

Events in Latin America: 1970 - 1975

Northeastern Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, 2006

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Renewing St. George

The second school in Santiago at which three Notre Dames taught was St. George College, a bi-lingual grade and high school owned by the Indiana Province of the Holy Cross Fathers. It enrolled 2600 students with 100 on staff. Here the approach taken in response to Medellín was quite different, and decidedly innovative. In order to make good education available to a diverse student body, St. George became co-educational in 1971. At the same time, tuition was placed at 4% of a family's income after taxes; this allowed the poor children of the poblacionesⁱ near the school to mingle with youngsters from privileged backgrounds.ⁱⁱ "The risk of changing the school to include all economic and social levels was felt that first year when 500 students left as the result of the change."ⁱⁱⁱ The vision of the Holy Cross Fathers was to enroll 1000 children of workers.

Under the leadership of Rector Gerald Whelan, CSC, who had become a Chilean citizen, other policies were put into place that confronted the wealth-based class system in Chile. All students were required to contribute to the upkeep of the school by part-time work arranged by the school's department of practical work. Productive and formative projects within the school promoted new values as students from different backgrounds worked together. Through a fostered sense of community responsibility, the hope was that the student body would earn 40% of the school budget. About 120 older students were trained to assume supervised teaching tasks with younger ones.

A volunteer summer program included work in rural schools and settlements. Youngsters who could never have become friends were brought together in common projects, some on the small truck farm owned by the Holy Cross community, where chickens, rabbits, and bees, as well as vegetables were raised. Work like this sometimes caused the youngsters to get their hands dirty,^{iv} but Paula remembers that "it taught them respect for all types of work, not just intellectual. At the same time, campesino fathers showed banker fathers how to plant different kinds of trees around the school in one of the parents' mandated contributions."^v

Paula remembered, in 2005, that what seemed to matter most to the grade school youngsters was not class or wealth, but whether a kid could play soccer. Also, when

classmates became friends, innocently they began to cross social boundaries, asking their parents, “Can José come over to our house? Can I go to his house?”

Wholeheartedly supporting these initiatives were the three SSNDs on the faculty at that time—Paula (Joan) Armstrong, Helenann Nelson, and Brigid (Bernadette) Ballasty. They worked as sub-directresses of parts of the grade school, and were a strong support to Father Whelan and the other 11 Holy Cross Fathers as they engaged parents and all members of the school community in seminars on new ideas in education and courses in Vatican II theology.^{vi} The faculty described its eschatological hopes and sense of witness in this way:

St. George is an example of normal people, with all their weaknesses, but strengthened by their faith in Christ, and united by the conviction that their actions mean the presence—if only for a fleeting moment—of something new and different which was a taste of that which can be and is to come.^{vii}

The Salvador Allende Presidency

The above faith-based ferment was taking place at St. George during the three-year presidency of Salvador Allende Gossens. Inaugurated on November 2, 1970, Allende led the Popular Unity Party¹⁵ and was noted in the foreign press as being the “first democratically chosen Marxist president”^{viii} in the western world. “Marxist” is probably not a correct description of the former physician who came from a prominent Valparaíso family that had long worked for socialism in Chile. However, Allende’s coalition included an avowed Communist Party and this platform:

the advancement of workers’ interests, a thoroughgoing implementation of agrarian reform, the reorganization of the national economy into socialized, mixed and private sectors, a foreign policy of international cooperation and national independence, and a new institutional order (the people’s state) including the institution of a unicameral congress.¹⁶

Clearly, this was a leftist agenda that threatened established interests in Chile, as well as the administration of Richard Nixon and the Central Intelligence Agency in the United States. In his autobiography, Henry Kissinger, national security advisor and secretary of state, wrote that he was ordered by the President to use the CIA to prevent Allende from taking office. According to Kissinger’s account, this effort was dropped within a month,^{ix} but there is clear evidence at this writing that the CIA made great efforts to destabilize Chile, politically and economically, during the three years of the Allende regime.^x

Speaking to the Wilton provincial chapter in January 1971, Joan Armstrong acknowledged that conditions under the Allende government were a “great challenge to work with,” but then quipped, “I really don’t worry about the Communists taking over the country- I let my mother do that.”^{xi} By mid-1973, Chile was in chaos and near bankruptcy, with street demonstrations, falling production, lack of investment,^{xii} high unemployment, and high inflation. Its several increasingly radicalized political parties, on

both the right and the left, seemed unable to seek compromise, even with the prodding of the Catholic Church.^{xiii}

Violent Military Takeover

Helen and Paula came to believe that the Allende presidency was never given a chance to succeed. Immediately at its start, shortages of basic goods began to appear, which caused long lines, a flourishing black market, and much unrest.

