

The pope is a man with a divided heart

An interview with Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns of São Paulo, Brazil

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NOTE FROM NCR:

Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, the retired archbishop of São Paulo, Brazil, spoke with journalist Laura Greenhalgh Feb. 10. In a wide ranging interview that appeared in the Portuguese language daily *O Estado de São Paulo*, Arns answered Greenhalgh's questions about the health of the current pope, Arn's scrapes with Vatican bureaucracy and his ministry in one of the largest and poorest archdioceses in the world.

The interview with Arns was translated for *NCR* by Ana Flora, an American professor of New Testament, who has lived in São Paulo for more than 40 years. She worked with Arns in the formation program for Ministers of the Word that prepared 5,000 ministers for the basic Christian communities in the São Paulo archdiocese.

Laura Greenhalgh's introduction to Cardinal Arns interview

Last Thursday [February 10th], Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns did not hesitate to answer my question about the resignation of Pope John Paul II. The Cardinal is the retired Archbishop of São Paulo, nominated by Pope Paul VI and is 83, one year younger than Karol Wojtyla. He answered my question with the same tranquility that he remarked that he had always been completely frank with the Pope and he repeated with emphasis: Always! The Christian world knows that his relations with the Vatican weren't always easy, but in his ministry as Cardinal, he was a direct collaborator of the Pope's. That is why he feels at ease to comment on the Pontiff's health and the fact that when he is absent, the Roman Curia makes the decisions.

In this exclusive interview to the *O ESTADO DE SÃO PAULO*, Cardinal Arns comments on facts that are important and little known about his contacts with three Pontiffs. Apparently in good health and with an excellent memory, he met with me in the Franciscan house in the center of São Paulo. He had lived there in his years as a young Franciscan. He spends every Thursday afternoon there receiving all those who desire to talk with him, from street people to important members of the Government.

He is retired as Archbishop of São Paulo and at 83 he can no longer participate in the conclave that will choose the next Pope. Free from the pressures of the past, when he had to face disgruntled Generals and conservatives in the Church's Hierarchy, he devotes himself to the poor, the aged and the babies that are born in the Archdiocese's maternity for poor, needy mothers.

I had to laugh when I asked him if he were ever considered papabile. His answer was: only by my favorite football team! He is an ardent fan of the Corinthians, and all the other fans and the team itself, think the world of him! He also never had a chance to win the Nobel Peace Prize even though he was nominated several times.

What really pleases him are the seven pastoral plans carried out in São Paulo, one of the largest Archdioceses in the world. He created 43 new parishes in poor areas on the outskirts of

the city and over a thousand Basic Christian Communities. Today he lives simply, faithful to his motto as Bishop: EX SPE IN SPEM. Or in a free translation: FROM HOPE TO HOPE !

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L.G.: Considering the Pope's state of health, do you think he should resign?

Several bishops have made observations about this to me. Yes, the time has come for the Pope to resign so that the Church can continue to respond to historical changes and to this critical moment that we are passing through and that is of great responsibility for the East and for the West.

L.G.: In your meetings with John Paul II, especially the most recent ones, has he commented on this subject?

I spoke to him about this with all simplicity. I said that he was traveling a lot, but with great difficulty. Indirectly, I asked him if it weren't too much for him. This was his answer: *Paulo, from here to here* [pointing to his chest and to his head] *I feel fine. I am the same person I was when I was elected to the papacy. I do not see any reason to resign because my head, my heart and my organs are all doing well.*

After this meeting, his health worsened and problems that have tormented him since the attempted assassination he suffered in the Vatican in 1981 have increased. Each one of us is conscious of our responsibility. And this consciousness has to do with the spirit of faith, of intelligence and of the things that are going on around us.

If he thinks that all is not in order, then it is probable that he will continue to wait until the name of a new Pope begins to germinate in the hearts of the Cardinals. As for myself, I am 83 years old and I cannot vote for his successor [the age limit for cardinals is 80].

L.G.: In what circumstances did you have this conversation with the Pope?

It was five or six years ago, when I still went to Rome regularly. The Pope had some difficulty walking, but we did walk up and down in the corridor. We were speaking in German. He speaks German clearly, and I do too since it was my second language at home.

L. G. : How was your relationship with Karol Wojtyla?

We were together several times, because whenever a Cardinal goes to Rome he is expected to have an audience with "the boss"! And that is what I did.

On certain occasions I left Brazil thinking that the Pope must not be too pleased with me at that moment. But every time I arrived near him, John Paul II had three questions for me: - *Are you taking care of the poor?* That was the first one. The second was: - *Are you taking care of the workers?* And the third: - *Are you taking care of the youth?*

This was what he always wanted to know about Brazil and especially about São Paulo, since I was responsible for an enormous flock of 10 million people. With these three questions he touched on all the essential points in the archdiocese.

