

# The Church in Chile

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The large parish of San Jose Obrero on the outskirts of Santiago, the Chilean capital, contains a cross-section of the city's poor. On one side of the Avenida San Pedro which runs down the middle of the parish are four storey blocks of flats, a memorial to a democratic Chile in which elected civilian governments built housing for the working class. These flats look across the avenue on the vast expanse of small, poorly constructed wooden huts which are the typical homes of Chile's poor. This huge poblacion, as these areas are called, contains some 150,000 people who moved in to take this land and build their flimsy huts during the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende.

Living in one of these wooden huts among the people are four Chilean sisters. While teaching three mornings a week in a local primary school to make a living the sisters concentrate their time on supporting the network of christian communities which have been growing in their area. In the immediate chapel which is the primary focus for their work (it is one of the eight such chapels in the parish) they now have four fully developed adult communities and one youth community, each of which has about 20 members. As well as that there are looser groups organised around the chapel: six groups of family catechetics in each of which some eight or nine couples attend weekly meetings for two years as part of the obligatory diocesan programme before First Communion; two groups of preparation for Confirmation in each of which about 20 teenagers attend a weekly meeting, again for two years as the only way in which they are permitted to receive Confirmation; two groups of parents who want their child baptised and who must attend a series of eight talks, and finally two groups involved in an experimental catechetics for which the catechists take their themes from the experience of the local people rather than using the diocesan course. This one chapel is organised therefore as a network of christian communities, some loose and in various stages of self-definition and commitment but with the five committed communities being the core of the church in the area. Apart from four major feasts of the year liturgy is always celebrated in these groups and they recently made a breakthrough in themselves organising their liturgy for the first time.

These core communities are what are called in Chile *Comunidades Cristianas Populares*, Popular Christian Communities (CCP). These are the roots of the popular church in Chile organised in some of the poorer suburbs of Santiago and of cities like Talca and Concepcion. In a document produced by a group of 21 members of these communities the uniqueness of this new way of living as church is analysed. The document was written in response to a request from Bishop Enrique Alvear, the bishop of the western zone of Santiago, in whose area the CCPs are most developed and it is the first comprehensive attempt made by members of the communities to describe their ecclesiology.

The starting point for this, as for their whole experience of christian faith, is the reality of their lives. "We have a consciousness (and we want to deepen it more and more) of belonging to the world of the poor," they say. "This is our primary and fundamental insertion." But they belong to the poor in another vital way, they say, that is in "active participation in the organisations of the people and in their struggle for liberation." It is from this standpoint and in this world that they want to be disciples of Christ, "to prolong his liberating, messianic praxis in the middle of the historical reality in which the working class live." Reflecting on the Word of God from this commitment permits them "to discern today, evangelically, the profound meaning of reality, and the challenges which it raises for our christianity, to return afresh to the world and the reality of the poor and there continue our commitment to a liberating praxis in the midst of the people." In celebrating the death and resurrection of the Lord in this setting then these communities are also celebrating the "suffering, the captivity and the oppression of the people, as a call to reach out for life, to move forward with the people in the struggle for liberation." Finally the stress that their commitment is "to make effective the great project of transformation, a project revealed by Jesus of Nazareth especially in his death and resurrection . . . a project which we see springing from and at times dying in the movement of the historical liberation of peoples."

In living this commitment in the difficult situation of Chile today, these christians are willing to put their own lives in danger. A sign of this was the liturgy they held last May Day during which they found the police had congregated in front of the chapel. As well as that there were security agents inside noting the contents of the celebration. Afterwards they followed the man who had acted as president of the liturgy and arrested him before he got home. He was held for 24 hours during which time he was tortured. As well as this, in an attempt to frighten the people these security agents drove their cars around the area all during the

night. As a result some community members stopped coming to meetings and participating but for most the experience strengthened their commitment.

