

The Church in Argentina

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Quilmes is a large, predominantly working class suburb on the eastern side of Buenos Aires. With a population of some 800,000 it was constituted as a separate diocese five years ago and Bishop Jorge Novak was named its first bishop. To mark their five years as a diocese Quilmes held a synod last September whose aim was, as Sr Justa Tello told me at the synod office, "to help the people commit themselves". The two-week synod last year was however just the beginning of a process of getting to know the socio-political and religious realities of the diocese; further sessions planned for 1982/83 hope to evolve pastoral responses to these realities. It is, as Sr Justa Tello explained, based on the 'See-Judge-Act' methodology and the September session of the synod had limited itself to the first of these.

Fr Orlando Yorio, who himself 'disappeared' for five months in 1976 just after the military coup in March of that year, is secretary of the synod. He pointed out to me that in the early years of the Spanish conquest of Latin America "evangelisation took place through synods". Among the ample documentation prepared by various commissions for the synod is one which gives an historical background in the early councils of the church, various diocesan synods held in Europe at different times and especially the 51 diocesan synods held in many different regions of Latin America from 1539-1638. To my great surprise Fr Yorio pointed out to me that canon law insists that each diocese hold a synod every ten years. This major event in the life of the Quilmes diocese then was, in the words of Fr Yorio, "to put us in touch with a renovating tradition of the Latin American Church".

Some 300 people were to participate, two thirds of them lay. Because this was the first time that lay people ever participated in a synod in Argentina special permission was obtained from the Pope himself. Each of the apostolic movements active in the diocese would be represented and each parish had elected delegates according to their size and extension. Special effort was made to ensure adequate representation for workers and housewives, for old and young. As a basis for discussions on the reality of life in Quilmes two detailed statistical surveys were carried out beforehand, one on the socio-political reality of the people and one on their religious practice and attitudes. These made some startling

discoveries, said Fr Yorio, giving as an extreme example the statistic that 7% of Mass-goers believed it was right to kill one's political enemies which, he added, was a comment on the success of government propaganda against 'subversion'. As well as these detailed surveys various sub-commissions prepared position papers on such topics as parishes, colleges, catechetics, youth, the world of work, the family and the laity. These were then sent out to be discussed by grass-roots discussion groups all over the diocese thus building up a momentum for the synod.

Among the most striking of these documents, prepared by the 'Church and World Team' was entitled "Hopes, Anxieties and Sufferings of Some of the Poor of our Diocese". The first half of this report lists the answers given by twenty different poor families to four questions: Who minds the children? Why do you have no work? How do you think the situation in which we live affects poor households? The bishop wishes to speak on your behalf; what do you want him to say? The second part consists of seven testimonies which are simply the transcriptions of conversations with different individuals and groups, some young, some middle-aged, married and single, men and women. The direct reporting of the views and outlook of the poor themselves thus set an immediate and concrete challenge to the synod to show solidarity with the situation of great numbers in the diocese and begin to see society from their standpoint. It is a direct response to the preferential option for the poor made at the Puebla conference.

The Quilmes synod takes on a far greater significance in the light of the fact that it is the first synod to be held in Argentina since 1936. As such it reflects both the orientation of Bishop Novak himself but also the organisation of grass-roots communities all over the diocese. Some of these are of the type which are developed on a far more extensive scale in countries like Brazil, Peru and Chile but others are more distinctively Argentinian. These latter are organised around the chapels dedicated to particular saints and the traditions of devotion to these saints. This is based on a pastoral approach stressing more the evangelisation of large groups and dependent more on the leadership of priests than is the case with basic christian communities. Interestingly in a school for training ministers for these communities run by the diocese it is the basic communities who send a far greater number to be trained than do the communities organised around the chapels thus reflecting the different roles priests take on in these two different models.

Once a year all the priests in the diocese meet for a priests' week in which pastoral strategy and planning is discussed. At their meeting earlier this year they decided to make the growth of communities a priority. In this Fr Yorio sees a growth in the conscious-

ness of many of the priests from an assistential understanding of simply helping the poor to a developmentalist attitude of sponsoring projects so that the poor can begin to do things for themselves but without questioning the overall social structures which keep them poor to, finally, a liberation approach encouraging the poor to understand the causes of their poverty and supporting them in taking a political stand to change that society. The hope is that the synod will give a stimulus to this latter approach not just among priests but more importantly among the people. For, as Bishop Novak is keen on stressing, he hopes to see the synod fulfilling the twin aims of the communion and participation of all the people in the church, aims which are themselves among the priorities of Puebla.

