

TESTIMONY
OF
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OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE AND PEACE
UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

ON
HUMAN RIGHTS IN ARGENTINA

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS
COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is J. Bryan Hehir; I am Associate Secretary for International Justice and Peace at the United States Catholic Conference. Our office functions as the foreign policy section for the Catholic bishops of the United States and I speak in the name of the U.S. Catholic Conference this afternoon.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you and the committee for inviting our participation in these hearings. It is an unpleasant task, at best, both because none of us enjoys rehearsing the sad chronicle of persecution, torture and other violations of people's basic rights that seem to be the hallmark of many societies today, and particularly in the case of these hearings, because we hold the Argentine people in such deep respect, admiration and affection.

As the unit of the United States Catholic Conference specifically dealing with international affairs, the Office of International Justice and Peace has received numerous communications and a great deal of printed documentation on the Argentine situation. These include long lists of political prisoners and missing persons, accounts of brutal and degrading conditions in the prisons, and descriptions of the systematic employment of the same revolting torture practices that have been widely reported now for some time in the cases of Brazil, Chile and Uruguay.

Much of this documentation has already been brought before the Committee and entered into the Congressional Record. It is beyond our competence to affirm the authenticity of all such allegations but the sheer volume of the charges, arising from many different sectors of the Argentine community, and the fact that highly responsible and moderate Argentine citizens with whom we are in direct

contact tend to credit them fully, places the burden of disproving these allegations squarely on the shoulders of the Argentine authorities.

That there are an extraordinary number of wholly unjustifiable and unjustified, systematic and gross violations of the universally recognized rights of the human person in Argentine today is simply a fact, an inescapable fact.

The Church and the National Security State.

Our testimony today will be restricted, however, to just one aspect of a more generalized repression, that directly touching the Catholic Church. We limit our remarks to this area for two reasons: it is the aspect on which we have the most complete and verifiable information, and it is, we believe, a very important key to understanding what is happening in much of Latin America today.

That is to say, repression of the Church, a relatively recent phenomenon in modern Latin America, can be understood only in the larger context of conflicting worldviews. Since these conflicting perspectives are at the same time powerful motivators of human conduct and in no way confined to any single nation of Latin America, it is almost inevitable that their expression in one country will, sooner or later, be relatable to similar expressions in other countries. This is one way of saying that the sad state of human rights in Argentina today cannot be seen apart from similar conditions in Chile or Uruguay and elsewhere, and that the repression of church persons and Christian movements in Argentina today, however selective, is equally of a piece with attacks against the Church in Brazil or Paraguay.

The two conflicting viewpoints, then, that we are addressing here are, on the one hand, that of the renewed Church of Latin America, responsive to Vatican II and Medellin, the church committed to preaching the good news to the poor, to being in fact the church of the poor, seeking justice for the poor and oppressed; a church that finds itself defining its evangelical mission ever more clearly in terms of proclaiming and defending the sacred dignity of the human person; and, on the other hand, the ideology of the modern national security state in which the individual's worth and merit, indeed very existence, has meaning only insofar as it contributes to the so-called security of the nation-state. Implicit here is the assumption that the state is under constant threat, not chiefly from external aggression but from its own citizenry.

Although these two "worldviews" are clearly expressed by different sectors of each country's population, it should be obvious that in no country are the two opposing views so sharply defined as to leave no room for variations of each or still other quite different viewpoints. Within the church, for example, there continue to be strong reactionary tendencies expressing themselves most dramatically in such right-wing movements as "Tradition, Family and Property." On the part of the state, even in the new military dictatorships which are today's norm in Latin America, there are still voices of moderation struggling to restore the democratic process and achieve justice for the masses. It is our impression that these voices are as yet numerous within the present Argentine government and were represented among those who overthrew the corrupt administration of President Isabel Martínez de Perón on March 24. That they have been manifestly unsuccessful in making their voices prevail is, I take it,

the occasion for these hearings.

Repression of the Church in Argentina.

Turning now to the situation of the Catholic Church in Argentina, I must preface what follows by saying that it would be an illusion to speak of a massive, organized persecution of the church or of an all-out confrontation between church and state. The situation is far too complex and nuanced to be captured by slogans.

