

The Solidarity of God:

A Theological Reflection on Terror, Fear, Nonviolence and the experience of the Sebastian Acevedo Movement Against Torture in Chile

by The Rev. Christopher Ney, July 2012

During the summer after my 21st birthday, I was invited to travel to Chile as part of a small group of students and professors from Earlham College. I had never travelled so far from home, and I had never visited a country living under the extreme conditions of dictatorship. We met people who lived in shantytowns and marginalized communities. We met people who had been exiled, tortured, or were relatives of the disappeared. We met people who were afraid to speak.

At the same time, we met courageous people who were struggling creatively to overcome these conditions, and we witnessed as the Chilean people voted to end the dictatorship non-violently in the historic plebiscite of 1988. For all of the ways this experience changed my life, Chile will always be very special to me.

One of the strongest and most enduring memories of that trip was the experience of fear. It was palpable almost from the moment I stepped off the plane. The machine guns that were carried by ordinary police officers and the anti-riot vehicles that patrolled the city streets were visible reminders of the regime's fearful authority. The atmosphere of fear was pervasive and subtle.

A repressive regime survives by fear. Using deadly force and torture, a dictatorship terrorizes its own people through the gross violation of human right. It manipulates the media and projects an image of omnipotence. It claims to be the only force that can provide stability and security. The truth is the opposite: repressive regimes are usually the source of insecurity and violence. As one Chilean political observer wrote, "Authoritarianism creates and sustains the conditions that require its existence."

The Pinochet regime used fear to establish and sustain its power. The coup d'état of September 11, 1973 ended one of South America's most stable and enduring democracies. With support from the Nixon administration and the CIA, the coup destroyed Salvador Allende's experiment to create a nonviolent, democratic road to socialism. The bombing of the national palace, *La Moneda*, by jets from Chile's Air Force represented the Chilean military's use of shock and awe—long before the term gained notoriety during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In the 17 years that followed, the regime used political violence with impunity. According to the Rettig Report (the first step in Chile's Truth and Reconciliation process following the restoration of democracy in 1990), Chile's military government killed nearly 2,300 people, including almost 1,000 who were "disappeared"—a macabre practice that left families shattered.

The Pinochet regime's use of state terrorism effectively silenced opposition. During the first ten years after the coup, few Chileans were willing to speak out and protest the regime, its harsh economic policies, or its gross violations of human rights. The exceptions were notable for their courage.

With strong support from Chilean Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, the church established the Comité Pro-Paz (Committee for Peace) to defend human rights in the immediate aftermath of the coup. That organization grew into the Vicaría de la Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity), an organization housed in the Roman Catholic cathedral in Santiago. It provided legal assistance and social services to victims of human rights' abuses. It also provided meeting space for the Family Members of the Disappeared (known by its Spanish acronym, AFDD), who also protested when others were silent. The work of the Vicaria is widely credited with saving many lives. The work of the AFDD was critical in investigating and prosecuting the regime's many crimes when democracy was restored.

That situation of fear-induced silence began to change when Chile's economy collapsed in the early 1980s. Massive protests, organized at the grassroots level, began in 1983. The regime responded with renewed repression and even more widespread use of torture. In this environment, the Sebastian Acevedo Movement

Against Torture (*Movimiento Contra la Tortura Sebastián Acevedo* or MCTSA) was born.

One participant in that movement, Juan, tells the story of his involvement with the MCTSA, beginning with its first action. On September 14, 1983, a group of approximately 75 people gathered at 1470 Borgoño Street in Santiago, the site of a clandestine jail and torture center run by the secret police. The group had planned to occupy the location to denounce the practice of torture. Beyond that basic goal, the event was largely improvised.

They unfurled a banner that read, "The CNI (secret police) are torturing a man here." They stretched out their arms to point at the building. They chanted the song, "I Name You Freedom."¹

For the caged bird
For the fish caught in the net
For my friend who is a prisoner
Because she has said what she thinks,
I name you freedom.