The reason that the Quilmes synod is so important at this juncture in Argentina lies in the fact that Quilmes is a very exceptional diocese in the overall context of a timid and conservative church. Unlike most Latin American countries it is very difficult to speak of a 'popular church' in Argentina, partly as a result of the strong wave of repression unleashed against popular groups of any kind from 1976 onwards and which is only now beginning to ease. Apart from political repression, however, there has been quite a strong ecclesiastical repression also from an episcopal conference dominated by a very conservative leadership and frightened by continuing government insistence that 'subversion' was present even in the church. In the highly polarised and repressed atmosphere of Argentina in the second half of the seventies it was not too difficult to raise suspicions about all priests and religious who lived and worked with the poor. The fact that some of these were involved in Left-wing political groups and a small number even supported guerrillas gave the government some basis for their allegations.

In this very difficult situation therefore what work there was at grass-roots level was driven virtually underground in order to protect itself. With any kind of meetings in poor areas inviting suspicion from the authorities who had killed off, through the sheer level of repression, all the vigorous grass-roots and 'barrio' organisations which had existed people began to develop a method of working quietly without inviting any attention. This is true even of whole dioceses. Apart from Quilmes there are perhaps as many as six dioceses, all in rural areas far from the capital, where a popular pastoral programme has continued even throughout the worst years of the repression. The result of this period was summed up for me by the well-known Argentinian Methodist theologian, Dr Jose Miguez Bonino, who said that there is "little going on but there is more than appears".

The existence of these dioceses attracted many priests and sis-

ters who were looking for opportunities to work in poor areas particularly with the backing of the local bishop. Groups of them, some organised as 'equipos misioneros' or missionary teams, went to work in these dioceses thus assisting in the growth of a 'popular church' in these areas but in the process leaving the large cities where popular church initiatives have remained isolated and without support. An example of how this drain of personnel comes about was occurring during my visit to Buenos Aires when I spoke with some of the seven priests who are members of a team working in the 'villas miserias' or shanty towns surrounding the capital. Though this team has been working since 1969 and has continued despite having some members killed during the years of the repression its future is now in doubt due to a document issued in October 1980 in which the priests documented the forced clearances of these people by the local municipality who have been moving them out of areas where they are visible – from, i.e. visible from, for example, the road coming in from the airport and dumping them on waste ground far from the city.

At the end of their document the priests named three people whom they said were directly responsible for "this prolonged operation which has such grave consequences for thousands of families" (estimated at more than 400,000 families in the same document). The three names included those of the director of the municipal commission for housing and the mayor of Buenos Aires. The Archbishop of the capital, Cardinal Aramburu, under whose patronage the team had been set up and functioned, has responded to the document by threatening sanctions under canon 2308 of canon law on the grounds of causing "grave scandal". If the priests wish to continue an active priestly ministry it now looks as if they will have to follow so many of their colleagues and move to a diocese where the bishop will be more sympathetic and supportive of their work.

Apart from a hostile political and ecclesiastical environment, however, Argentina displays another unique factor which has moulded the church's response to the poor in very distinctive ways. This is the experience of peronism, the populist political movement built up by Juan Domingo Peron in the early forties and which brought him to power in 1946 until overthrown in 1955. The strength of peronism lay in the simple fact, which Peron alone exploited politically, of the immigration of large numbers of poor seeking their fortune in Buenos Aires in the early part of the century. It was these people Peron appealed to over the head of the traditional oligarchy or the middle class and fashioned an enduring popular movement despite all the failures of his first government or more especially of his short-lived return to the presi-

dency in 1973 when his death in 1974 allowed his third wife, Isabel, take over for a disastrous two years. Yet peronism still dominates Argentinian politics. As one trade union militant said to me: "To be anti-peronist is to be anti-popular".

This dominance of populism therefore conditioned the response of priests and sisters who began to discover the reality of the poor from the early sixties. Instead of using a class analysis to understand the causes of this poverty by seeing the poor as an exploited social class the category of 'people' was used in the sense of "the collective subject of a history and culture", as Fr Juan Carlos Scannone S J, a leading Argentinian theologian, explained it to me. This "polyclassist idea", as he called it, then interpreted the poor as those who live out basic Gospel values such as solidarity and justice and for whom christian faith is not an opium but rather the basis of their identity and a ferment for liberation. These poor had been politically organised and given a political consciousness so successfully by Peron that Fr Jose Meisegeier S J could say to me that "Peron was the greatest evangeliser in Argentina". Priests and sisters meeting this reality of the organised people therefore sought to take up the rich traditions of popular religiosity in order to evangelise and deepen them. Because of this the post-Vatican II period in Argentina led to a very distinctive theological understanding and pastoral action which obviated the need for liberation theology.