In this way the Christians act as a focal point for an alternative vision of society amid the all-pervasive propaganda of the dictatorship. Many members of the CCPs are active in local organisations such as groups organised around immediate issues (a recent example was a movement of committees of people without houses who tried in different ways to put pressure on the regime to do something for the over three million people who have no houses of their own and have to live with parents or relatives) and many of the clandestine groups of Left-wing parties organised in poor areas have a strong representation of Christians as active members. The church organised in CCPs therefore doesn't see itself as existing to build itself but rather to strengthen the consciousness, independence and militancy of the people's own organisations.

At the level of Santiago also it is the members of these communities who tend to be most committed to the few public protests which take place in the city. On such occasions as May Day demonstrations in the city centre or protests organised against particular actions of the government, it is almost always church groups rather than political parties who turn out in support (and consequently bear the brunt of repression). These protests are often organised by the church and it is said that the Left expects the church to take on this role. A typical example of this occurred at the end of last August when a liturgical act was organised at a city centre church in protest against the government's expulsion of four leading former politicians, three of them former government ministers and apart from one former Christian Democrat, all active on the Left. It was the only public gathering of protest against the expulsions and it was the only way to affirm the rights of people to express different opinions to those of the government and to organise their own organisation to defend their rights. Among the many who crowded the church there were almost certainly political militants who weren't believers but who turned up to support and hear Bishop Enrique Alvear express in a determined and forceful manner the views which they themselves could never publicly express.

The church organised in Popular Christian Communities, for all the importance of its role, is only a very small sector of the church, however. In the poorer areas of Santiago most people's contact with the church is through one of the many groups organised for catechetical purposes. Though all the catechetical programmes deal with a social dimension of the faith and stress the value of a just society, most participants in these groups resist any

concrete political application of these values. I sat in on a group of ten couples who were coming to a meeting every Saturday night for two years as a preparation for their children's First Communion. They discussed very openly the theme which was an introduction to the New Testament. However when the leader read out a letter from the bishop asking for the participants' opinions on the church's open support for the jailed leaders of an illegal trade union confederation, the CNS, the room fell silent. This is partly out of a fear of one another since there is usually an informer in most groups but it is partly due to the success of the regime's propaganda which leaves people with the sense that there is something wrong in talking politics. As one elderly worker priest, Fr Roberto Bolton, who works closely with the CCPs explained to me, "the dictatorship lowers the morals of the people. They become convinced of the propaganda for consumerism and an atmosphere is created that they shouldn't get involved in the struggle."

Apart from the small committed groups of activists then, the dictatorship's propaganda has to be countered at the level of principles rather than concrete analysis for the most part. This came out clearly at a large gathering of the members of youth groups of one of the seven zones of Santiago for which the theme was 'Peace and Non-Violence'. Among the over 1,000 young people who attended there were extreme differences in consciousness and the theme was the only possible way to raise political issues in a way acceptable to all. Among some of the group leaders present I met members of Left-wing parties who saw their youth work as a means of developing the political consciousness of the young but I also met many who feared any treating of political issues and felt this was an "instrumentalisation of the faith" as one young woman put it to me.

Though at many points during the day speakers laid stress on the necessity for a commitment to justice, for resisting the values of a consumer society and for standing up in a positive way against the use of violence for political ends no matter from what quarter it comes, the young people by and large remained happy with discussing issues on a theoretical level. In one discussion group I attended, a participant raised the issue of Ireland and the problems of violence there while nobody once mentioned Chile and the option by some Left-wing groups for the armed road not to mention the continuing violence of the dictatorship against the majority of the people. Yet even this level of discussion disturbed some and because of objections to the use of the class conscious songs of the Campesino Mass from Nicaragua, the music for the closing Mass of the day was changed. It was a telling microcosm of the consciousness at the grass-roots of the Chilean Church.