There is persecution, that is repression of and attacks upon various church personnel, and there is, at the highest institutional level, an on-going discussion that could fairly be described as confrontational, but some distinctions continue to be in order.

That it is a situation that can only be described as most serious, however, is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that just two days ago (27 September) Pope Paul VI drew unusual attention to the current crisis. In receiving the credentials of the Argentine ambassador to the Holy See, the Pope departed from the usual formalities and expressed his deep concern at "the anguish of those who have been dismayed by the recent events that have cost precious human lives, including those of several churchmen, under circumstances that have still not been adequately explained." Although couched in the language of diplomatic understatement, there should be no doubt that the Holy See considers the Argentine situation to be extremely serious.

We can identify at least three categories of attacks upon the church which appear to be part of a more generalized system of repression and terror. First are the direct attacks against well-known progressive church figures, such as the brutal killing this year of four priests, one of them a Frenchman, and the presumed

murder in a highly suspicious auto accident of one of the Argentine hierarchy's most outspoken advocates of the poor, Bishop Enrique Angelelli of La Rioja.

All five of these victims were men known for their commitment to the poor. Fr. Francisco Soares was killed in the delta town of Tigre and his body dumped on the Pan American highway. Fr. Jorge Tedeschi was kidnapped from his house in Bernal and his body later found on the outskirts of the provincial capital of La Plata.

Although the Tigre parish house where Soares was killed is only one mile from the federal police station, a priest from the chancery office of the San Isidro diocese arrived before the police did. The chancery official who was in bed when the dawn call was relayed to him had to get dressed and drive six miles to the scene of the murder but still arrived before the police, although both parties were notified simultaneously.

Fr. Soares' parishioners believe that he was marked for execution because of a sermon he preached which made unflattering references to police conduct.

On July 21, Fathers Gabriel Rogelio Longueville and Carlos de Dios Murias were arrested in the province of La Rioja by two carloads of men with police credentials. The dead bodies of the two priests were found the following day. The local parishioners in Chamental believe that the men who took the priests were indeed policemen because the clergy there have been the target of several police roundups in an intense campaign against suspected subversives.

On August 4, two weeks after the murders of Longueville and Murias, Bishop Angelelli celebrated a memorial Mass in their parish.

That same day, the commander of the Navy and member of the ruling junta, Admiral Emilio Massera, called for the dismissal of Bishop Angelelli, Bishop Jaime Francisco de Nevares of Neuquen and Bishop Augusto Scozzina of Formosa. All three were involved in the creation last December of an ecumenical committee called the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights in Argentina. After celebrating the memorial service, Bishop Angelleli was killed when his car suddenly overturned on a flat section of well-paved highway under light traffic conditions. According to reports, the car was removed to a nearby air force base, the tires removed and they were not made available for inspection. Virtually no one believes that this was a mere accident.

A second category under attack appears to be those far more numerous assaults against relatively unknown persons, frequently members of Christian reflection groups or parish teams working among the poor. No one knows how many, but in recent contact with Argentinian priests, friends and parents of disappeared persons, each one of them knows of different people in this category.

Typical is the case of the 24 year old daughter of a man well known to our office, who was abducted from her family's apartment in May in the presence of her parents and her younger brothers and sister and has not been heard from since. In the same early morning, four friends of hers, two young couples, were similarly abducted by armed men claiming to be members of the Argentine Army.

Her father, a highly respected educator and former international civil servant, has compiled a list of thirty-five other persons, mostly in their 20's and 30's, all of whom have been abducted in Buenos Aires under almost identical circumstances and at about the same time. In most cases these are students or young professionals, often with some personal involvement in a parish program in one of the villas miserias (slums).

The case of Fr. James Weeks and the five seminarians in Cordoba about which the committee heard testimony yesterday belongs in this category of persons whose life style and dedication to serving the poor is perceived by certain people as a threat. But it also shades off into the third category, seemingly random attacks against persons who apparently symbolize the supposed threat but may not themselves be engaged in direct ministries with the poor.

The most horrible instance of this is, of course, the carefully planned, wanton and brutal murder of the three priests and two seminarians in the parish church of San Patricio on the morning of July 4.

