

## MY EXPERIENCE OF PARISH LIFE

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### *My experience of Parish life as a lay person*

If I am to talk about my experience of life in a church parish I have to go back to the mid seventies; more specifically to 1974 when I was 19 and living in Arica.

My family which comes from a poor, humble background, arrived there in 1959 from the Saltpetre refineries of the Northern Pampa. My parents, who had both been married before and had separated from their first partners, lived together for over 34 years. My Father brought two children with him from his first marriage, and then had 10 more with my mother; I'm the fifth. There wasn't much space in our house but we ended up with 14 of us living there. We were all baptised but that was the only religious education or formation that my parents gave us. As a result at 19 the only religious experience I had was my baptism and an attempt at preparation for my First Communion which was interrupted when I wanted to keep the catechism book belonging to another child in my group!

In 1973 Augusto Pinochet U., led the Armed Forces in a coup d'etat which overthrew Salvador Allende's 'Unidad Popular' Government. One of the many consequences brought about by this was the fact that many of the popular neighbourhood organizations closed their doors, thus bringing to an end the participation of the people so, where before there had been movement and light, because of all the activities and meetings, there was now darkness and silence. It also meant that a good number of Chileans, who had left the country on hearing of the democratic triumph of

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the first Marxist president, now returned to Chile. Among them was a very special religious sister: Sister Olga Freddy Alcayaga. She had become a nun after her husband's death, and later, because of her fear of the Marxist Government, asked to be moved to another country.

When she heard about the coup, Sr. Olga was extremely relieved and felt she could return to Chile. Driven by her missionary zeal and a great

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desire to live among the poor, she landed up in Arica, more specifically in what was, at that time, my neighbourhood Chapel: 'St. Joseph the Worker'. This chapel was only open on Saturdays for Catechism classes and on Sundays for Mass. But the arrival of Sr. Olga meant that we began to see lights on there every day and little by little the people

began to gather there. We also saw her walking in the streets, especially where we young people used to hang out: a little plaza opposite the chapel itself

One day Sr. Olga approached us and invited us to join the youth club. We didn't think twice about it, not because we were interested in religion but because there was nowhere else to go and this nun was offering us somewhere to go and have a good time and, in addition, meet the girls who went to Mass. What was the result? We started off with our idea and ended up with the nun's! Our idea was: "Let's go, we'll have a good time, there's space, we have somewhere to go and there are girls". And that's how it was. In the first months we pretended that we were doing what she wanted; but only while she was there; once she'd gone we pleased ourselves and did whatever we wanted in the chapel itself.

But, little by little, we began to undergo a process of human formation! For the first time I began to hear about things that I was experiencing but which I'd never been able bring up; subjects I'd never been able to talk about seriously with anyone. Friendship began to take on a new importance for me. Hanging about with the group on the street corners I could never talk about what was going on inside me. I could never admit to feeling sad, or anxious, or to any other emotion, because if I did the others would make fun of me and I would never get over that. But

in the chapel this nun began to create such a special atmosphere among us that, little by little, we could really talk about ourselves.

But we weren't only becoming more human; a process of conversion, of becoming more Christian, began to take place as well. This was because other things, apart from friendship, began to be important to this group in the chapel. One of these was 'service'. We began to organise meals for children who had nothing to eat, we sought help for old people who had been abandoned, we began to go on missions, to visit young people in prison. Another was the spiritual dimension. Gradually I began to discover how important religion was becoming in my life – even though I was still going to Mass largely because of the girls, I began to take more interest in the Mass itself. I paid more attention to the Word of God and to the homily. I wanted to go to Communion but I couldn't because I hadn't made my First Communion. I also experienced changes in other aspects of my life and a great desire to live a better life. All this led me to the decision to prepare for my First Communion so that I could participate more fully in the Eucharist. This happened when I was 21 on a Mission; I made my First Confession on the bank of a river and I was confirmed the following year.

Some of my brothers and sisters were going through similar experiences at the same time so it felt as if my whole family were living through a religious whirlwind as quite a few of us were touched by spiritual experiences. At the present moment one of my brothers is a Bishop in the Mormon church, another is a Pastor in the Adventist church where one of my sisters is also a very devout member; another brother entered the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity and finally, I became a Jesuit. The only way I can explain this is that, in spite of there being no tradition of Catholicism in my family, we were always very religious, especially my Mother. Also, in spite of having suffered the effects of poverty, my family is psychologically very healthy, and this is especially true of my Father.

At some time during this process I began to consider religious life. I think there was at least a hint of selfishness about it. I thought, "If I feel this, if I'm so happy living like this when I do so little, how must Sr. Olga, Fr. Raul Ulloa and Fr. Pepe Correa<sup>1</sup> feel, when they have dedicated their whole life to this?" This question set in motion a whole process that culminated in April 1979 when I entered the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus.