The division that came out that day runs right through the church and can clearly be seen at diocesan level. Fundamentally it is expressed in the formulation of Chile's only liberation theologian, Fr Ronaldo Munoz, who has written of the three models of the church operative at the moment. There is the conservative model, a pre-Vatican image of church, and with a conservative political outlook. In Chile at the moment this is held by only a handful of bishops and by many of the upper and upper middle class who actively support the dictatorship. It is the model followed by Mr Jaime Guzman, the ideologue of the regime, who uses theological arguments to justify Pinochet. However it is clearly contrary to the line of the majority of bishops who hold a renewal model with a broadly centrist politics, which in Chilean terms links them with a christian democratic outlook. While they have been consistent in condemning the abuses of the dictatorship and setting up organisations to defend human rights they will not go as far as to break with Pinochet. In church terms they are more concerned with renewing the existing structures rather than with creating new ones and their instinct is still to do things for the poor rather than to side with them in their struggles. In an implicit way it is the image of the church held by most of those who participate in parish activities. The third model of the church is the liberation model with a Left-wing political outlook. It is still very weak and small in Chile but has established itself as a presence which the church and the Left have had to take account of. It can count on a very small number of supporters in the episcopal conference but they are the bishops closest to the people and most trusting of the popular initiatives to change both church and society. They are not afraid to speak out against the dictatorship itself and oppose all links with it but because of this they will never be given charge of important dioceses.

The most important example of the tensions between these two latter models is the current conflict over the Santiago archdiocese's Vicariate of Solidarity. It is the largest single organisation of the Chilean Church, employing hundreds of people, and larger in its budget and personnel than the archdiocese itself. This is the alleged reason for a re-organisation which was ordered by Cardinal Silva last April and which is expected to mean the loss of some three quarters of the staff currently employed. But behind this controversy lies a conflict over models of what the church is.

This tension can be seen to have been present from the very beginning. The Vicariate grew out of an ecumenical Committee for Peace set up with representation of all the main christian churches and the Jewish community soon after the coup of September 1973. However due to pressure from General Pinochet to have it

closed down Cardinal Silva instead created the Vicariate of Solidarity taking on the functions of the Committee for Peace but with the important difference that they were now being exercised by an official organ of the Santiago archdiocese. The Vicariate quickly became a large and complex organisation comprising five different departments but with the overall aim, as a spokesperson told me, of "the promotion and defence of human rights in Chile especially within an option for the poorest." In founding the Vicariate therefore Cardinal Silva took on, as a work central to the mission of the Santiago archdiocese, the defence of the most repressed and persecuted sectors of the population, some of them sectors traditionally hostile to the church, as was the marxist Left. The church became the only institution able to confront the government on its repression and by doing this, it is now generally acknowledged, it saved many lives and forced the regime to modify the worst excesses of its brutality. But though the Cardinal was very far-seeing in supporting this work he did so from within his own renewal model of the church and from this standpoint was glad to be able to control an organisation with such a vital political role. It is only now that a re-organisation has been ordered that this aspect is being fully appreciated.

It cannot be said that from its founding in January 1976 up to 1981 that Cardinal Silva modified its strong stand. In fact he resisted severe and constant government pressure to tone it down and defended it in its work despite the fact that he knew some of its members were non-christian marxists which lent some credibility to the government's claim that the Vicariate was a front for marxists. The department for juridical help has documented the continuing detentions, cases of torture, the still unresolved cases of almost 700 people who disappeared while in police custody and the new method of relegations under which the government relegates opponents to the isolated and sparsely populated parts of the north and south of Chile for anything from 3 to 18 months at a time simply by administrative decree with no charges or court proceedings. It gives legal help to those who ask for it and it offers the most reliable source of the continuing level of repression in the country. The Vicariate's department of zones, as it is called, organises 145 food centres feeding 11,700 children in the different zones of Santiago, all of them children of exiles, of political prisoners or of unemployed people. Through this also it runs courses for the mothers in things like nutrition and gives financial help to families who need it. As well as helping people the department is active in educating people in their right to food, work and jobs. The Vicariate's campesino department plays an important role in teaching peasants who have only small plots of land how to cul-



tivate it more intensely as many of these are being forced to sell their land under the impact of government policies. It also educates them in organising themselves to defend their rights and in resisting the pressure to become apolitical.