In early September (1973), Allende was preparing to call for a rare national plebiscite to resolve the impasse between National Unity and the opposition. The military obviated that strategy by launching its attack on civilian authority on the morning of September 11. Just prior to the assault, the commanders in chief, headed by the newly appointed army commander, General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, had purged officers sympathetic to the president or the constitution.

Allende either was assassinated or committed suicide while defending (with an assault rifle) his socialist government against the coup d'état. Several cabinet ministers were also assassinated, the universities were put under military control, opposition parties were banned and thousands of Chileans were tortured and killed, many fingered as 'radicals' by lists provided by the CIA. Although sporadic resistance to the coup erupted, the military consolidated control much more quickly than it had believed possible. Many Chileans had predicted that a coup would unleash a civil war, but instead it ushered in a long period of repression.^{xiv}

The day after the coup, all the stores were suddenly well-stocked with everything, suggesting that basic goods had been hidden by the military all along. In 1975, C.L. Sulzberger wrote, on *The New York Times News Service*, that Pinochet summed up the situation when he took over as, "chaos, misery, destruction." Today, Sulzberger said, "It is terror, unhappiness, despair."^{xv}

St. George Interdicted

Within a month of the coup, one of the first acts of the Pinochet dictatorship was to take over St. George College and demand that Father Gerald Whelan, rector, and Father Robert Plasker, Holy Cross superior in Chile and head of the theology department, give over administrative control to Air Force Commander Osvaldo Verdugo. The junta also decreed that Sisters Paula, Helenann, and Brigid cease teaching there on December 31. All five religious were accused of "infiltration of a Marxist type."^{xvi}

Informed of the junta's action, Father William Lewers, provincial superior of the Holy Cross Fathers, went to Santiago and decided to remove all 12 priests at the school, a move which they and all the sisters supported. Father Lewers's rationale was that it was totally unacceptable for the government to have control over the assigning of personnel in a religious community, and over the educational policies of the privately-owned school.^{xvii}

On November 1, 1973, Sister Virginia Sebert, Wilton provincial, wrote to the three sisters:

This letter confirms the telephone communication in which I informed you that our Provincial Council has suspended you from your teaching and administrative assignments at St. George College, Santiago, Chile, for the remainder of the academic year.

We strongly protest the military intervention of the Chilean government because it impedes the authority of religious superiors with regard to the assignment of our sisters. . . .

We pray that the Chilean government, for the good of the Chilean people whom you love so well, will restore St. George College to the Holy Cross Congregation, so that you too may return to the service you have given so well.

As to the charges made against the priests and sisters, the Holy Cross Congregation promptly sent out this refutation in a press release:

Father Lewers said that Admiral Hugo Castro, minister of education, admitted in a conference that he had no specific evidence to back up the charge of a 'Marxist type of infiltration.' Commander Verdugo, admitting a like ignorance, said that he assumed that there was such infiltration because his superior said there was. 'This was the kind of run-around we got during our conference with the authorities,' said Father Lewers.

Father Lewers also stated that, during the course of a lengthy meeting, Cardinal Raúl Silva of Santiago had assured him that the Holy Cross priests at St. George's had done more than any other group of priests to implement the educational and sound teachings of the Second Vatican Council and of the Latin American Bishops . . . and those of the Chilean Bishops themselves. . . .^{xviii}

Father Lewers said that he has reason to believe that authorities took over the school because a small group of conservative parents at St. George's had persuaded them that the implementation of Medellín and Vatican II teaching was a 'Marxist type of infiltration.' This small but extremely influential group of parents had been striving for some years to gain control of the school and to restore pre-Vatican II policies in teaching and programs.^{xix}

Aftermath of the Coup

A year after the coup, the sisters had gone "into schools in poorer sections of the city."^{xx} Brigid joined Sister María Eugenia and Padre Lavin at Escuela Borja de Echeverría to teach fifth grade. Paula (as seventh and eighth grade teacher) and Helenann (as vice-principal) joined two Maryknoll sisters at their school, San Juan de Dios, not far from Borja.

