint was Óscar Arnulfo Romero (1917-1980) ([NotiCen, June 4, 2015](#)), who served as the Archbishop of San Salvador between 1977 and 1980 ([NotiCen, April 3, 1992](#)). Romero's severe criticism of the atrocities committed by the Army and paramilitary squads during El Salvador's 12-year war (1980-1992), and his work on behalf of social injustice, led to his assassination while offering mass on March 24, 1980.

An odd alliance

In Costa Rica, Sanabria was part of an unprecedented alliance between the government, the Communist Party, and the Catholic Church that made possible innovative social legislation, one of the elements that have placed the country in a position of regional leadership in this field and in the protection of human rights in general.

Sanabria was the archbishop of the San José archdiocese from 1940 to 1952, at a crucial time in Costa Rica's history that included the 44-day revolution of 1948. The sweeping changes brought about by the revolution, among them the abolition of the Army, opened the way for the establishment of the Costa Rican Second Republic.

The armed struggle was triggered by the congressional decision to annul that year's presidential election, won by Otilio Ulate (1949-1953) and challenged by his defeated rival and former president, Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia (1940-1944).

After the victory of the revolutionary forces, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) led by José Figueres, the government was run during 18 months by the Junta Fundadora de la Segunda República (Founding Junta of the Second Republic), also headed by Figueres (1948-1949, 1953-1958, 1970-1974). The Ejército de Liberación Nacional later became the social democratic Partido de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Party, PLN).

Leader of Costa Rica's Catholics

Born Jan. 17, 1898, in the central city of Cartago, 23 km southeast of the capital, San José, Sanabria led the country's Catholics for 12 years, partially coinciding with the Calderón administration.

Calderón, of the center-left Partido Republicano Nacional (National Republican Party), began promoting a series of changes that came to be known as the Garantías Sociales (Social Guarantees), which paid particular attention to workers' rights and were eventually enshrined in the 1949 Constitution, a document that is still in force.

The initiative met with immediate opposition from the country's economic élite, which led to the strategic alliance between Calderón, Sanabria, and Manuel Mora, who was the leader and co-founder of the Communist Party of Costa Rica.

The social reform included, among other achievements, the enactment of the Código de Trabajo (Labor Code), as well as the creation of the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (Costa Rican Social Security Fund, CCSS) and of the public Universidad de Costa Rica (University of Costa Rica, UCR).

The Labor Code was a pioneering set of rights—unprecedented in Central America—that included guarantees such as a minimum wage, the eight-hour work day, Christmas bonuses, double salary payment on holidays, severance payments, and the right to strike.

Besides having taken an active part in the social reform process, Sanabria was one of the founders, in 1945, of the Confederación de Trabajadores Rerum Novarum (Rerum Novarum Workers' Confederation) and five years later created the Congregación de las Hermanas Misioneras de la Asunción (Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption).

The labor organization was named after the encyclical "Rerum Novarum" ("Of New Things") issued in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. The encyclical declared that the state's role is to ensure social justice, while that of the Church consists of speaking out on in the absence of it.

In a lengthy speech during the confederation's convention of May 1, 1945, Sanabria described the organization as the Rerum Novarum's union movement, one "of the people and for the people ... a movement of a legitimate democratic origin."

He said the convention was the setting for debating, "with a superior social interest and also with a spiritual and Christian sense, the interests of a vigorous workers' organization born in the light of social legislation based on purely Christian criteria."

Sanabria was also instrumental in the creation of the Catholic station Radio Fides (Radio Faith) in 1952, the year in which he died.

'The archbishop of social guarantees'

Bishop Ulloa said that Sanabria has entered Costa Rican history as "the archbishop of social guarantees, the archbishop who supported those guarantees that Costa Rica lives today and that distinguish it from the other countries worldwide."

"He managed to reconcile the social guarantees Calderón Guardia's government was after [with] the Communist Party's social dimension," and because of this mediation "the bourgeoisie treated him, to some extent, as a communist," Ulloa said.

But while both groups trusted him, Ulloa said, "we can't say he took up any ideology."

Sanabria, Ulloa added, "was truly a man of the Church, a man of God, a man who thought about the poor, the neediest ... [Sanabria has] "values, virtues we should take into account for a possible beatification process and after that, reaching the altars as a saint."

Ulloa said Sanabria was a man ahead of the renewal of the Church, adding that his work provides "a guarantee that a [beatification] process could go ahead."

Regarding the present initiative for Sanabria's sainthood, Sister María Molina, a member of the congregation, told the Costa Rican Catholic weekly newspaper Eco Católico that their founder was "close to the people."

He was "concerned about the people who were not frequently visited by a priest," she said. "He was a man full of virtues," most notably humbleness and simplicity. "His way of life was a true testimony of his capacity to give. It was not just rhetoric."

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