

The End of a Religious Community

Members of religious societies in Chile have had different experiences of the military Junta that seized power on September 11. Some have welcomed the overthrow of Allende, some have had their schools taken over, at least one -- a Spanish priest -- was executed, and many have fled or been expelled.

This is from a letter of the Provincial of one of the groups that was dissolved, its foreign members expelled. The Provincial had not been living in Chile at the time of the coup; he came in from Europe to see how the community was faring -- and was arrested.

Because the community hopes to continue its apostolate in Chile and because Chilean members are still there, some names have been changed or generalized.

Yesterday afternoon I landed in Buenos Aires. Luis was on the same plane but continued directly to Europe. I was able to obtain a laissez-passer from the Embassy which enabled me to spend a few days in Buenos Aires; that was an exceptional concession for normally I should have been directly repatriated. The fact of the matter is that Luis and I have just been expelled from Chile and the Community dissolved. It's a hard blow which has profoundly affected us, all the more so because of the conditions in which it happened. I realize that this news will astonish you so I'm going to try to recapture the events to permit you to participate in them.

After your departure we regrouped ourselves in our little center house. As you know we expected to receive a "visit" one day -- and it came Monday, October 1st, about 10:30 P.M.

The house was completely surrounded and raided by about 15 carabineros. They immediately pointed their submachine-guns at us and ordered us to go outside and to lie on our bellies, our hands behind our necks. Each one, where he was, recollected himself silently and prayed the prayer of abandon. Our little dog went from one to another sniffing at our heads.

The search lasted about 4 hours. All this time, given the threats they were making against us, we expected to be riddled by bullets. The house was turned upside down. The search revealed two or three books on the Third World. We were given the order to climb into the paddy-wagon, litterly thrown against one another. On the floor were 4 neighbors whom they'd come to get earlier. From there we were taken to the police station. All of us were thrown into a cell full of piss and shit. We passed the night scared stiff. The next day about 11 a.m. we were taken out (I'll spare you the details of the threats and brutalities) and were led to the National Stadium. Our entry into the stadium was something I'll never forget. Thousands of prisoners were there, for the same reasons as ourselves, divided up into groups. Several groups arose when we passed and applauded us. We were surrounded by soldiers armed to the teeth but the real masters of the Stadium -- and that was to be revealed on occasions like this -- were the prisoners themselves by their moral superiority and their sense of dignity.

We were taken half-way around the stadium and made to stop. A little while later Luis and I were called forward as "foreign extremists." That wasn't a very good omen and we were escorted

to locker-room #9 under heavy guard. We found ourselves with about 30 men who had previously been beaten up and accused of being extremists -- all workers and of the power classes whose only crime was to have belonged to the U.P. and to have had responsibilities in the factories. Most were from Puente Alto.

We were shut up there for two days. In a certain sense we were in ideal conditions for our religious life. We didn't have to worry too much about how things would turn out; right from the beginning it was all too clear that we were caught up in an implacable machine over which we didn't have the least control. The only thing we had was a deep abandon of our whole life to the Lord and our confidence placed in Him. A current of solidarity circulated amongst us that I found extraordinary. Sometimes a community needs years and years before arriving at a relationship of confidence and trust with those around it; here the miracle happened immediately for we had crossed all at once and all together Love's Threshold. At certain times a great joy invaded Luis and me amidst and with all our companions.

After these 2 days, all too short in our eyes, Luis, myself and a Uruguayan were taken out and put into another group, this time mainly composed of foreigners, above all Latin Americans. There were about 400 or 500 foreigners in the stadium at that time.

The Friday after our arrest we were called together, along with 80 other foreigners. That was time wasted because we were too many and most of the group wasn't able to be interrogated. We were all taken back to the stadium about 8 in the evening. At least

we were able to see, from the outside, how things shaped up -- and it didn't cheer us. What we saw was horrible. Most of us, with these scenes in our heads, passed a night of anguish awaiting the morning.

The next day, Saturday, we were re-assembled about 6 a.m. This time we were about 200. At 8 a.m. we were taken to the Velodrome heavily escorted by military. We stopped on the Velodrome Track and the whole farce was set up. We were called by groups of 10 and each group was handed over to a prosecutor. All the orders, calls and summonses were done from a central office, by loudspeakers, amidst a great silence. There were 5 interrogation points, one each for the Army, Air Force, Navy, Police and criminal investigation. The groups were divided among these 5 points. Luis and I were handed over to the Air Force. We were all taken near a little fort and with a great deal of brutality given the order to face the wall; we were then covered with a blanket from head to foot in order to keep us isolated and disorientated; we couldn't move; the first one who did so got a rifle butt in the spine. A painful calvary began. Luis and I were the last two -- from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., the sun beating down in this position of total immobility. Several times I thought I'd ^{gone} ~~have~~ beyond my possibilities of physical resistance. During this long wait we could hear the piercing cries coming from the interrogation rooms. Throughout these interminable hours I often thought of the Trial of Jesus. Finally our time came.



Luis was taken first; about a half-hour later it was my turn. Eyes covered I was taken into the fort. The shrieks became louder for in this section there must have been 4 or 5 groups of interrogations. I was made to back up to a wall where I remained leaning. It was there that Luis too was questioned for I recognized his voice. He disappeared a few minutes after my arrival. The interrogation began: when had I arrived in Chile, why had I come, where had I been before. They insisted that I was passing arms, that I was a subversive agent, a marxist agitator, etc. Thank God I remained calm and replied that I was provincial superior of a group of religious in Latin America. I quickly realized that they knew nothing about us at that time; Luis had exactly the same impression. That permitted us to give vague replies. Finally, with more threats and insults they led me out, still blindfolded. I'd gotten through; Luis too -- and he too hadn't been beaten up -- but the majority of our companions in the group hadn't been spared -- and the most refined means were used -- electricity and the rest.

We returned to the stadium that evening and awaited the verdict! Two more days, Monday, they informed us that both Luis and I were expelled and the next day we were handed over to the Embassy, which, from then on, assured our protection.

Andres was released a day after us. His interrogation went off well too but he noted that it was harsher and more brutal than the first time.