

SHARING OUR HOUSE

By Sister Bernardita Ballasty (LA)

Sharing one's home during times of unrest is the experience that made me feel very deeply my identity as an SSND. This occurred in Santiago, Chile, on several occasions after a military junta assumed power on September 11, 1973.

I was living in community with other SSNDs in Santiago, Chile. Tension was palpable everywhere. Many Chileans who had served as leaders in community organizations or unions, or who had participated actively in leftist political organizations, had been arrested. Some experienced physical and/or psychological torture, some were executed, and others just plain "disappeared"—never to be heard from again.

Today many families are still struggling to discover what happened to their loved ones. The justice system appeared to be controlled by the military government. With ecumenical support, church leaders established the "Comité pro Paz" (Committee for Peace). After that group was dissolved by the military, the Archdiocese of Santiago formed the "Vicaría de la Solidaridad" (Vicariate for Solidarity) to support people suffering from violations of their human rights.

We SSNDs continued our ministry of formal education in poor areas, frequently ministering to persons who needed someone to listen to them. One day, through a priest friend connected with the "Vicaría de la Solidaridad," we were asked if we could receive in our home a young man who had been shot and left for dead. After dialogue, we agreed to do so. That young man stayed for approximately three weeks. Finally he was able to leave the country, and we relaxed. Similar situations occurred fourteen times with different individuals until November of 1975. An English doctor, Sheila Cassidy, who had treated one of the last persons in our home for an infected bullet wound, suffered torture as a result. Then agents of the National Intelligence Service arrived at our house looking for the Sisters who were involved. After a few days, two of my companions had to leave Chile.

Those were days of uncertainty about my own safety. Through contacts made by friends, several families received me into their homes and offered me a "safe haven," some for a night and others for a longer period. These were people who did not know me personally nor did they ask my name. In a small way, this made me very aware of what it means to "be at the mercy of another." It was a profound experience to be receiving instead of giving. I realized these Chilean families were risking everything by providing me with asylum.

The decision to open our home 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 a 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, C 4). God was inviting us to hope against hope and to accept situations of insecurity—even if we struggled with welcoming them (YAS, C 16). It was one way of deepening communion with God and with God's people that continues to challenge me to renew daily my vowed commitment as an SSND.