A busload of Chile's national police, the *carabineros*, arrived shortly and arrested 48 of the protestors. Although this was their first public action, in the weeks of preparation and planning that preceded it, the group had already developed a deep sense of solidarity. Many of the protestors volunteered to be arrested, but the *carabineros* had already decided to take only forty-eight and all were released that afternoon. Juan reflected, "If one is taken prisoner I will also go as a prisoner, because to protest in the street is not a crime."

Of course, in Pinochet's Chile, protest was a crime.

Reading Juan's testimony, I was reminded of the courage and creativity of the MCTSA. A semi-clandestine nonviolent movement survived under one of Latin America's most brutal dictatorships. A movement that included people of faith and people who were inspired by humanistic or political ideals inspired me to think more

¹ "Yo te nombro, libertad." The song composed by Italian song writer Gian Franco Pagliaro became one of the hymns of the Chilean resistance movement.

deeply about the power of nonviolent protest and the role of faith in social change. From the moment I first learned about MCTSA, it captured my imagination.

As a young person with strong pacifist leanings, I was frequently challenged by the question: "What about Hitler?" The argument is familiar: nonviolence worked for Gandhi because the British had a tradition of liberal democracy. It worked for Martin Luther King because of the US commitment to constitutional rule. But nonviolence would not have worked against Nazi Germany. This argument owes much to the "Christian realism" of Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). As evidence of its influence, President Barack Obama made specific reference to these ideas and terms in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

The example of the Sebastian Acevedo Movement Against Torture in Chile offered living testimony that Reinhold Niebuhr and all those who argue that nonviolence is incapable of resisting evil are wrong.

This group of nonviolent activists confronted a military dictatorship with militant action in defense of human rights. They were arrested, but never silenced. Their actions were repressed, but they did not cease to protest. They grew dramatically, yet were never infiltrated. They showed that while Chile's military regime seemed omnipotent, it was, in the words of MCTSA spokesperson and Jesuit priest Jose Aldunate, a colossus with feet of clay.

The Pinochet regime's violation of human rights—above all, the practice of torture—was its vulnerability.

Nearly twenty years ago, I had the privilege of interviewing several MCTSA participants as I prepared to write a thesis for the Master of Divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Although Juan was not among the activists that I interviewed, his reflections hold much in common with the interviews that I conducted.

Fear is a theme that emerges again and again in the interviews when the participants talk about their protest experiences. Many said that in the days before an action, they could not eat normally. Others could not sleep. Some experienced stomach

aches and pains. The prospect of protesting the regime's most heinous crimes provoked feelings of profound fear, even terror.

Juan spoke very concretely about those fears:

I would say that any nonviolent activist, or at any nonviolent action, there is a place (for everyone). Not necessarily the act of being in the street, running a risk, exposing ourselves, because the fact is that every one of us was absolutely clear that participating in an action meant risking our lives. There might have been a bullet or there might have been a tear gas canister that hits you in the head. Or there might have been a simple blow to the head from a police officer's club that might produce head trauma. We recognize this risk of this commitment to overcome this false idol.

Fear is also a theme that runs throughout scripture. The prophet Elijah fled from the crowds that wanted to kill him after he revealed the powerlessness of their idols. Isaiah is filled with fear when he was called to ministry. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that he might be spared the suffering of trial and crucifixion.

The scripture story that might best inform the experience of the MCTSA is the story of Moses. When God's people were oppressed by slavery in Egypt, God heard their cries. God called Moses to confront Pharaoh, but Moses was afraid. Moses objects to God's call, saying, "Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10) Scholars debate whether Moses had a speech impediment or if he was paralyzed by the fear of confronting a tyrant.

God overcame Moses' objections and empowered Moses to challenge the inhumanity of an oppressive regime. Moses found the strength to speak truth to power and become an agent of liberation. The Exodus story of that ancient freedom struggle has inspired people for generations.