Both schools are in a marginalized area of Santiago. Most of the children come from poblaciones and the economic problems are worse than ever this year. As a result, the majority arrive without breakfast and the piece of bread and milk that is served mid-morning serves as lunch for many.

During winter, attendance was poor as essentials such as a pair of shoes or a sweater (Boots and coats are luxuries, not to mention an umbrella.) had to be saved for dry weather. Once they were wet, there was nothing into which the children could change. Others didn't even have that much. Teaching in such schools is a challenge and a frustration. Problems are varied and monumental and for many the solutions are unattainable.^{xxi}

Peg Regan ministered on the pastoral team in Santa Cruz Parish in Población Santiago, coordinating the catechetical program. She and Brigid Ballasty lived in San Luis, a shantytown, where they prepared children and adults for the sacraments, and fostered small Christian communities.^{xxii} By early 1972, all five Notre Dames had moved together into one house and called themselves Comunidad en Esperanza; a year later, they were one community but living in three different houses. The situation was so fluid that Helenann remembers living in nine different situations in those years.

In late 1973, the diocese of Santiago established the Vicariate of Solidarity to aid those who were searching for missing relatives; thousands had been held in a football stadium immediately after the coup and many had disappeared. The junta set up DINA, the National Intelligence Directorate, a vicious secret police; and it was later revealed that many of the desaparecidos were dropped into the ocean from planes that took off from the south of Chile. Many were young people.

Helen remembers that by January 1974,

The Church began asking us^{xxiii} to take in people so they could be gotten out of the country. We didn't hesitate; it was natural to say 'yes.' The Church was asking; it wasn't something you would have done on your own. Cardinal Silva saved a lot of lives.

Between October of '73 and November of '75, we harbored about 14 or 15 people- some couples, once a six-month old baby and mother, all innocent and sought by the police at the time. They would have been killed. As time went by, we realized the great risk but didn't stop to think about it; people needed help. People took us in later when we were being hunted.

Many years later for a booklet on the charism of SSND, Brigid wrote,

The decision to open our homes to those in need was made after dialogue and prayer, attempting to seek and do God's will in the situations of life in Chile at that time. After each guest left our house, we shared about the experience, recognizing our human limitations, our fears, and our dependence on God and each other. Where there was lack of justice and respect for human life, we felt

this was one way to make Christ visible by our very being, by sharing our love, faith and hope (YAS C4). God was inviting us to hope against hope and to accept situations of insecurity- even if we struggled with welcoming them (YAS C16).^{xxiv}

Visitation

During fall of 1974, when the general chapter was in session in Rome, Councilor Patricia Marie Griffin^{xxv} made visitation to Chile with Mission Coordinator Madeline Conway. When they arrived in Santiago, a fugitive the sisters called “Juan Segundo” was being harbored in the convent. On the way from the airport, the sisters didn’t know how to break this news to their visitors; it had been too dangerous to let the council in Wilton know of their activities. Helen and Paula remember that Madeline and Pat took the news very well. Juan was a young college student who had been picked up, shot, thrown into a river, and left for dead.

Pat Marie, typically, made herself useful by tutoring “Juan Segundo” in English since the plan was to get him out of Chile through the British Embassy. Helen remembers cautioning the slightly hard-of-hearing Pat to keep her voice low. When the time came to take Juan by car to be picked up by another driver in a coordinated relay, the sisters sent Pat and Madeline to San Felipe to visit Ruth Strothmann and Mary O’Connor so they would not be around in case anything went wrong.

As matters fell out, the two were back in Santiago before the transfer could take place, but all went well, and Juan got to the British Embassy and eventually out of the country. Helen drove him as a passenger in the front seat of the convent car; some others went to their destinations hidden in the trunk.^{xxvi} After Juan was gone, Helen and Paula gave their visitors the job of going around the house and washing off his fingerprints. All in all, “They took the situation quite well,” Helen remembered years later.