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small Christian community in a Chapel which is now a Parish. It is a process which was also very much influenced by the historical events in the country.

***My Parish Experience in Santiago in the Parish of Jesus the Worker  
(March 1988 to June 2004).***

I was ordained a priest in 1988 and sent to the Parish of Jesus the Worker which is in a working class area of Santiago, the capital of Chile. This Parish, where popular culture is very strong, was very important for the Society because Fr. Alberto Hurtado's<sup>2</sup> tomb is there and next door is one of the most cherished undertakings of this Jesuit prophet of Justice: Christ's Home (Hogar de Cristo).

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I was in Jesus the Worker parish for two periods of time: the first as a curate from March 1988 to September 1991; then as Parish Priest from June 1994 to August 2004<sup>3</sup>.

The most important aspect of my experience in this parish is the way in which this community contributed to my priestly formation. As I look back I realise that my formation prior to ordination was intellectual as I acquired the basic elements of Theology and Philosophy necessary for ordination. But it was in the day to day life of a Parish Community experiencing the political and economic reality of the country, that I felt I was truly being formed as a priest.

The following are some of the characteristics of my priestly ministry in this Parish. Everything I did, and could do, on a pastoral level, was built on the work of the Jesuits who had preceded me in the Parish. In other words, it was a continuation of what they had begun; I boarded a train that had begun its journey long before I arrived in the Parish.

***What are these outstanding characteristics?***

**The Parish as an ecclesial structure which welcomes and applies the Main Principles of Vatican II and the Pastoral Options of the Latin American Bishops<sup>4</sup>.**

From the beginning I felt that I had come to a community which formed part of the People of God. As this community gathered together around the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, they emphasised the Community aspect of their faith. They came together to laugh, to cry, to sing, to celebrate their faith and to organise themselves for apostolic service, reaching out to those suffering most in the area where the Parish is inserted.

This seems to me to be of the utmost importance as a counter sign in a society which emphasises the individualistic character of human living. It's also important for what it has taught me, through my own experience, about the concept of Church.

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When I say the word 'Church' I automatically see before me the faces of the children, young people, women, married couples, grandparents, who come to the parish on a daily basis; when I say the word 'Church' I automatically think about the names and faces of the priests, deacons, religious (male and female) of the most varied charisms. I also think of the names and faces of the Bishops and area vicars with whom I was on such friendly, brotherly, terms. My experience among all these people arouses in me feelings of affection and gratitude for so many good things received through them in the Church.

Inspired by the spirit of St. Albert Hurtado, and because we wanted to be seeds of the Kingdom in the midst of our neighbourhood, we started a **Pastoral Team: "Neighbourhood Service" ("Servicio mi Barrio")** to work alongside the traditional pastoral teams that prepared people for the sacraments. Through this team we contacted all the social services and neighbourhood organisations so that we could support each other and, an additional advantage for us was that, from our point of view, we could strengthen the solidarity programmes we offered. Basically we had an image of the Parish as a springboard for a whole web of solidarity in contact with others who, while not necessarily sharing our faith, were very sensitive to social issues.

In line with this, our Stations of the Cross on Good Friday were not the traditional ones; this was so that we could gather up all the sorrow

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present in the area. We did this by finding out which places in the area had been significant because of tragic events that had happened there and we set up our Stations in those very places, gathering up the suffering and sorrow of the poor and marginalized who make Christ's Passion present in the world to-day. The places where we set up the Stations were: an encampment where families lived in extreme poverty; the place where a young adolescent had been killed because of drugs; a primary school – the poorest in the municipality<sup>5</sup>; the site where two young people<sup>6</sup> had been set alight by the military in Pinochet's time; the home of an immigrant family; the grounds of 'Christ's Home' (Hogar de Cristo) which is where those who have nowhere to sleep, or die, with dignity, are welcomed.

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In Summer we organised Holiday Camps for the poorest children of the area. The adults and young people from the Parish community set up a timetable of events for the children and played, laughed, sang and danced with them. For those young people who were at a higher risk or who were actually involved in the drug world, we organised an activity called ENJUPO<sup>7</sup> offering them a variety of artistic and handicraft workshops which we thought would appeal to them.

As the economic situation of the country improved, poor immigrants began arriving from neighbouring countries, especially from Peru. Through the network of the Christian Life Communities (CLC) we formed the 'PIPA' Pastoral Team dedicated to Pedro Arrupe (Project for Immigrants Pedro Arrupe). When we saw their living conditions and how they were being treated, we realised very clearly that our Parish Community had to be a place which was life-giving for all of them through the help and support it offered. This wasn't easy because there were people in the Parish Community itself who, both by words and actions, treated them with contempt, uttered racist comments or said things like, *'These are coming to take jobs away from the Chileans.'* So the evangelising process was two-way! To welcome the immigrants on the one hand and on the other to make the Parish Community aware of Gospel values and the pastoral options adopted by the Church and the Jesuits. To do this we had to remind the Community that, while the immigrants in Chile number just over 200

thousand, there are around 800 thousand Chileans living outside the country and that the vast majority of these have been welcomed by the countries they fled to after the military coup.

