The Pope and Pinochet

Why the Vatican defends mass murder

Bill Vann
4 March 1999

Reports that Pope John Paul II made an appeal to the British government for the release of Augusto Pinochet "for humanitarian reasons" provoked outrage from human rights groups and relatives of the victims of Pinochet's murderous regime in Chile.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro Valls confirmed that the Pope had interceded on behalf of the former Chilean dictator. He declined to confirm press reports that the Vatican's intervention took the form of a letter addressed from the Pope, Karol Wojtyla, to the House of Lords, which is deliberating whether to extradite Pinochet to Spain, where he faces charges of mass killings and torture, or to return him to Chile.

"The Holy See supports national reconciliation everywhere, including Chile," the Vatican spokesman said.

In Chile an organization representing relatives of the "disappeared" published an open letter to the Pope declaring, "The Catholic Church cannot teach that to kill, to disappear and to torture thousands of oppositionists can be crimes that are left unpunished."

In Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the most prominent organization of relatives of the tens of thousands of victims of that country's military dictatorship of the 1970s and early 1980s, went further, accusing John Paul II of "defending assassins."

"We address you as a common citizen, because it appears aberrant to us that from the Papal throne in the Vatican, without knowing nor having suffered yourself the electric prods, the mutilations, rapes, you decide, in the name of Jesus Christ, to ask clemency for the murderer," read the letter that the group gave to the Papal Nuncio in Buenos Aires.

"Jesus was crucified and his flesh was lacerated by the Judases who like you today defended the assassins," it continued.

It appears that the Pope's efforts on behalf of Pinochet date back as far as November, shortly after representatives of Chile's Christian Democratic-led government met with the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano. In making the Vatican's appeal, Sodano repeated the arguments made by Pinochet's defenders, including the Chilean military and the right wing generally in Latin America. He presented it as an issue of national sovereignty, implicitly upholding torture and mass killings of political opponents as a legitimate state function. At the same time he expressed concern about "equal treatment for small states," suggesting that somehow by prosecuting Pinochet, a trusted instrument of US imperialist policy in Latin America, Chile's national independence would suffer.

For many in Latin America's predominantly Catholic countries, the Pope's "humanitarian" concern for a man who directed the extermination and torture of tens of thousands of workers, students and intellectuals came as a brutal and agonizing shock. For those familiar with the Vatican's role during Latin America's decades of dictatorship, however, the Pope's defense of Pinochet was neither a surprise nor a mystery.

Lord Lamont, the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer under Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, expressed his certainty that the Vatican's intervention had been made directly by the Pope himself, as someone who recognizes "the General's contribution to protecting freedom during the Cold War." Lamont added, "The Pope would understand the reason for saving a country from a Marxist dictatorship."

The Vatican was a full partner in the bloody crimes carried out against the working people in Chile and throughout Latin America under US-backed dictatorships from the 1960s through the 1980s. While thousands of Catholic-educated Latin American students were inspired during this period--at least in part by the teachings of Vatican Council II--to challenge the gross social inequality that prevailed throughout the continent, the church hierarchy fulfilled its historic function as a defender of private property, the state and the military forces of the ruling oligarchies, together with the fundamental interests of US imperialism.

Some Latin American critics of the Pope's defense of Pinochet have compared the situation to that of the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals at the end of the Second World War. The Vatican, they say, did not demand the liberation of Goebbels, Goering and others who were put on trial. This argument, however, ignores the fact that, while the Vatican may not have raised its voice for those brought to trial in Nuremberg, it used its considerable resources to ensure that more than a few fascist mass murderers escaped prosecution.

The so-called "rat line" created by the Vatican brought many of those fleeing the ruins of the Third Reich to Latin America, using Vatican false passports and under the protection of the International Red Cross. Mass murderers like Adolf Eichmann, Klaus Barbie and Ante Pavelic were delivered to the port of Buenos Aires disguised as priests. Hundreds of other Nazi SS officers were spirited out of Europe in the same way. Some, like Barbie, went on to become expert advisers to Latin American dictatorships in matters of repression and torture perfected by the

© World Socialist Web Site

Nazis.

Despite the Vatican's recent declaration of regret over the Holocaust, it has never made an accounting for its efforts on behalf of individuals who directed the genocide. Many of the documents relating to this shameful alliance remain locked up in the vaults of Vatican City.