In 2005, Madeline tells the story that, the first night in Santiago, she and Pat were sharing a bed in a room with windows directly on the street. The footsteps of police on patrol on the sidewalk frightened them; they knew that a 10 pm curfew was in effect throughout the capital. Madeline, listening and lying awake, was saying the rosary when she realized that Pat was wakeful, too. She whispered, “Pat, are you awake? What are you doing?” Pat replied, “I’m saying the rosary.” Later they laughed that they had the same response at a moment when they both needed courage and strength.

Back in Wilton, the two reported to the chapter, without specifics, on their admiration for what the sisters in Chile were doing, and calling their visit “a religious experience.”^{xxvii} Madeline redoubled her efforts at fund-raising for them. In a June 1, 1975, letter printed in *Communiscope*, she told readers that “Your contributions have supplemented the sisters’ meager salaries. They make the most of every penny and squeeze each dollar until it gives.”^{xxviii}

Crisis

While SSNDs were involved with the Vicariate of Solidarity in this way, so also were their Jesuit, Holy Cross, Columban, and Maryknoll friends, as well as lay people and

diocesan priests. For all, these courageous activities came to a crisis when DINA had a shoot out, on October 16, 1975, with members of the Revolutionary Left Movement, known as MIR. The young deputy leader of the outlawed group, Nelson Gutierrez, was wounded, as was Andres Pascal Allende, director of the MIR, a nephew of the overthrown president. He escaped capture by hiding for almost four days in bushes, without food or rest, before he got to the residence of Holy Cross Father Phil Devlin.^{xxix}

Gutierrez and his guerilla companion, Marie Elena Bachman, were sheltered in the SSND house on October 20, at the request of Father Gerry Whelan. Dr. Sheila Cassidy, a 37-year-old physician from England, lanced Nelson's bullet wounds there on October 21 and 23, at the request of Monsignor Rafael Maroto, a native Chilean. Believing Gutierrez to be in danger of death from blood poisoning, she urged that he be taken to an embassy for further treatment. On October 24, Fathers Fernando Salas and Gerry Whelan smuggled him and Bachman to asylum in the Papal Nunciature.

Around the same time, Phil Devlin drove Andres Pascal Allende to the Trappist monastery outside Santiago; later he was given refuge in the Costa Rican Embassy. Allende had been educated at St. George, a student of Whelan and Devlin.

Helen and Paula attest that Gutierrez came into their house armed, but that they explained they had humanitarian motives only in giving refuge. Asked to give up his weapons, he did so to two Holy Cross fathers who broke them into pieces, placed them in canvas bags, and left them at various points around the city. The police never discovered the dismantled guns.

A few days later, DINA raided the provincial house of the Columban Fathers in another part of Santiago, searching for Gutierrez and Allende who were already safe with the papal nuncio and the Costa Ricans. Police came in with guns blazing, shot and killed the priests' housekeeper, and arrested Dr. Cassidy, who happened to be there on a routine medical visit. She was held for 13 days, brutally and repeatedly tortured with electric shocks. The British ambassador to Chile, Reginald Secunde, was later allowed to visit her in Tres Alamos prison, where she was held in solitary confinement.

About a month later, after Cassidy was safely back in England, British Foreign Secretary James Callaghan recalled Secunde, and Britain severed diplomatic ties with Chile to protest such savage treatment of one of its citizens.^{xxx}

Arrests

Around the same time, Gerry Whelan and Chilean worker-priest Rafael Maroto were picked up and held for questioning. Jesuits Patricio Cariola and Fernando Salas gave themselves up after warrants were issued for their arrest. The police were also looking for Phil Devlin,^{xxxi} who sought the protection of the papal nuncio and left Chile shortly afterwards. It had become clear to the junta that the Church was the principal opposition to its repressive regime. By November 17, Cardinal Silva had been ordered to disband the Interchurch Committee of Cooperation for Peace.^{xxxii} Although

he was in Rome at the time, the cardinal immediately replied that, even though it was officially disbanded, the committee's involvement in human rights would continue 'within church organizations and with brotherly ecumenical collaboration.'^{xxxiii}

On the morning of Sunday, November 2, at about 6:30 am, police came to the SSND convent looking for Helenann and Peg Lipsio, a Maryknoll sister just up from the south of Chile, who had not been involved in any of the activities of the Vicariate of Solidarity. By that time DINA knew that the Notre Dame convent was the place at which the two MIR revolutionaries had been harbored, and Gutierrez medically treated.