The voice of the Vicariate for the poor themselves is their fortnightly magazine *Solidaridad*. It is the only magazine critical of the government which is directed at those suffering most from the government's policies and its editor, Mr Juan Gonzalez, told me it wouldn't be permitted if it weren't under the protection of the church. Fortnight after fortnight it charts the human situation and prints articles on people detained for days on end without being charged, on threats against people involved in human rights work, on torture, on those relegated and on the one million Chileans in exile for their political views. While it keeps up constant pressure on this front it also charts the ways the current economic model is making the poor poorer, it supports workers' struggles, it gives examples of popular organisations and how they operate, and it analyses the policies and actions of the regime. Mr Gonzalez said that there is representation made to the Vicariate about almost every issue by the government who go to great lengths to give the magazine "the image of being subversive." Therefore whenever the police find an arms cache hidden by a Left-wing group among the guns and Left-wing literature displayed on television will always be a copy of *Solidaridad*. A regular article in an internal police magazine is entitled 'What the Enemy thinks and does' and it always carries a review of articles in *Solidaridad*. Furthermore, people have been known to be stopped in the street by police when they were seen carrying the magazine and told that it was prohibited. Security agents have also attacked some of the magazine's network of private distributors most of whom are church personnel or trade unionists.

As well as publishing the fortnightly magazine, the Vicariate also publishes materials for conscientising work in small groups. Some of these are popularised and simple versions of the Puebla documents, of Roman documents like *Pacem in Terris* or *Evangeliū Nuntiandi*, or of documents of the Chilean church. Each of these are illustrated with lively drawings emphasising the message. Another series destined for a different readership deals with studies of the legal situation in Chile, of the human rights situation and of the ideology of national security which is the government's basis for justifying their actions. Another series, which has been presented to the government, details the cases of the almost 700 known cases of persons who disappeared while in police custody. A recent book published to coincide with the first anniversary of Archbishop Romero's death is a collection of his pastoral letters and some ser-

mons and speeches.

The public face of the Vicariate doesn't give much indication of the inner tensions therefore. These, Fr Roberto Bolton told me, are rooted in different models of the church. For the Cardinal as for the vicar in charge of the Vicariate, Monsignor Jaun de Castro, it is important to maintain a christian democratic line dominant and therefore all department heads share this political perspective. A strong anti-marxism which has deep roots in the social pastoral of the Chilean Church lies behind this desire to maintain a centrist hegemony in the Vicariate and the present changes have as one aim to reinforce that perspective at the expense of a more Left-wing one. That this has happened at this time is related to other factors also. Chief among these is the forthcoming retirement of the Cardinal in September of next year and he apparently wishes to trim the size of the Vicariate so as to make it easier for his successor to have a free hand in deciding what its future will be.

But more important than that for indicating the model of the church which lies behind the Vicariate is the new political situation created in Chile by the institutionalisation of the Pinochet regime last March under a constitution approved by the people in a referendum. The Church now has to face the fact that Pinochet and his Right-wing model of society is here to stay and this has forced a more profound evaluation of what is the role of the church in this situation. For those who hold a liberation perspective the issue has always been clear – no christian can accept Pinochet and must in a practical way be committed to the eventual overthrow of the dictatorship. The majority of the church's leaders however are more marked by a desire not to break fully with the state and Cardinal Silva has even gone as far as to say that he never would. In this the Chilean Church is marked by a need to be associated with political power and because of this its option is more and more clearly to settle down with the Pinochet dictatorship not refusing to criticise violations of people's rights when they occur but basically with the perspective of "humanising the dictatorship", as Fr Mariano Puga, a well-known Santiago worker priest put it to me. This line is more and more expected to mark the work and staff of the Vicariate of Solidarity and some bishops are pressing for it to be closed down altogether. Its future depends on the Cardinal's successor.