The immediate and probably intended effect of these murders was to increase the already intense climate of fear and uncertainty within which many in the church are now forced to work. If the five Pallotines engaged in normal parish activities in a middle-class suburb could be slain with such total impunity, others are asking, why not us? One pastor told a member of my staff flatly that he no longer touches on social issues in his sermons and has instructed the other priests in his parish to do the same. Another spoke of "cleaning out" the rectory library, making sure that nothing--whether books on liberation theology or posters with any social content--could lead anyone to point the finger of suspicion at him.

Whatever else is at work here, this is a form of church persecution, a campaign of intimidation that inhibits the church's full pastoral ministry. Whether decreed or merely tolerated by the authorities, the effect is the same.

Other Attacks Against Religion

No discussion of the attempts by national security elites to stifle religious expression in today's Argentina could fail to note the extremely ominous resurgence of anti-Semitism in that country. Recent visitors to Argentina have described to me the shocking number and variety of crude, obscene anti-Semitic tracts to be found in virtually every bookstall and newsstand. The government has lately taken some steps to restrict the

distribution of some of this calumnious and frankly Nazi material, but direct attacks upon the Jewish community have multiplied in recent months and much anti-Semitic literature is still being widely diffused.

This is a matter of the gravest concern to all of us, and I am grateful that the committee has also taken detailed note of the situation through yesterday's testimony by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

The Church's Reaction

The Argentine Episcopal Conference, the National Justice and Peace Commission, the Papal Nuncio, and individual bishops have all been active in seeking an end to these violations of human and civil rights. The bishops issued a major pastoral letter on May 15 decrying the many present events that wound the Argentine nation and obstruct the common good.

In July, the executive board of the episcopal conference addressed the recent slaying of the five Pallotines and added:

"But we cannot nor do we want to emphasize only that horrendous crime, when every day the papers bring us news of many other deaths about which nothing is ever known as to how or by whom they have occurred.

"We ask ourselves, or rather people ask themselves, at times only in the privacy of their homes or in a circle of friends--because fear also is growing--what all this means. What forces are so powerful that they can act thus with such impunity and such total anonymity in our society. The question arises also, what guarantees, what rights are left to the average citizen."

On July 29, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Villot sent a telegram to Cardinal Primatesta, president of the Argentine

episcopal conference urging the bishops' efforts "to eliminate violence and restore peaceful coexistence." And just this week, as mentioned earlier, Pope Paul expressed his personal concern.

We know that a great deal of work is going on quietly to secure information about prisoners and missing persons, but more visible attempts to organize around the human rights issues are greatly inhibited by the need for extraordinary caution. Even the papal nuncio, whose work is very much behind the scenes, has reportedly been threatened by the neo-Nazi Argentine National Socialist Front for his "crimes against the nation."

One high level committee, the ecumenical Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, previously mentioned, has this month issued an open letter to President Videla expressing its distress over the violence that "hinders most Argentines, a peaceable people, from devoting themselves in tranquility to work for the society we all desire." Among the signers are Bishop Nevares of Neuquen and Dr. Jose Miguez Bonino, one of the six presidents of the World Council of Churches.

What more the Argentine Church will and can do in the coming days remains to be seen, but they know that they can count on their sister churches in the United States to offer every possible assistance.

To date, our involvement, as USCC, has been considerable, if often frustrating. We have engaged ourselves, with others, in seeking the release of particular political prisoners and detainees, as in the cases of Norma Morella, Casiana Ahumada, and the American citizens Olga Talamante and Fr. James Weeks.

In this connection, Mr. Chairman, I have just received a communication from Olga Talamante describing the conditions of her own arrest and imprisonment from November 1974 to April of this year and expressing her deep fears for the safety of her companions who did not have the benefit of strong pressure from U.S. citizens to secure their release. I would request that Olga's statement be added to the testimony received for the record.

We have made such representations as seemed appropriate directly to the Argentine Embassy here in Washington and we have urged the Attorney General to admit into the United States under his parole authority a generous number of political exiles presently residing in Argentina. Through our documentation and publication services we will continue to do what we can to expose and denounce the violations of human rights that come to our attention and to urge our fellow citizens and our government to employ every proper means at their disposal to assist those who suffer injustice in Argentina today.

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