After an interrogator, nicknamed 'Ronco,' demanded to know where she had treated Gutierrez, Cassidy invented a house and described it to the police. But after they had driven her around Santiago without finding the place, the police realized that they had been duped.^{xxxiv}

Four days later, at Villa Grimaldi, a former nightclub used as a torture center, Cassidy broke down and gave the address of Paula, Helenann, and Brigid's house.^{xxxv}

When three secret police with machine guns drawn came that morning with a warrant for the arrest of Helenann, she happened to be at the Maryknoll house in Santiago. Brigid was away at a meeting on the coast. Paula, sensing something, had cut short a retreat and come home, but the police at that moment were not looking for her. Also in the house were Rosa Arroyo, a native Peruvian, and Isabel Donoso, a native Chilean, both former IHM Sisters, and Kathy Osberger, a South Bend native, who was in Chile as part of a University of Notre Dame program. Kathy was taken away by the police but released by 10 am that same morning. The other three were placed under house arrest.

When the police left by the front door, "I just went out the back door," Paula remembers. She was able to make calls to the cardinal and American Embassy officials, get a message to Helenann, and later go to the Holy Cross house. Helenann and Peg Lipsio went to the central train station where they would be inconspicuous in the crowd. Later they were sheltered in a house that they left voluntarily because they did not want to endanger little children.

Resolution

A few days later, Helenann, Paula, and Peg Lipsio were safe in the house of the American consul,^{xxxvi} whose wife was a Mexican. They lived upstairs, being extremely quiet as she entertained company downstairs and often sent the maid up with delicacies for them. The consul told them each morning that this might be the day they left Chile, and that he'd come home in the afternoon to take them to the airport.

David Popper, American ambassador to Chile, on November 7, arranged safe conduct passes for the three after intense negotiations. "The government revoked their permanent resident visas and each was required to sign a statement admitting

individual responsibility in aiding the leftists.”^{xxxvii} Paula and Helenann expressed it this way in a letter to the province dated November 23, 1975: “As a prerequisite, we both admitted in a statement to the Chilean authorities that as Christians we could not in conscience turn away these people since it involved the preservation of human life.”

Finally, the evening of Friday, November 7, Paula, Helenann, and Peg were taken to Pudahuel, the Santiago airport, in a caravan of three cars, the first holding a Marine guard. The consul had been assured that they would go directly onto the tarmac and into the plane, but when they arrived at the airport, they were told that they had to go through the terminal. A noisy crowd^{xxxviii} had been bussed in to insult them on their way to the plane, demonstrating with placards and throwing coins, trash, and rice and beans- symbols of traitors. Helen remembers, “It was scary; any one of them could have been a bullet.” Pictures of the three sisters and the mob appeared in the government-controlled Chilean press, TV, and radio.

Told not to alight from the plane in Lima, Perú, because some fugitives had been re-arrested there, the three sisters kept to themselves on the flight and said to reporters waiting for them in Miami only that they wanted to express thanks to the American Embassy for their help and consideration.

They did not know at this point how many of their companions in the Vicariate of Solidarity were still in custody, or what they might be suffering. Added to this anxiety was the grief they felt at so abruptly leaving a country they had come to love, and many dear Chilean friends who could not escape the brutal dictatorship.

After going through customs at the Miami airport the next morning, the three were finally able to call their families and communities. Sister Virginia Sebert started immediately for Kennedy airport with Sister Mary Carole Nelson, Helen’s sister. Mrs. Josephine Armstrong, Paula’s mother from Boston, and her sister Mary Jo, also came to JFK. Peg Lipsio was met by her own Maryknoll community

ⁱ Essentially a shantytown, with dirt-floor dwellings and a central common water faucet

ⁱⁱ Unsigned, typed description of St. George’s vision, in Wilton archives, p. 5. It could have been written by Father Whelan.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Chapterscope*, Vol. V, No. 6, April 17, 1973, p. 1.

