

Washington, D.C. August 12th, 1978

Dear Friend,

In a recent meeting organized by Representative Christopher J. Dodd, an account of which appeared in the Congressional Record (July 26, 1978 - E 4071 - E 4073), we explained the sad case of the secret detention in Argentina of Fr. Kleber Silva Iribarnegaray in order to request the intervention of members of the US Congress on his behalf.

We are extremely grateful and, indeed, overwhelmed by the expressions of sympathy and interest we have received. Both in appreciation of your efforts and in order to give you a greater understanding of the activities of our community (Little Brothers of the Gospel of Charles de Foucauld) and of Fr. Kleber Silva, we have prepared this letter, focussing on some points which people here have difficulty understanding, and which are impossible to adequately explain in a few minutes of interview.

The Fraternity of the Little Brothers of the Gospel is a response to a need acutely felt by the Church in its desire to come closer and to be present among the poor, the abandoned and forgotten sectors of humankind, in particular the lower sectors of the working class. This necessity has found its expression in many places through new pastoral experiences and new ways of religious life. Some examples are the priest workers in France, the sisters and brothers of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the numerous grassroots communities in Latin America and the different groups, who, like ourselves, follow the spirituality of Fr. Charles de Foucauld. The lifestyle of these communities tries to adapt itself to the social environment to which they are consecrated. They try to come closer to the poor and marginated, because these do not come readily to the Church. Every possible contact is encouraged in order to overcome the many psychological and objective barriers which impede or discourage the trust and confidence of the poor in the Church. One tries to live as they do, and to be accessible to their needs. Some characteristic features which this type of religious life demand are:

1. Live poorly and simply.
2. Work in some manual labor, not only as the only source of subsistence, but also as an expression of solidarity and friendship with the poor.
3. Not have possessions which make one appear as people, men and women, who have already resolved the basic needs of life. The poor should not think that this simple life is no more than a "hobby" or "vacation" for their "new friends."
4. To live in small communities, because the big communities are seen to lack the family touch and the familiar relations which are normal in the working-class environment.
5. Not to have any big religious houses or convents, oftentimes empty; no walls which protect the "peace," the garden, and the relaxation of the community. Also wear no habit which is not appropriate to working-life in factories, homes, bars, etc. The poor should feel themselves the owners of the wealth of this silent and prayerful presence, and dispense of it as they judge best. They should not feel questioned and compelled by false expectations



generated by the imposition of exterior symbols (e.g., the soutane). Rather, they should be able to live this new friendship in joy, spontaneity, confidence, and freedom. For this reason, the religious will try to be accessible and simple, not only in dress, but in language, customs, and attitudes.

6. A strong spirituality and community life in a religious organization which is clearly with the Church, linked hierarchically in obedience to Rome, to the local Bishop, and to its own religious Superiors.
7. Accompany without being leaders; To be prepared to wait so that the Gospel lived by the poor will fructify within the heart of the local community, and lead to the initiatives, which will change their lives, and allow them to be the authors of their own human development.

These general orientations underlie the life of our community. The Little Brothers of the Gospel has its central house in Cepie, Limoux, France. The Fraternity's General Prior is Rev. Francois Vidil. The former Prior and Founder, Rev. Rene Voillaume, is very well known in the Vatican and the religious world in general because of his work and writings. For example, SEEDS OF THE DESERT, BROTHERS OF MEN, and THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE are some of his books available in English. Some other brothers are writers as well, such as: Carlo Carretto, LETTERS FROM THE DESERT, IN SEARCH OF THE BEYOND, and THE GOD WHO COMES. Also Arturo Paoli, the former Regional in Latin America, is the author of FREEDOM TO BE FREE and MEDITATIONS ON ST. LUKE. These have very efficiently answered any doubts or uncertainties which people may have about the ecclesiastical and doctrinal stance of the Little Brothers and their presence among the poor. Both the growth and concrete orientations of the community are very much indebted to the social teaching of the Magisterium of the Church, and particularly to the thought and writings of the late Pope Paul VI.

Our Fraternity has worked in Argentina since 1960. The places where it has worked were not chosen haphazardly, but in perfect agreement with the above criteria.