L.G.: What were the answers you gave to the three questions? You were a critic of the military government and of the establishment...

That is so, they did not understand my position in Rome. The Nuncio did not accept my criticisms of the military government. I tried to explain that it was exactly the Government that

persecuted the workers and the university students. Paulo Egydio Martins [Governor of São Paulo from 1975 to 1979] did not order the arrest of the students or the invasion of the Catholic University. The orders came directly from the Federal Government in Brasília. The struggle of the factory workers in the automobile industry spread through the whole country because the heart of industrial production was here in São Paulo. But they did not understand...

L.G.: Did the Pope ever rebuke you?

He never gave any sign that he did not approve of what I was doing in São Paulo. I could have been admonished for accepting the books on Liberation Theology, for example. But he never mentioned this to me, even when we were alone, face-to-face. Once I was with him and other Cardinals around the table and again, he never mentioned anything that displeased him. I cannot say that I have any memory of meetings with him that were disagreeable. I am sure he did all he could to understand the situation of those who were suffering.

L.G.: Leaving divergences aside, certainly the Pope knew of the importance that you and Archbishop Helder Camara had in Brazil and in all of Latin America.

The Pope and I never talked about this. When we met we had real facts to discuss. He used to compare the situations that I told him about in Brazil with his knowledge of Poland and Russia, countries that had also known totalitarian governments. We shared experiences.

There is another aspect to consider. In 1983 and for the next eight years, I was the Secretary of the Synod of the Bishops in Rome. It was my responsibility to write down the conclusions of one synod and to draft the documents in preparation for the next synod. Nothing of what we prepared was ever taken into consideration. Very competent people carried out the whole process, but the texts were never used. At that time, the Pope, or whoever he delegated, drafted the conclusions of the synod. The Pope is a man who wants authority to be respected. I always respected him and, at the time, never made public this fact.

L.G.: Are you saying that the Pope changed the conclusions of the Synods?

The conclusions were formulated in such a way that they no longer reflected what had been said in the discussions.

L.G.: In what situations did the strong temperament of John Paul II prevail over the wishes of others?

This happened everywhere and in every type of situation and in relation to any subject. For example, the Catholic Church asking for pardon for past facts. In this case, John Paul II has left his mark, especially in his earliest documents. Today it is Cardinal Ratzinger, President of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that leaves his mark.

L.G.: Was this asking for pardon something special for John Paul II ?

What is dear to his heart is the unity of the Church in the face of Evil. He always saw Evil as penetrating the world through poverty, through youth... We in Latin America saw the poor as evangelizers, but he did not see it in exactly the same way...

L.G.: The Pope seems to show more theological sensitivity to the situation of the poor, than to that of women.

You are right. I am in favor of the promotion of women and always defended their ordination by the Catholic Church. My mother raised 21 children, 13 of her own and 8 by adoption, and all of them accomplished what they set out to do. How can I accept that women be treated as less than men ? I have immense respect for my mother and all my sisters..

On the other hand, the Pope has done much for Africans and for peace in that continent. He worked for peace in the former Communist countries. He did not only think about these problems but acted with great energy. He helped to build a world in which the rich countries should help the poor ones in a more just distribution of the world's wealth. This is the concept he has of the world.

L.G.: You said that the Pope never rebuked you for supporting Liberation Theology, but the Vatican came down hard on this movement in the Church.

Yes, but the Pope, himself, wrote a letter that was read in one of the yearly meetings of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops. He said in this letter that Liberation Theology was not only opportune, but necessary to the theological evolution of the Church. This document was brought to Brazil by the Prefect of the Congregation of the Bishops in Rome and was read to the Assembly by Archbishop Ivo Lorscheiter. It is a personal letter of John Paul II and was never published in Rome.

L.G.: Do you think he changed his mind?

John Paul II was always a man with a divided heart. As we all are in one-way or another! I love the poor and at the same time I respect those who knew how to accumulate wealth through their own initiatives during the course of their lives. Each person exists before God and has the right to live with dignity.

L.G.: Do you agree that Liberation Theology has lost space lately?

There was a certain withdrawal caused by two very negative documents from Rome. Liberation Theology was weakened in Latin America because of the loss of some of its best proponents. But it flourishes in India, in Africa and in other parts of the Orient. It is a seed that Latin America planted and that others are collecting the fruits.

L.G.: Was the case of Leonardo Boff, silenced by the Vatican and afterwards leaving the priesthood a landmark?