**Team Work.** The Jesuits in the Parish at that time – parish priest, curate, Jesuits and religious sisters in formation – tried from the beginning to get the idea across that we worked as a team. While it was true that each one of us had our own specific job, nothing was undertaken without first reflecting on it as a team. For this reason we met every Friday to share what we were doing and reflect on it. Basically this was to confirm that we were all responsible for the Pastoral work of the parish, not just the Parish priest.

This made a tremendous difference to the service we offered and also to our collective learning process. This was especially true of those in formation, who did not have the experience of Church in a Parish Community made up of children, young people, adults, married couples, old people, widows, those who were separated, those who were co-habiting, etc. This experience was a great help in discovering an unknown dimension of the Ignatian rules on feeling with and in the Church.

It also made the handover from one parish priest to another a lot easier, as happened when I replaced Fr. Eddie Mercieca, S.J. as Parish priest. Before the actual change took place we spent three months together visiting all the groups as well as some twenty pastoral teams. We asked some very helpful

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questions such as: “What is the group’s aim? What are your strengths and weaknesses? What do you need in order to improve the apostolic service you offer? It was a most participative and formative hand-over.

We didn’t confine our team to Jesuits, but also worked with the clergy and religious, both men and women, from the neighbouring parishes, the Deanery and the Zone. In this way, through the Parish, we were able to have a church experience of communion and participation with clergy and religious of different charisms and with different viewpoints on what constitutes Church.

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In the interests of creating networks and also of belonging to a continental network, the Society encouraged us to actively promote the co-ordination of our parish with other parishes run by the Society in Chile and indeed throughout Latin America.

***The Ignatian stamp of a Parish under the Pastoral care of the Jesuits.***

Following the recommendations of the CG34, I and my companions worked to make sure that the Parish had the stamp of Ignatian Spirituality and that, in communion with the local Church, it would assume the pastoral options of the Society. To do this we thought out three collective processes:

First of all, together with my companions, we put into practice different ways of giving the exercises in their most varied forms: we gave Ignatian inspired retreats of one day, a week-end, 4 days, 8 days and the full 30 days in daily life. I personally dedicated much of my time to this last retreat. From 1955 I never stopped looking for key Pastoral agents in the Parish - adults and young people - and preparing them by giving them the exercises in daily life. I ended up by having an average of 10 people each week doing this. Some were finishing, others beginning. The Workshop 'Breath of the Spirit'<sup>8</sup> was of great help to me in this. I would invite 12 Pastoral agents to take part in this workshop and I would then begin the full exercises with about half of these. The length of their process was determined by Ignatius' recommendations: sufficient time for them to be undertaken in a relaxed way; sufficient time for the person to become docile; sufficient time for the person to find what they were looking for and needed to live out their vocation and specific mission better.

Secondly, I got the whole Parish community to begin a process of reflection and elaboration on what we called "*Our Way of Proceeding in the Parish of Jesus the Worker.*" One of the things I had in mind was that the overall view and organisation of the community should be shot through with the characteristics that spring from Ignatian Spirituality and the Pastoral Options of the Society. The other was that the community should acquire, in an experiential way, the tools they needed to show them how to act in whatever circumstances they might be presented with. The final aim of this document was to ensure that the community would not move forward at the rhythm of whoever happened to be parish priest, but that it would be whatever Gospel values and the Options of the Society called it to be, in communion with the Diocesan Church: an adult and mature community who welcomes the Parish priest who, according to St. Augustine, regards

himself first as a brother in Faith and secondly as the Shepherd of the community entrusted to him.

Finally, along the same lines, I tried to ensure that each Pastoral Team had its own Apostolic Project. To do this we had to invent a simple method of setting up and evaluating a project. For two consecutive years I met with each Pastoral Team to help them with this until it became second nature to them. By the third year they were able to elaborate their own projects with only indirect intervention on my part. Both the communal Apostolic Project and the document on our procedures turned out to be invaluable tools which made my work as Parish priest much easier, especially when I had to be absent from the Parish for long periods of time because of my other ministries.

#### ***My Experience in a Parish in Arica (September 2004 to ...)***

In September 2004 the Society sent me back to my own town and, among other ministries, named me Parish Priest of the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which, like Jesus the Worker, is in a poor area. Generally speaking I have put into practice in this parish what I was doing in Jesus the Worker.

But there are some new things and I think they are important. To understand this I need to point out some elements which mark my pastoral experience in my own town.

