

An Obituary of Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga

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Pedro Casaldáliga, bishop; Balsareny, Spain, 16 February 1928; Batatais, Brazil, 8 August 2020

A key figure in the Brazilian Church since the 1960s and a keen promoter of the ‘option for the poor’ who was not afraid to defend liberation theology in the face of hostility from Rome

Pedro (“Pere” in his native Catalan) Casaldáliga y Pla, who died on 8 August, was one of the generation of Brazilian bishops who made the “option for the poor” the cornerstone of their ministry.

Born in 1928 in Balsareny, in the province of Barcelona in Catalonia, Spain, Casaldáliga joined the Claretian order in 1943 and was ordained priest in 1952. He left for Brazil in 1968, where the dictatorship which had begun in 1964 was entering its most brutal phase. He spent his first years getting to know his mission territory, which meant that on the day he was ordained as bishop of the diocese of São Félix do Araguaia in 1971 he was able to publish his first pastoral letter, which a leading sociologist was to describe as “one of the most important documents in the social history of Brazil”. The title was his personal manifesto: “An Amazon Church in conflict with large landholdings and social exclusion”.



The big landowners feared and loathed him. That same year brought the first assassination plot, thwarted when the designated assassin confessed the plot to Casaldáliga and was smuggled out of the area. Pope Paul VI, who had appointed him, declared: “Anyone who touches Pedro touches Paul.” In 1976 there was another attempt, when Casaldáliga and the Jesuit missionary, João Bosco Penido Burnier, went to investigate a report that two women were being tortured. The Jesuit, being bulkier and taller than the frail Casaldáliga, was mistaken for the bishop and killed with a shot to the head.

Casaldáliga was a poet, and amongst his best-known works are the contributions he made to “The Mass of the Quilombos” (the settlements founded by runaway slaves), which gives a voice to the experience of Afro-Brazilians; and the “Mass of the Land without Evil”, a celebration of ecological redemption in terms of Amerindian mythology. Despite the pleas of the Brazilian bishops, the Vatican refused to allow these works to be used in the liturgy. Some of the songs, however, have become a fixed part of the celebrations of Brazilian base communities, especially one that addresses Our Lady as an Afro-Brazilian, “Negra Mariama”, described by the theologian Clodovis Boff as “a black Magnificat”. Pope Francis quoted one of Casaldáliga’s poems – “Carta de Navegante (Por el Tocantins amazônico)” – in Querida Amazonia. Casaldáliga’s work can be sampled in English in *The Spirituality of Liberation*, published in 1994 and now available as a free download.

Casaldáliga was involved in the founding of two of the Brazilian Church’s key agencies, Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI), dedicated to the support of the Indigenous peoples, and the Pastoral Land Commission, which works to defend small farmers against the violence of large landowners. After the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, Casaldáliga made annual visits to Nicaragua and El Salvador. The bishops, then implacably opposed to the revolution, refused to meet him, so he met and celebrated the Eucharist with communities that supported the Sandinistas.

After Pope John Paul II’s visit to Nicaragua in 1983, when he clashed with Catholics who supported the Sandinistas, Casaldáliga wrote to the Pope suggesting that his advisers had misled him. He went on to argue to the fiercely anti-communist Pope that the Church should have a dialogue with socialist regimes: “Is it only with socialism and sandinismo that the Church cannot have a critical dialogue? It dialogued with the Roman Empire, with feudalism and has been happily dialoguing with the bourgeoisie and capitalism, often uncritically. Isn’t it dialoguing with the Reagan administration?”

John Paul’s reaction is not recorded, but Casaldáliga, who had not been on the normal five-yearly ad limina visits to Rome, was summoned to the Vatican in June 1988, where he was interviewed by the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and other cardinals. A statement was produced for him to sign as an acknowledgment of his errors. He did not sign it. He was ordered not to talk about his meetings, but he refused. “The Church has too many secrets,” he said. He later told the press that he was questioned about liberation theology, his Masses and his visits to Nicaragua. He also had 15 minutes with the Pope. Casaldáliga reported that the Pope embraced him, saying in Portuguese: “This is to show you that I am not a man-eater.”

Casaldáliga returned to São Félix to continue the life he described in one volume of his diaries as “rebellious faithfulness”. He was already suffering from Parkinson’s disease, “Brother Parkinson”, as he described it, and increasingly required help with everyday tasks. After he retired in 2005, he continued to live in his simple compound in São Félix. At the beginning of August this year he began to have breathing difficulties, and was airlifted to an intensive care unit in a Claretian hospital in Batatais in the state of São Paulo, but suffered a pulmonary embolism. His body was returned to São Félix and buried in a cemetery beside the Araguaia River.

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