The withdrawal is due to the position of the Roman Curia and the progressive promotion of Latin Americans who were contrary to Liberation Theology. As they took on more important roles and began to surround a weakened Head of the Church, their influence became tremendous. The Pope, himself, was never unjust to us. If he ever misjudged, it was because of those around him.

L.G.: We have had about eight or ten years of a debilitated Pope..

At least...

L.G....and it is said that the Roman Curia governs the Church during this period, even though it is not their responsibility since the Pope is still alive and responsible for these functions.

I will tell you a story. The last time I visited John Paul II, when I was leaving as Archbishop of São Paulo, I stood up to take leave of him and he said: *Just a minute, Paulo, I have a letter for*

you... they gave me the text and I only have to sign it. I suggested to him that we read it together. It was a three page memorandum with different topics, written in Portuguese, and very critical of me. I started to read it to him, translating it into German. When we got to the third paragraph, the Pope became indignant and said: *I am not going to sign this! I never said this about you, Paulo, and neither do I want it stated in a document.* He threw the paper on the floor. I picked it up. Then he decided that I should write two lines saying that I had answered all the questions satisfactorily. He signed it and it must be filed somewhere.

L.G.: What did the document say?

It said that I neglected the older priests. But I built a beautiful home for them near the Institute of Theology. Anyone can visit it. Then they said that I did not care for the formation of the seminarians. But I organized ten houses of formation for them. But some important figures in Rome do not like this type of formation with a dozen seminarians in each house. They prefer that we build enormous seminaries. But the Pope never corrected me about this. I was lucky because I always told him everything myself. Everything! He always asked me about anything he wanted to know. The role of a Cardinal is to be a close collaborator of the Pope's.

L.G.: Did you feel there was anything vindictive in this memorandum?

It was written and given to the Pope to be signed on my last visit to him as Archbishop of São Paulo. It had to be written by someone who wanted me leave the Archdiocese as a failure or as a Bishop who did not have a good relationship with the Pope. I was leaving the Archdiocese but I was still well known in Rome. This document, full of rebukes, and signed by the Pope, would be divulged in the four corners of the church. But the plan did not work. When I handed over my office to Archbishop Cláudio Hummes, in a beautiful ceremony in the Cathedral, they read a letter written by John Paul II. In it he praised me and asked the new Archbishop to carry on my work.

L.G.: So there was interference in your contact with the Pope?

Yes, because of the time he spent traveling. I said to him once: *You travel so much that you abandon the Roman Curia.* He answered back: *Not at all, the Roman Curia is I !* My comment was: *Holy Father, not even my little Curia in São Paulo is I !* When the Pope is absent, the Curia decides. If the image of the Pope-Pilgrim has done much good for the Church, it also is true that many internal matters may have been left aside.

L.G.: The top hierarchy of the Vatican is said to be against the hypothesis of resigning.

In all the history of the Church this only happened once with Pope Celestine V, in the 13th century. He was a religious from a contemplative order and preferred to return to monastic life. Practically, resigning the Papacy never existed and they do not want it to be introduced now.

L.G.: Didn't Paul VI, Pope from 1963 to 1978, want to resign?

This was always commented on, but I never heard Paul VI, himself, mention the subject. I had great liberty in my conversations with him. We spoke in French. I received my doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris and, of course, I spoke the language fluently. Paul VI spoke French that was not only fluent, but also beautiful. We spoke together as two friends and he never mentioned that he was thinking of resigning. They used to say that he suffered from depression but I think it was mainly the sad expression on his face. This impressed Christians all over the world and many

thought of him as a downhearted or depressed Pontiff. He wasn't. When we spoke to each other, we sounded like two optimists in relation to life.

L.G.: Was he a good leader for you?

He could not have been better! I will tell you something that I have never told before. I went to see him before my last trip to the Holy Land. I was in Rome for a few days and I asked the head of his residence if I could visit His Holiness. He told me I could, but only for five minutes. He said that I should write everything I wished to speak about but that I should not bring up everything in my short visit.

He said in so many words: *You are a Cardinal and I cannot forbid you to visit His Holiness. But please do me the favor of leaving your letter with him and ask permission to leave after five minutes.* So I went in, spoke with him for five minutes and said: *Holy Father, the five minutes are up that they gave me to spend with you.* He said: *What ?! Who is in charge in the Vatican? You and I who are having such a good conversation, we are in charge.* Right after that, the head of the Pope's household came to the door and gestured to me that I should leave. Paul VI determined that we would continue. When the man left, the Pope said: *Let's go to the back of the room, behind the books, so that if he knocks again on the door we won't even hear him.* And there we stayed for 55 minutes, talking about the Holy Land that he loved so much. The region was beginning to face the difficulties that we know so well today.