1960 - The Fraternity of Fortin Olmos - in the Chaco Forest in the Northeast of Argentina. Fortin Olmos is a small rural town dedicated in that time to the extraction of tannin from the Quebracho wood for an anonymous forestry company. When the company moved its operations to South Africa in the early sixties, the remaining population, then without any industries or other means of production, searched for its own subsistence. They turned to the primitive burning of firewood to make charcoal, the making of fire bricks, and migrant work in the cotton and sugar harvests, etc. The Brothers who began during the time when the forestry company was leaving, started working in the same tasks together with the people. In the very dramatic situation which the area was finding itself, they encouraged cooperative and selfhelp initiatives, such as a land-and-consumer cooperative, a community garden, a carpentry shop, and artisan workshops for the womenfolk. Amazingly, because of these activities and its style of life, the community was immediately branded "communist" and regarded with great suspicion by the civil and police authorities in the zone. The fact that the Fraternity supported and encouraged government-sponsored health, educational and development projects there did not change matters.



Kleber Silva Iribarnegaray came to integrate this community in 1970. He became the driver of the only ambulance in the locality, some 65 miles from the nearest hospital in the city of Reconquista. He worked for free, and did not have any schedule, day or night. He oftentimes had to overcome much opposition in order to get adequate attention for the sick, whom he brought from so far. Confronting these problems created friends, but also enemies.

1971 - The Fraternity of Suriyaco, La Rioja. Suriyaco was our novitiate fraternity, established deep in the foothills of the Andes Mountains at the invitation of Bishop Enrique Angelelli. In the beautiful and simple environment, deep into the mountains, many people came to the community in their search for inner peace and the Will of the Lord. Yet traditional "flight into the desert" came to be regarded with deep misgivings by the authorities and the police came to exercise a very close vigilance over our visitors and the activities of this 'wilderness' fraternity. The Local bishop Angelelli became very concerned about the situation and finally advised us to leave the area. Shortly afterwards, he, himself, was tragically killed in an accident which even "Observatore Romano" did not hesitate to call "mysterious" and many people believe to have been deliberately provoked. It was in Suriyaco that Kleber Silva had made his novitiate in 1971-1972.

1970 - Fraternity of La Boca, Buenos Aires. It was situated in one of the very famous immigrant neighborhoods adjacent to the port of Buenos Aires. The Brothers worked as longshoremen on the docks, or on construction sites, and helped in the Church's pastoral work in some nearby shanty towns. Cardinal Aramburu, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, took a personal interest and offered continued support to the work of the community. In 1973 Kleber Silva began working in the cleansing department of the municipality of Buenos Aires, accompanying by his life the hard lot of these humble workers. When shortly after the military coup in 1976, sectors of the Church working among the poor or in defense of human rights began to be openly persecuted, the fraternity began to suffer as well. But now it was not only the hostility of the military government but we became the object of open persecution, together with numerous other communities. Kleber Silva was detained on June 14th, 1977, while two priests, Carlos Bustos and Pablo Gazzarri, who were very close to our community, were detained months previously. To date we have no definite news of their whereabouts or why they have been detained.

#### SOME AREAS OF DIFFICULTY AND QUESTIONS WHICH HAVE BEEN RAISED

(We have formulated these difficulties into questions in order to fully clarify the situation.)

1. The persecution of Christian communities, such as the Fraternity, in Argentina is not really a religious persecution, that is, it is not directed against the strictly religious or cultic activities of the Church as, for example, in the Eastern bloc countries, but rather at those Church sectors who assume a particular social commitment, which, although very admirable, is, at best, marginal to the religious message of Christianity. . . .

Response Given the conditions of misery, underdevelopment, and insecurity Latin American theology points more towards salvation understood in its full



human and historical implications, that is, both in the present circumstances of earthly existence and in eternal life afterwards, rather than in a purely spiritual salvation, as it is generally understood in many theological traditions in Europe or in the US, which do not have to respond to people suffering desperately in the basic struggle for subsistence and survival. For that reason, the pastoral orientations of our Churches and the attitudes of clergy are not fully understood outside of Latin America. They fulfill the demands of their vocation, not only in the purely liturgical or religious functions, but also in the very serious obligations of human assistance and promotion, such as organizing literacy programs or self-help cooperatives or defending the weak in cases of gross violations of their basic human rights. To live in a shanty town, participate in a silent march with the relatives of "disappeared" persons, or to work manually in a humble task does not mean in any way to go outside strictly ecclesiastical demands and is every bit as important for the integrity of the Christian message in our society as celebrating the Eucharist.