In Chile, the fear that led to silence did not result from a speech impediment. The military regime enforced silence through arrest, torture, execution, and disappearance. As a part of Chile's truth and reconciliation process, a commission

was empowered to investigate accusations of torture by agents of the state. According to the most recent report of the Valech Commission (dated August 2011) nearly 38,000 people were tortured during the Pinochet years. Some of the most common practices included simulated drowning, electrical shock, sensory deprivation, and stress holds. Among women detainees, sexual violence was nearly universal.

Like Moses, the members of the MCTSA were called to confront a repressive and seemingly omnipotent regime. They found the strength to put their bodies on the line and confronted the military dictatorship to cry out on behalf of the most marginalized and oppressed group in society: those who were tortured.

In Juan's case, the fear of the regime's repression was personal. His testimony includes graphic details of his own experience of torture. In June 1979, Juan was arrested by the Chilean Investigatory Police. He was taken to the 8th Precinct for Investigations, a location known to house a paramilitary group notorious for its treatment of those accused of killing police and other regime officials. Juan had been accused of killing two detectives. For several days following his arrest, he was subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment, including psychological pressure, sleep deprivation, and submerging his head in urine or excrement when he asked permission to use the toilet.

The experience of living through the brutality of imprisonment and torture led Juan to ask profound questions about the nature of humanity: How can one human being inflict such suffering on another? How is it possible to survive and maintain a sense of integrity in an environment that is designed in every way to dehumanize and destroy personal dignity? Juan reflected,

How is it possible that a human can be transformed into an animal? How is it possible? As a product of training, of dehumanization and of stupid reasons such as internal security or national security that they become wolves, wolves that hunt humans, their brothers and sisters.

The experience of imprisonment and torture also led Juan to ask questions about political engagement and it led to a profound experience of the divine.

Up until the point (when I was detained and tortured) I had believed that armed struggle was a solution to conflict. I had been a sympathizer of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left. In the prison, in that hour of solitude, of absolute helplessness, because you are in their hands, that is, you don't have any other possibilities and you know that you are at their discretion, that if they wish in the middle of the night to kill you, they would kill you. So I began to think about Christ.

These experiences are sometimes called Gethsemane moments, named for the gospel story in which Jesus prayed that he might be spared the suffering of arrest, trial and crucifixion. Jesus asked his disciples to stay awake and watch while he prayed, but they were also overcome with fear. They fell asleep, leaving Jesus was utterly alone and vulnerable. In that moment of vulnerability, Jesus experienced God, found courage and peace. He committed himself anew to God's purpose for his life.

The Christian tradition is filled with stories of Gethsemane moments.

During the Montgomery bus boycott, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King reached the breaking point, but he had a Gethsemane moment that empowered him to continue the struggle. He tells the story, Stride Toward Freedom. After a long night of strategy meetings, King arrived home exhausted. He tried to sleep, but was restless. The phone rang and an angry voice threatened his life and the life of his family. Unnerved by the call, he went to his kitchen. He prayed over a cup of coffee. He asked God to relieve him of leadership responsibility for the civil rights struggle. He wanted for a way to abandon the campaign without losing face or damaging the movement. In that moment, he felt God's presence in a way that he had never experienced it before. He heard God's voice speaking to him, saying "Stand up for truth. Stand up for righteousness and God will be at your side forever." In that moment his fear subsided and he found renewed courage to continue the struggle, no matter how difficult or threatening.

In El Salvador, Archbishop Oscar Romero had a similar experience. When Romero was named Archbishop by the Vatican, El Salvador was being engulfed by social unrest, the result of decades of inequality. Romero was supported by El Salvador's elite who viewed him as a moderate. Many hoped that he would restrain the church's

activist priests and their efforts to organize peasants and workers to demand better living conditions. Leading the church through the increasing polarization and violence in his nation challenged Romero. But his Gethsemane moment came in 1977 when his long-time friend, Father Rutilio Grande was murdered with an elderly *campesino* and a young boy. Romero became an outspoken advocate for human rights—ultimately challenging the Salvadoran military to stop the repression of the Salvadoran people. Tragically, Romero became a victim of the violence he denounced. On March 24, 1980, an assassin's bullet killed him as he consecrated the host during Mass. Romero is respected throughout the world as a martyr who defended the rights of the poor.