At the end of the visit I told him that there were seven graduate students accompanying me [priests of the Archdiocese] that had never had the chance of meeting him. I asked if they could enter and he immediately agreed. They came in, spoke to him and took pictures. Paul VI was a father and a brother of very happy memory for me.

L.G.: Did you have contact with John Paul I who was Pope for only 33 days?

Yes, I visited his hometown, Forno di Canale, in Belluno, Italy and entered the room where he was born and visited the parishes where he had ministered. He said to me: *I did not know you were a reporter.* Just before he was elected Pope in August of 1978, he had been in Brazil at the invitation of Archbishop Ivo Lorscheiter. We became friends even though we met very few times. By the way, we were nominated Cardinals at the same time, 31 years ago.

L.G.: Were you ever seen as a *papabile*?

Only by my favorite football team! I would never have been considered because I was known for being aggressive with the military government. A Pope who struggles forcefully against injustice causes problems for the Church.

L.G.: Now a days they say that your successor, Cardinal Cláudio Hummes is *papabile*. Is that another football story?

No, Cardinal Hummes is different. I never accepted more than one position in Rome because I did not want to be absent from the Archdiocese. I had little familiarity with Vatican customs. Cardinal Hummes participates in a dozen positions and is well known all over the Vatican. It is very possible that his name would come up as a candidate.

L.G.: What were the positions you held?

I was Secretary of the Congregation for Non-Believers and the Congregation for the Cult. I used to go to Rome twice a year and work on the elaboration of documents which is something that

gave me great pleasure. In the group for the Non-Believers I had the pleasure of working with Cardinal Koenig, Archbishop of Vienna, who died recently. We worked on Human Rights and he was the head of the Congregation for 18 years. We were great friends. He was perfect for the task because he had an open mind and could make connecting links between Christianity and Communism.

L.G.: Speaking of Non-Believers, the left in Brazil always saw you as a protector. Many were communists, materialists and atheists.

In the defense of human rights I never asked anyone if they had faith. Or if they were a Catholic. When people are being tortured it does not matter what color, what faith, what social class they are. We are all human beings and we need to be respected. If a drunk was arrested and tortured I would go to the prison to complain about this treatment. He is a human being who is being violated by those whose task is to defend the order. I never was in favor of communism or capitalism. I always wanted an alternative that I hoped would come with the election of President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva.

L.G.: What would this alternative be?

It would be a social system where all would have what is sufficient for a decent life and where there would be justice and equality. I do not see this happening and I would like to see it. Wealth is still concentrated in our country. 2% of the population has more wealth than the other 98%. This is a scandal.

L.G.: Are you disappointed with the present government?

What annoys me is that this continues with a President who was always on our side, on the side of the worker who earns his bread with the sweat of his brow, as the scriptures put it. I become indignant when they cut social spending to raise the pay of the Armed Forces. I can't accept this. Solving social problems is the proof of whether we are civilized or not.

L.G.: Do you think it is a lack of courage or of competence on the part of the Government?

You have to choose the right persons to work in the right social area. They have to be persons that have authority and influence with the people. You can't change a social situation by decree. The President has to find competent people and enough money to face the challenge.

L.G.: What hurts you most when you look at the poor?

The Church here in São Paulo has a maternity home for poor mothers before, during and after the birth of their babies. It hurts me to see three mothers in the same bed because there is no money to buy more beds. The poor have to be born with health and with some prospect of normal growth. We try, but we cannot guarantee this.

L.G.: But think of the children in Africa condemned to live and die in the AIDS epidemic. Do you accept the Church's veto of condoms?

I cannot be against a decision of the Pope's. If it were my decision I would be against death and for life. The use of the condoms should not be interpreted as a liberalization of sex. We have to understand that the body, the spirit and the soul are a unity. People have to be educated for sexuality as they need to be educated in other areas. And it is good to remember that problems

begin in the family. Little by little we have to return to that which is indispensable for social harmony.

L.G.: Does it seem to you that the way the Church speaks of the family is so conservative that it has no more place in this world?

We have to speak of the family with respect and with simplicity. Today not even television brings a family together, because each one has his own set in his own room. The family needs to come together around ideas that unite them.

L.G.: Describe the successor of John Paul II.

I hope that the one elected, chosen by the Holy Spirit, would be someone capable of uniting East and West, all religions and philosophies of life. If this happens, humanity will have a chance to find peace. Peace among religions, and among the religious!

L.G.: Does this man exist?

He's a Cardinal.

L.G.: Who is he?

I dare not say. I trust the Church and have hope for humanity.

L.G.: Will he follow the same path as John Paul II?

Let's leave that to the Holy Spirit!