The other unique vicariate of the Santiago archdiocese which is also a creation of the Cardinal, is the Vicariate of the Workers' Pastoral. Because of its involvement in the world of trade unionism and workers' rights and because of its personnel it is more clearly committed to a liberation perspective. The Vicariate sees its role as being not just to be a christian presence in the world of



work but to support and strengthen the growth of militant, independent workers' organisations. Though it has only 15 staff members it has a wide outreach. It gives legal advice to workers and unions on issues relating to their position as workers; it gives courses on the new corpus of labour law so that workers can fully know their rights; it educates trade union leaders in collective negotiation; it works with groups of trade union leaders helping them to analyse the political and economic developments in the country; it has a workshop on methodology for groups involved in popular education in their local areas; it works closely with the underground federations of trade unions (as the regime doesn't allow the trade unions form united groups to strengthen their position) and it plays a significant role in facilitating these to organise and meet; it co-ordinates the work of priests and nuns in organising groups of workers to analyse their situation so as to "help the evangelisation of the workers from the values of their own culture and not that of the pastoral agents who work with them" as Mr Jose Aguilera Belmar, the Vicariate's general secretary told me. The Vicariate also works directly in strengthening popular organisations in local areas and it publishes both a simple informative bulletin and more detailed studies on the impact of economic policies on the workers and their families. Though less well known than the Vicariate of Solidarity and less public in its work, its role is vital to the growth of an independent workers' movement.

It is his willingness to found and support such an organisation as a fully official organ of the archdiocese while maintaining his equivocal vision of the social rôle of the church that the ambiguities of Cardinal Silva come out. It is an ambiguity which has marked the social pastoral of the Chilean Church since the early decades of the century and of which he is simply the inheritor. Though early in its commitment to the social teachings of the church, the Chilean Church's motivation for this was marked by a strong anti-marxism. This led it to break its traditional ties with the conservative party in favour of a more centrist position in the form of christian democracy. The result therefore was a paternalistic commitment to doing things to better the conditions of the working class and marginalised while maintaining the system intact. Its highest expression was in the reforming government of the Christian Democrat, Eduardo Frei from 1964 to 1970. The three years of Salvador Allende's government changed nothing of this attitude on the part of the official church though it did dramatically change the attitudes of a small elite of clergy and christian intellectuals who began to see that their faith demanded a critical support for the building of socialism from within the revolutionary process. This position led to the founding of Christians for Socialism in

April 1971 and later the founding of the Christian Left party within the Popular Unity alliance. For most of the bishops this was more than they could accept and they prepared a document condemning Christians for Socialism which they published just after the coup. The ambiguity of a church with a social conscience linked to a paternalistic outlook and a fear of marxism still dominates the Chilean Church. Though the eight years of Pinochet's repression has ended any lingering sympathies some bishops may have had for the Right, most continue to be as uncomprehending as ever of the popular political and ecclesial project.

What the coup has achieved however is the growth of the popular church. Those priests radicalised by their experience of the Popular Unity government who weren't exiled from Chile have worked since the coup in the growth of a new understanding of the faith at grass-roots level. It is only now that the full results of this work is becoming obvious in the growth of the CCPs. The coup also facilitated this process through the elimination of all autonomous political organisations so that church groups became the only place where people could meet for political discussions. But the process of the popular church also lost through the coup, particularly in the exile of some of its leading thinkers, notably Fr Gonzalez Arroyo and Pablo Richard and the lack of well qualified and creative theologians committed to the project remains a problem.

Since the coup the Chilean Church has had an image of being a progressive church standing up to Pinochet. It is an image largely resulting from the work of the Vicariate of Solidarity but behind it lies the same paternalistic vision. Fr Roberto Bolton told me: "The church thinks that it is now on the side of the poor but that is not so. It has a problem of equivocal vision. If the political situation changed tomorrow and Communists could really come out and say what they thought, I think they would say that the church, though it has done a lot of good work in defending the human rights of all, hasn't substantially changed."