This attempt to relate to the traditions of popular religiosity became the dominant approach of those sectors of the church which had moved closer to the poor and were trying to develop new pastoral strategies adapted to their needs in the late sixties and early seventies. It was very much a pastoral of the masses using the occasions when the people gathered in huge numbers for religious processions and 'fiestas'. These huge gatherings which continue to be the most common link most Argentinians have with the church were seen as the religious expression of the political phenomenon Peron had created, again through mobilising massive gatherings of the people. Just as in Peron the people found a *caudillo* or leader who was on the side of the people and in whom they could have complete trust, popular religiosity was interpreted as satisfying their need for father- and mother-figures in spiritual terms. It is interesting to speculate on the extent to which the quasi-deification of the person of Peron's wife during his first years as president, the now world-famous Evita, was exploiting the striking devotion to the Virgin Mary which is so very strong all over Argentina.

An example of how this pastoral approach works in practice was given to me by Fr Scannone. The large church of San Cayetano

in a suburb of Buenos Aires attracts about half a million people on the 7th of every month for devotions to the saint. The tradition has been that people bring offerings for the saint and in the past people normally brought candles or holy objects which were left as offerings. However, instead of that the people have now been encouraged to bring clothes and food as offerings which are then collected and given to the poor. This more practical approach emphasising responsibility for helping the poor is also stressed in preaching at San Cayetano. This pastoral approach, which is called the pastoral of sanctuaries, is, in the opinion of Fr Scannone, one of the more successful examples of how the church is changing attitudes in favour of the poor. For him, he says that, in the greater Buenos Aires area, San Cayetano "is the place where the new man is being made".

Sr Nelda, formerly the superior general of the Argentinian congregation of the Divino Maestro, sees however that in many cases this emphasis on the popular religiosity has led to a pastoral approach which simply serves the devotional practices in their traditional forms without evangelising and deepening them. When she was superior general she had a lot of contact with the diocese of La Rioja where some of her sisters had gone to work together with many priests and sisters attracted by the example and approach of Bishop Enrique Angelelli. Though Bishop Angelelli was deeply committed to the liberation of the oppressed and had a clear vision of the social structures oppressing them his pastoral approach depended on using popular religiosity to conscientise the people and he hadn't in any way begun to stimulate the growth of basic communities. Put starkly by Sr Nelda, the church in La Rioja was "still a church of priests and nuns, still a parochial church".

The reason why Bishop Angelelli concentrated on changing people's religious attitudes through traditional devotions was that he saw this as a force used to keep the people oppressed and before any new church structures could be fashioned this oppressive religiosity had to be re-interpreted for the people. He never got time to follow this approach through however. On 4 August 1976, returning from assisting at the funeral Mass for two priests who had been arrested and killed a few days before by the federal police, Bishop Angelelli died in a road accident which, it is widely believed, was caused by the security forces who had tampered with the steering wheel of his car and then forced him off the road. The imposition of a conservative bishop on the diocese since has meant, in the words of Sr Nelda, that "the pastoral has reduced itself to popular religiosity".

How Bishop Angelelli would have developed his pastoral approach could have been very significant, had he lived. For the leg-

acy of peronism has made it very difficult for the central issue of who the poor are and why they are oppressed to be clarified and acted on. As Dr Miguez Bonino said to me the notion of the 'people' oscillated between understanding the term as meaning primarily the workers or understanding it as meaning all Argentinians. By opposing the 'people' to 'class' an alliance of working people with the nationalist oligarchy was forged which hasn't yet been broken. It is clear how a pastoral approach which seeks to relate to the 'people' understood in this way is in grave danger of ending up as an unconscious ally of the soporific use of religion by the ruling class.

Where this lack of political clarity came to the fore and caused very damaging consequences was in the Priests for the Third World Movement. Among the many priests' movements which sprang up all over Latin America in the wake of Medellin, the Priests for the Third World (which slightly ante-dated Medellin in fact) was at the time the largest and arguably the one with the greatest potential. Yet for all the hopes it raised it has not only not endured itself but has left little to show for its impact on the Argentinian church which remains among the most conservative in Latin America.