The first thing is to be aware that Arica is on the Chilean border with Peru and Bolivia. In the past my town has suffered war and has wounds which have not yet healed. For as long as we can remember, we Aricans have listened to Bolivia calling out for a way out to the sea, and Peru reiterating their claims about ocean boundaries. All of us, Chileans, Peruvians and Bolivians, have our own perspectives and arguments on these issues, all of which grow from something inculcated in us since childhood: love of our country. This can very easily become excessive patriotism which can be exploited by politicians when it suits their interests.

The second thing to be aware of is that the Latin-American continent, including our countries, are largely Christian and Catholic. For this reason the Church has placed a very important role in our history.

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In the third place, you only have to look at the faces and hear the names of those of us who are Aricans or who live here, to realise that the variety and cultural mix here is one that is seen in very few other Chilean cities. Arica is a mixture of Aymaras, descendants of Africans plus the people who came from the saltpetre refineries in the Pampas at the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s.

In the fourth place there is the phenomenon of globalisation and the vertiginous cultural changes we are experiencing in all aspects of life, in the family, socially, at work, in politics, sexually, in the field of economics and in the area of religion.

Finally, there is the fact we Jesuits are present in frontier towns of all three countries: Arica (Chile); Tacna (Peru); and El Alto –La Paz (Bolivia).

As a Jesuit community, we have taken all these elements into consideration, as well as the words of Pope Benedict XVI in the CG 35 and we have discovered a mission that is both interesting and challenging:

*to use Gospel values and the Pastoral Options of the Church to help face the problems caused by past wars. In the same way we want to take on board the challenges which spring from the cultural changes we are living through at the present moment.*

In this respect we feel ourselves very much supported by what the Bishops said in their meeting in Aparecida, Brazil:

*"In her Pastoral work, the Church cannot be oblivious to the historical context of the place where her members live. They live their lives in concrete social and cultural situations. These social and cultural transformations naturally represent new challenges for the Church in her mission to build the Kingdom of God." (No.367).*

In view of the above, we have opted for two central issues:

**a. Formation** along the lines of the Second Vatican Council and the Bishops' documents from Medellín, Puebla, Santo Domingo, and most recently, Aparecida.

***b. Option for the poor and the promotion of faith and justice.*** The principal idea is that these two central issues should run through everything we do as Jesuits – in the Parishes, in the movements we run or in whatever we write in the local press.

The new thing about my work in the Parish in Arica lies in trying to understand this mission in a frontier context with all the characteristics I've mentioned above. This means I have to make an effort to involve the parish community in this new perspective of Parish pastoral life. This is so important for me that if I don't do it or if the Parish community don't want to travel along this path, I would have to leave the Parish and I'm very clear about that. The reason for this is very simple: I would not be being faithful to the mission that has been entrusted to me.

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That is why we have created the IGNATIAN APOSTOLIC NETWORK OF ARICA. This network is international in its scope and all the groups and movements that we Jesuits are involved in, belong to it. Through this network we are in contact with the Jesuits, and all their works, in Tacna (Peru), and in El Alto and La Paz in Bolivia. We have started a process of collaboration and mutual support in all our apostolic works without exception.

As far as globalisation and cultural changes are concerned, we have sought professional help and together with CISOC (Centre of Socio-cultural Investigations) we are starting a Project of Cultural Investigation in my parish. This is a community process<sup>9</sup> of becoming aware of the changes which the community is experiencing; then, in a reflective process, asking ourselves what pastoral challenges, arising from these changes, we are faced with in our evangelisation. There is nothing new in the results of this process.

***What is new is the process itself: it is a community process, it's a growth in awareness through an experience of Church, and in the dynamism which***

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this whole process has generated in the community. In other words the community holds itself responsible for the challenges it is facing.

*Translated by  
Patricia Carney, o.p.*

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<sup>1</sup> Jesuits who were in Arica at this time and who, together with Mgr. Ramon Salas V. took turns in saying Mass in the chapel.

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Hurtado was beatified by John Paul II on October 16th 1994 and canonised by Benedict XV October 25 2005

<sup>3</sup> In between – September 1991 to June 1994 – I was in Spain for the third probation and studying Spirituality.

<sup>4</sup> Medellín, Puebla, Santo Domingo and Aparecida

<sup>5</sup> They were so poor that they used to borrow chairs from us for their assemblies or when they had important visitors from the local authority.

<sup>6</sup> Carmen Gloria Quintana and Rodrigo Rojas who died as a result of their burns.

<sup>7</sup> **Encuentro Juveniles Populares**: Meetings for Young People.

<sup>8</sup> Prepared by a Uruguayan Jesuit: Fr. Horacio Carrau, S.J.

<sup>9</sup> All the lay pastoral agents of the parish take part in it.