If, from the standpoint of those committed to the popular church, the vision underlying the pastoral work of the Chilean church hasn't substantially changed, there is a confidence and vigour behind that work. The bishops have just undertaken a two-year's preparation of a national pastoral plan for the years 1982-1985, the first such plan Chile has had. This has gone through three different revisions by the bishops after being sent to pastoral directors all over the country for their comments and suggestions. Its overall objective is: "To announce the truth about Christ, the Church and man, making a preferential option for the poor, forming persons who, with a renewed missionary spirit, in this moment

of our history and assuming their culture, promote and celebrate the integral liberation of man to construct in Chile the civilisation of love." The plan then breaks this down into six elements which are the family, youth, basic christian communities, the popular and marginalised sectors, popular religiosity and education and gives concrete means to realise each. Bishop Camilo Vial, the vicar of the southern zone of Santiago explained to me that though previously the episcopal conference has given pastoral orientations they now wish to unite more the pastoral work going on in each diocese. Each diocese and zone will be expected to apply the national plan to its own situation and elaborate its own plan which has already been happening for some years past in the southern zone at annual meetings with representatives of each deanery of the zone. The zone's current plan has picked out four areas of work-option for the poor; area of insertion and commitment; area of communion and participation and the area of formation – and then detailed concrete objectives and means to achieve them in each area.

One parish which is organised in CCPs however, hadn't found these areas of work very relevant and had elaborated their own plan, a pastoral agent in the parish told me. It is a plan far more inserted in the reality of the people's lives and takes as its aim "To Construct a Church of the People". This is then broken down into elements of this church and concrete means to realise these elements: aware of the social reality, living in class solidarity, announcing the liberating Christ, committed to the class, denouncing prophetically, being led by workers, celebrating the faith and the sacraments from the basis of their life and as signs of the power for a liberating commitment. The latter isn't different just because it is more applied to one concrete situation; behind it also is a different model of church.

It is unlikely that there will be any great change in the Chilean Church in the near future. Settling down with the Pinochet dictatorship it will, by and large, continue to follow a middle road. The worst that could be feared would be the appointment of a new archbishop of Santiago who would actively oppose the popular church. However the likelihood is for a moderate man, perhaps more accommodating to the regime than Cardinal Silva but still willing to take a stand on specific violations of human rights. An indicator of Rome's attitude is the increasing favour being shown priests of the Schonstatt Fraternity, a society of priests founded in Germany which has had quite some success in attracting able Chileans to join but which is heavily marked by a centrist, spiritualist, 'apolitical' and renewing theology.

Theirs is the line which Rome seems to favour for the Chilean

Church. One of their members, Camilo Vial, was appointed an auxiliary bishop of Santiago last year and their other episcopal member in Chile, Francisco Jose Cox, was promoted to head a congregation at the Vatican in August, a move some fear may be the prelude to a return as Cardinal in Santiago. Another Schonstatt priest, Fr Joaquin Alliende, organised a successful Eucharistic Congress last year which appears to have been reluctantly agreed to by leading bishops only after a visit to Rome. This stressed the unity of the Chilean family symbolised by the presence of General Pinochet at the huge closing Mass of the Congress, an event criticised by some CCPs in a public document as "a true sacrilege." The indications are therefore that even if the future archbishop of Santiago won't be a priest of Schonstatt he will be someone with a similar theology. As well as a new cardinal Rome will have seven other episcopal appointments to make in Chile over the next two years, many of them senior posts. The men appointed to these posts will have a decisive influence for the future.

The popular church has established itself strongly enough however to further develop and grow and may be even to convert some more bishops to its theology, as some in this perspective suggested to me. The difficulties for this sector may lie more with the government which over the last year has begun to give expulsion orders to foreign priests and sisters, many of whom are working with the popular church. Though in every case so far the expulsion was withdrawn in favour of three-monthly visas which have to be constantly renewed, the very real threat of expulsion has to be faced. It also appears the government has decided not to give a permanent residence to any missionary now entering the country.

The suffering of the Chilean Church is going to continue as surely as are the tensions within it. But it is a church in which most sectors are making some response to the political situation in which they find themselves and if the response of many is considered too little and too slow by some of the most aware and committed, it is a living church finding in the Gospel the means for discerning and confronting the ideology which seeks to domesticate it.