Juan's Gethsemane moment came during his time of detention and torture.

I thought of Christ, perhaps for the first time in my life. I invoked (Christ), and I prayed from the depth of my soul that I would be liberated from that situation. I don't know what God is. Is God love? Is God truth? God is both of these things...that is the testimony of Jesus.

These moments of reflection led Juan to a new commitment, a commitment to nonviolence.

I realized that the men who were doing these things to me were justified by the armed struggle, to eliminate others to achieve the just society that I believed in. In the end, I had an internal conversion.

As a participant in the Sebastian Acevedo Movement, Juan found a new way to work for justice. He also found the ability to confront his fears and overcome them. The thought of returning to jail terrified him, yet he knew that he had the support of the group.

From the moment that the police arrive and a carabinero is going to hit you, you feel the hand of someone who holds onto you firmly and you know that you can count on that person. They know that they can count on you. It is an impressive display of empathy. There is a spirituality of the movement that strengthens you and allows you to overcome fear. I believe that the

psychological treatments that I received after the experience of torture were not as effective as the experience of participating in these street protests.

For Juan, this group that gathered because of their shared concern for victims of torture provided an avenue to resist oppression. All members of the MCSTA knew what it meant to stand in solidarity with each other and with the victims of torture. But Juan also had experience of detention and torture. And he had the experience of the overwhelming presence of God while he was in the hands of torturers. Juan came to know a God who stands with the poor and the oppressed, the marginalized and the abused. He encountered God incarnate as one who was tortured.

Through the MCTSA, Juan discovered another expression of incarnation: the power of nonviolence when people put their bodies on the line. In those actions, Juan found healing from the trauma of violence. Through the street actions of the MCTSA, Juan reclaimed his sense of identity and integrity. Eventually, Juan became a staff member of Chile's Peace and Justice Service (Servicio Paz y Justicia or SERPAJ, a Latin America-wide nonviolent movement founded by Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel).

Fear was one experience that every participant in the MCTSA used to describe their experience of going into the streets to protest torture. But that was not the only experience they held in common. The second common experience is described as the *mistica* of the movement.

The word *mistica* does not translate easily into English. A direct translation is mysticism. But a better rendering might be spirituality, in the broadest sense of the term and not limited to the understanding of any particular faith tradition. In fact, the experience of *mistica* was described by both religious and non-religious participants in the MCTSA. In a sense, the Sebastian Acevedo Movement is an expression of liberation theology, particularly as elaborated by Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez: When people work for justice it does not matter if they are believers or non-believers. They are fulfilling God's intention for creation.

In a climate of fear and repression that the Pinochet regime created and sought to exploit, the Sebastian Acevedo Movement empowered people to confront and

overcome their fears. Contrary to the popular belief, torture is not designed to extract information. Rather, it seeks to destroy personal integrity and the relationships that bind people together. The MCTSA created a transformative experience of solidarity that healed some of the individual and social wounds that the regime inflicted. As a result, the movement's participants knew that they could count on each other.

The MCTSA became a dramatic symbol of nonviolent resistance to a violent and repressive regime. For the participants in the movement, their actions became an antidote for fear and terror. Part of that antidote was the experience of solidarity—with both the victims of torture and with each other. Juan and other participants in the movement spoke easily of this experience. But the other part of fear's antidote, the movement's *mistica*, eluded easy explanation.

Is it too bold to suggest that the *mistica* represents not human solidarity, but Divine solidarity with humanity? In his Gethsemane moment, Juan experienced the overwhelming sense of Christ's presence when he prayed for liberation from his captors and tormentors. Could it be that when the members of MCTSA took to the street to protest against torture, they too were accompanied by God? From a theological and ethical perspective, perhaps the greatest lesson of the Sebastian Acevedo Movement Against Torture is that when we stand with each other, confront our fears, and show solidarity with the most marginalized and oppressed, then God stands with us.

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