The impulse for the Movement was the letter of 18 Third World bishops issued on 15 August 1967 and aimed at concretising and making more effective the message of Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio*. In response a group of Argentinian priests issued a statement asking priests in their country to commit themselves publicly to trying to put the message of the letter into practice. The response amazed them — 270 priests signed the statement and so the Movement was born, taking its name from the bishops' letter which had motivated it. From the beginning it had three basic principles underlying it: firstly, it was to be prophetic, denouncing injustices as it saw fit; secondly, it didn't see itself as having a distinct political line but rather gave freedom to its members to choose their own political commitment; and thirdly, it was committed to the poor.

But the Movement's commitment to the poor very soon took on a strong political tone. At their second national meeting in the city of Cordoba in May 1969 the priests issued a document called 'Our Basic Agreements'. Speaking of Christ who came "to liberate the people from every slavery", they went on:

"This implies inevitably our firm commitment to the revolutionary process, to the radical and urgent change of structures and our full rejection of the capitalism now in force and of every type of economic, political and cultural imperialism; to progress in the search for a Latin American socialism which will promote the growth of the New Man; a socialism which

doesn't imply the forced imposition of programmes by political parties either here or of other parts of the world but that would necessarily include the socialisation of the means of production, of economic and political power and of the culture."

The priests then made what they called "a commitment":

"Convinced that 'the poor peoples and the poor of the peoples' will be the agents of liberation and that it is permanent contact with the people which will show us the ways to follow, we commit ourselves to an ever more loyal involvement with the people, in the midst of the poor, taking on human situations which signify and verify our commitment."

This commitment didn't remain at the level of generalised theory but was applied to specific situations in various parts of the country in statements issued by local groups of the Movement as well as by the Movement at a national level. In a book of documentation published by the Movement in 1972, 61 documents issued between 1968 and 1971 are listed. While most of these concern themselves with specific social, political and economic issues, there are statements criticising the President of Argentina, defending the Movement from allegations that they were dividing the Church and a telegram from the Movement to Pope Paul VI expressing their support for his stand on social issues.

The Movement soon ran into difficulties on two fronts however. They were unlucky to be active at a time when a particularly conservative man was president of the bishops' conference, Archbishop Tortolo of Parana. His particularly unsympathetic attitude at the time coloured the response of the episcopacy as a whole. Though some seven or eight bishops were openly supportive, some to the extent of attending meetings of the Movement, and only some fifteen bishops were openly hostile, in August 1970 the permanent commission of the bishops' conference issued a statement drawing attention to certain 'errors' in the attitudes and statements of the Movement. The priests responded in October saying that they :

"sought to be faithful to Christ, to the Church and to the people, which means that we have to necessarily confront the resistance of the system which is so deeply rooted in the institutions of our time."

Just one year later the priests had another public disagreement with Archbishop Tortolo who issued a public statement saying that the apostolic blessing which the Movement had received from Pope Paul VI had been expressly asked for in the priests' telegram to the Pope and didn't imply the Pope's approval of "this so-called movement". In reply, the priests called Archbishop Tortolo's state-

ment 'false' calling attention to the text of their telegram which hadn't asked for an apostolic blessing. They then asked for the full text of Pope Paul's letter to them which hadn't been passed on to them by the Archbishop.

But probably more damaging than the official attitude of the bishops' conference were the internal divisions which began to emerge within the Movement itself. These related to the strength of peronism and the attraction it held for some of the priests while others, more influenced by political developments in Chile at the time, criticised it from a marxist standpoint. Many, particularly among the latter group, began to leave the priesthood in order to marry and some became militants in the Left-wing branch of peronism, the Partido Autentico. A small number got involved with the guerrillas who were becoming very active in the early seventies.

This division became too deep to allow the Movement continue. While in Buenos Aires the members tried to keep free of any party political commitment, in provincial cities such as Santa Fe and Rosario it became far more marxist. Already, even before the systematic repression began in 1975, members of the Movement were the subject of harassment and threats; on 11 May 1974 one of the founders of the Movement, Fr Carlos Mugica, was shot dead when coming out of a church in a poor suburb of Buenos Aires. He was to be the first of many priests who 'disappeared', were killed or expelled from the country in the following years.

Despite the fact that the Third World Priests' Movement was never as clearly marxist as were the priests' movements in other Latin American countries at the time, the common name for members of the Argentinian movement, *tercermundistas* (taken from the Spanish for Third World, Tercer Mundo) has now become an everyday term used to denote socially committed priests by conservatives in many parts of the continent. This itself indicates a measure of the failure of the Movement. For priests' movements which have taken similarly radical stands in other countries not alone continue to grow but exercise a significant influence on their churches. But the Argentinian movement, though at one stage it contained over a quarter of all the priests in the country, some 400 out of 1,500, found itself caught up in the highly polarised political situation of Argentina and suffered enormously under the impact of repression. In some ways it can be argued that it did more harm than good to the Argentinian church since it was used by the military to frighten many bishops into a more defensive and conservative position, concerning themselves more with the fear of marxist infiltration in the church while one of the most brutal waves of officially inspired and organised terror which has been seen since the days of Nazi Germany took place around them.