^{iv} Unsigned, typed document, *op cit.*, p. 5.

^v Interview by Kay O’Connell with Joan Armstrong and Bernadette Ballasty at Wilton on May 23, 2005; audio cassette is in the Wilton archives.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 7.

^{viii} From the Internet, www.geocities.com/educhile-1970s/Allende, p. 2.

^{ix} *The White House Years*, by Henry A. Kissinger.

^x See “An Open Letter to President Gerald R. Ford,” *Communiscope*, Vol. 6, No. 2, October 1974, pp. 20-22. Signed by an ecumenical group of 16 religious leaders, this letter protests the role of the CIA in Chilean affairs.

Since it is impossible in a paper of this size to document precisely the myriad events of Allende’s election, three years in office, and final overthrow, the above account is a very brief description gleaned

from several sources available on the Internet in 2005. The statements made here are widely agreed upon by historians and no attempt has been made to footnote them precisely.

^{xi} *Chapterscope, Vol. III, No. 5*, January 11, 1971, p. 18.

^{xii} When Allende nationalized the copper industry, American investment in Chile virtually came to a halt.

^{xiii} Chile is 86% Catholic.

^{xiv} “*Allende’s Leftist Regime, 1970-73-Chilean Intelligence Agencies*,” maintained by Steven Aftergood, created by John Pike, updated Friday, September 11, 1998, pp. 4, 5.

^{xv} From the *Boston Herald American*, Wednesday, November 26, 1975, p. 12.

^{xvi} Press release I from Holy Cross Fathers- News Office, Rev. John H. Wilson, CSC, St. Joseph Hall, Notre Dame, Indiana, no date, p. 1.

^{xvii} The military interdicted at this time all of the universities in Chile, including two Catholic ones, and 35 public high schools, putting military men in charge. St. George was the only private secondary school interdicted.

^{xviii} Press release II from Holy Cross Fathers—News Office, *op. cit.*, no date, p. 2.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.

^{xx} Interview with Helen Nelson by Kay O’Connell on April 3, 2001 is recorded on microcassette and kept in the Wilton archives.

^{xxi} *Communiscope, Vol. VI, No. 1*, September 1974, p. 15.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiii} A whole network of religious men and women, as well as diocesan priests and laity were part of this effort.

^{xxiv} Sister Bernadita Ballasty, LA District, “Sharing Our House,” *Into the Heart, School Sisters of Notre Dame*, Reflection Booklet on SSND Charism and Spirituality, Generalate, Rome, 2005, p.19

^{xxv} The other four members of the council were all at the general chapter.

^{xxvi} One group involved with the Vicariate of Solidarity once got someone to safety in a coffin.

^{xxvii} *Communiscope, Vol. VI, No. 3*, November 1974, p. 1.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, No. 8, June 1975, p. 16.

^{xxix} “Sisters, Priests Tell Frightening Story,” by Deanna Francis, *The South Bend Tribune*, November 21, 1975, p. 22. Clipping in the Wilton archives.

^{xxx} Dr. Cassidy in 1977 wrote her story in an autobiography called *Audacity to Believe*, published in England.

^{xxxi} “Chilean Junta Bans All News on Priests and Others Accused of Aiding Fugitive Guerillas,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 1975, no page number. Clipping in the Wilton archives.

^{xxxii} “Chilean President Asks Disbandment of a Church Group,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1975, no page number. Clipping in the Wilton archives.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxxiv} “Doctor’s Ordeal,” story signed “Kim Willenson and Peter R. Webb in London” from an untitled newspaper clipping kept in the Wilton archives.

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*

^{xxxvi} Brigid, when she returned from the coast, was at the American Embassy for four days; then she returned to the States.

^{xxxvii} “Sisters, Priests Tell Frightening Story,” *loc. cit.*.

^{xxxviii} A placard-waving crowd like this was deliberately organized by the government; curfew regulations at the time prevented more than two people from being together.