With the period of revolutionary social struggles that shook Latin America beginning in the 1960s, the church hierarchy was more than prepared to offer its assistance to similar forces. In *Brasil Nunca Mais*, a book published by the Catholic Archdiocese of Sao Paulo reviewing the ghastly record of repression, murder and torture during 21 years of military dictatorship in that country, the following admission is made:

"The church hierarchy played a fundamental role in the creation of an ideological climate favorable to the military intervention, engaging itself in the anticommunist campaign backed by the conservative elites: against agrarian reform, against the strike movements."

It was the Catholic Church which provided the cement for the movement of the Brazilian middle class that culminated in mass marches in the country's major cities for "Family, God and Liberty," setting the stage for the military's seizure of power. Brazil provided the prototype for CIA-backed coups in country after country, and the essential role of the Catholic hierarchy was reproduced in Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and elsewhere.

In articles published last year on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the military coup that toppled Chile's elected president Salvador Allende, leaders of that country's Christian Democratic Party, then the right-wing parliamentary opposition, rejected suggestions that they were responsible for calling on the military to overthrow the government. No, it was the church that took the leading role, they said.

After the coup, the church and the Chilean junta cemented extremely close ties. Indeed, the figure now leading the Vatican's campaign for the former dictator's freedom, Cardinal Sodano, the Vatican's secretary of state, was the Pope's representative in Santiago from 1978 to 1988. He was one of the chief organizers of the Pope's 1988 visit to Chile, during which he gave communion to the dictator and held a personal audience with him in the La Moneda palace, the scene of aerial bombardment and murder just 15 years earlier.

In Argentina there is ample evidence of equally close and sinister ties between the church and the dictatorship. In the aftermath of the 1976 coup in that country, Monsignor Tortolo, president of the Catholic Episcopate, went so far as to compare the military junta with the Easter Resurrection and its chief, General Jorge Videla, with Jesus Christ.

Some of the ex-military torturers who have come forward to testify about the horrors of that period recounted that the church played an instrumental role in keeping the machinery of repression working. Catholic priests were assigned as chaplains to the military units that ran the torture centers and concentration camps where prisoners were subjected to unspeakable tortures.

In places where pregnant women were raped with electric prods and small children had their bones broken one by one in front of their mothers to force confessions and extract information, these chaplains took confessions from Catholic prisoners about to die while reassuring the torturers that their work was both necessary and moral.

Adolfo Francisco Scilingo is an ex-naval officer who confessed to his role in the so-called "transfers" from the torture centers, in which political prisoners were injected with sedatives and then thrown from helicopters into the Rio de la Plata. He related confiding to a priest his feelings of guilt over these missions. "He was telling me that it was a Christian death because they didn't suffer, because it wasn't traumatic, that they had to be eliminated, that war was war and even the Bible provided for eliminating the weeds from the wheat field," he recalled.

Other naval commanders have confirmed that the junta discussed its method of executing prisoners with high-ranking church officials. One of the most bitter charges leveled against the church by the families of the disappeared in Argentina is that the Vatican and its representatives were provided detailed lists of those whom the military imprisoned and executed. These lists, containing thousands of names, were never made public and were utilized only when members of prominent and well-to-do Catholic families fell into the clutches of the junta.

Finally, in 1991, after the leaders of the military junta had been found guilty of political mass murder, torture and other crimes and subsequently pardoned by Peronist President Carlos Menem, they joined him as guests of honor at a reception held by the Vatican's representative in Buenos Aires marking the thirteenth anniversary of Wojtyla's ascension to the Papal throne.

Even when military repression claimed the church's own, the Vatican continued its role as a political and ideological pillar of reaction. In El Salvador, when Archbishop Arnulfo Romero asked for an audience with the Pope in 1980 to speak about the wholesale violence of the US-backed military against the people, he was rebuffed and told not to "exaggerate." Within weeks, after giving a sermon criticizing US military aid to the regime and urging Salvadorean soldiers to disobey orders to massacre unarmed civilians, he was assassinated while celebrating mass. Shortly thereafter the Vatican replaced him with Fernando Saenz Lacalle, the former Catholic chaplain of El Salvador's armed forces.

Thus, as news circulates in Latin America of the Pope's "humanitarian" appeal for Britain to pardon Pinochet, the question arises: who will pardon the Pope?

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site