Many priests, religious, and layfolk have left their homeland in the US to work in Latin America. With a deep experience of material well-being and profound democratic traditions behind them, they have generally come to assume the very same attitudes and lifestyles we have already outlined. Tragically, they have also suffered the same consequences, for example the case of Fr. Jim Weeks in Argentina (August, 1976). This latter situation is one which should give much food for thought in the US as to the true nature of religious persecution in Latin America. The full integrity of the Gospel message is as much threatened in our countries as it is in the Eastern ones.

2. The option to live and share with the poor as a Christian implies in many Latin American countries a readiness to undergo all the sacrifices involved, including not least, persecution. To publicly complain afterwards seems, at best, contradictory or, at worst, theatrical . . . .

Response It is clear we could have avoided these sorrowful consequences but only at the price of being faithful to our own consciences. To defend the cause of justice does not simply mean to measure the risks which the weak confront in the face of possible reprisals by the powerful. It is, above all, a question of justice and moral judgment about that which is right, with the danger of our becoming the "wicked" or "evil ones" consenting to evil. If it weren't for this, which is indeed much more than just an impertinent scruple, it is obvious that, even if many disturbing and grave things had happened in Argentina, nothing would have happened to us. If one reasons directly along those lines, it is not worthwhile to work for the respect for human rights in any part of the world. In such a case we should honorably admit that the truth lies in situations like the following: "The holding of any trials is obviously a great mistake. Consider that Argentina was able to eliminate some 1,000 dissidents in 1975 alone, and Guatemala, 14,000 between 1970 and 1975, by the simple use of "death squads," with no trials at all, and without suffering the negative front-page coverage the inept Soviets have generated by the trial of two individuals." (Washington Post, July 29, 1978, quoting letter by Naom Chomsky and Edward Herman) In these situations silence does indeed imply consent, and speaking out is a difficult burden but the only possible response for the Christian.



3. Given the existence of communist and terrorist organizations in Argentina, to give publicity to the "errors" of the government which is struggling against those groups is to consciously or unconsciously play into the hands of those groups . . . .

Response Our presence and life among the poor is based on the firm belief that the true seeds for human progress and development are to be found in the Gospel message. In no way do we believe that the defense of the poor and the weak to be the exclusive, or even prior, possessions of communist or similar ideologies. "You must be imbued with the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that, independently of the powers and ideologies of this world, you are always ready to affirm its values which alone fully guarantee the transcendence and essential rights of the human person. Whatever your participation in social or political struggles, you must be instruments of peace and reconciliation by remaining faithful to the Gospel of the Beatitudes; there must be no hate in your hearts, you must love your enemies, you must have the courage to reject violence, which is useless and degrading. Beyond the Gospel texts our allegiance must be to Christ Himself in his mysteries .... We must never fail to proclaim the truth or firmly denounce injustice and oppression, even though it costs us our freedom or our life." Fr. Rene Voillaume, founder of the Fraternity, in THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc. 1977, pp.126-7)

In fact, abandoning the struggle for human rights or distancing one's self from the poor on those grounds is to give those ideologies an apparent "justification" for their activities. We become hostages to our own fears and in so doing, betray the true strength of the Gospel to transform humankind and uplift the downtrodden.

4. When people are disappeared over a long time, as in these cases, i.e. over 12 months, given the situation in Argentina, it is more than likely that these priests are dead. There is no point to insisting any further . . . .

Response Shortly after the "disappearance" of the two French nuns, Srs. Alicia Domon and Leonie Duquet, last December, some bodies were discovered washed up on the beaches near Bahia Blanca in the South of the province of Buenos Aires. It was strongly rumored that bodies of the two Sisters were among those found. However, their Sister Superior declared that until she can positively identify them herself, she continues to believe that they are still alive. There are cases of people disappeared over a long period of time, even rumored dead who have reappeared in prisons or on the streets. The cases of two Jesuit priests, Frs. Yorio and Jalics, towards the end of 1976 is a well-known example. We have informally many indications that both Fr. Silva and the others are still alive. However, even if they have already been killed, it is both our civic and Christian obligation to pursue a full explanation for their disappearances. Otherwise we can involuntarily become silent accomplices to an evil practice.

Because we rebel against these crimes, and because we hope for a more just society in Argentina and Latin America, we have tried to interest as many people as possible in these cases. We thank you for all you are doing on their behalf and hope this letter will be useful to you in further explaining the situation.



We conclude, echoing the famous words of President Kennedy:  
"For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe - the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God." (Inaugural Address, 1961)

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jesus Ramon Silva Iribarnegaray  
Rev. Patrick Rice