While there are still many priests in Argentina who were involved in the Movement they have until now not been able to carry out any serious evaluation of its lessons for them. But one thing comes across clearly from talking to them: no matter how open the political climate may become there is no prospect of the Movement beginning again.

One recent sign of hope has been a statement from the bishops' conference, now under the presidency of the more moderate Cardinal Primatesta of Cordoba, entitled 'The Church and the National Community' which, though dated 8 May 1981 wasn't issued until the end of June, due, it is thought, to government pressure to tone down certain parts. Though the document, which is 74 pages long in the original edition, remains highly theoretical and lacks the concrete force which one finds in the statements of the Brazilian episcopacies, it is the first time the Argentinian bishops have spelt out principles such as the right to elect one's government or the right to free trade unions which have very direct political implications at this juncture in Argentinian politics. As Fr Scannone said to me: "Never have the bishops spoken as critically of the government". As if to underline its message they issued yet another document in November called 'National Reconstruction and Moral Order' expressing their distress at the steady rise in unemployment, the decline in productivity, the drop in wages, rising prices, excessive taxation and high interest rates. Earlier in the same month they had given tacit backing to a march for 'peace, bread and work', organised by the still illegal trade union confederation, the CGT, and which turned into the largest march seen since the 1976 coup.

For the Argentinian bishops all this is a dramatic change. Unlike their Chilean colleagues who took an active role in defending the victims of political repression after the 1973 coup there, the Argentinians, with a few isolated exceptions, were, in the words of one theologian, "gripped by a fear which led to a paralysis". So strong was this that some of them claimed that the analysis of the Latin American reality and the preferential option for the poor made at Puebla didn't apply to Argentina and instead emphasised doctrinal aspects in a theoretical way. For Sr Nelda their commitment to a conservative model of church is shown by their constant stress on rising numbers of vocations and the priority they have put on pastoral work for youth. "But by this they understand doctrinal and spiritual work," she adds.

An interesting example showing the bishops' commitment to social change is the history of the Justice and Peace Commission. This was set up as an all lay body in 1969, one of its members, Dr Ignacio Palacios Videla, told me. He described it as having a "cen-

trist line" and up until 1974 produced studies on various social topics. However, since then it has effectively done nothing and had to be virtually re-founded last June with three aims: firstly, to advise the bishops through doing studies of the national reality; secondly, to form the laity in the social teaching of the church, and thirdly, to maintain permanent contact with different sectors of society such as the trade union movement. Dr Palacios Videla laid great stress on the need for reconciliation in Argentinian society after what the military like to call, the *guerra sucia*, or dirty war, meaning the campaign to eliminate the guerrillas. The commission will try to arbitrate between the military and the people, he said, in order to get a return to the rule of law.

The new political phase which began in Argentina with the accession of General Roberto Viola to the presidency last March has created new possibilities for the growth of a 'popular church' there. The cautious liberalisation being permitted by the new government allied with the grave severity of the economic crisis is already beginning to mobilise people to protest, to demand a return to democracy and to look more critically at the economic model being followed. The fear on the part of the average Argentinian of any radical change used, as they have been, to high levels of employment and a share in a developed consumer market may be in the process of being broken down. Even the sign that the bishops are beginning to re-evaluate their role and distance themselves from a thoroughly unpopular establishment may provide the basis for a radicalisation of some of their number especially if, as seems likely, the economic crisis gets worse and the military continue to hang on to power.

Dr Miguez Bonino is optimistic about the future. He points to the Brazilian church as an example. Up to the early seventies it was showing few signs of the radicalism which is now its main distinguishing feature. Then suddenly, with a new liberalisation, theologians like Leonardo Boff began to publish and increasing numbers of bishops began to take a forceful stand on social issues and support a pastoral approach based on the development of basic christian communities. Just as was the case in Brazil before 1972 he reminded me that in Argentina "everything has been frozen". His hope now is that "groups will occupy whatever space is allowed and use the possibilities but not so as to invite repression". If the political climate remains favourable then the dark night that Argentina has passed through over the past five years may come to be seen as the preparation for the new dawn of a popular movement for a new society. This then would provide the opportunity and the means for the church to find its true role as a leaven for the liberation of the oppressed.