

Mercy sisters call Chileans 'faith-filled people'

By Teresa A. Parsons
Soldiers patrolled the streets. Victims of a devastating earthquake struggled to rebuild. Tales of abduction and torture made daily conversation.

This is part of the Chile three Sisters of Mercy witnessed on a recent visit. But in contrast to the poverty and oppression around them, they unambiguously described the Chilean people as gentle and rich in faith.

"I was struck with their beauty, warmth and goodness — their complete trust, almost a possession by God," said Sister Carol Wulforst.

"Their faith and trust is not passive or resigned," added Sister Anne Curtis. "There's just a real paradox between their natures and the violence around them."

Sister Anne is a campus minister and theology teacher at Our Lady of Mercy High School. Sister Carol is the principal of St. Joseph's School in Penfield, and Sister Julia Norton is pastoral assistant at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. The three spent a month in July at their congregation's mission in Santiago.

During their stay, they never observed signs of a middle class, just the rich and desperately poor. There is little hope for finding jobs in Chile. In the area where the Mercy mission is located, unemployment runs at 50-60 percent. Since Chile has no welfare system, families survive from day to day, sometimes selling furniture or other household belongings to pay for a special event.

The people rely on their creativity for survival. Some families sell homemade crafts to provide them with their only source of income. "You never see the women idle," Sister Julia noted.

Others pool what money they have to make bread for sale in the public market. With the proceeds they can buy ingredients for a community pot of soup, or "olla comun." In many areas, these cooperative efforts have replaced soup kitchens operated by people from outside the neighborhoods.

Since they have nothing material to give, their hospitality is one of presence and comforting ministry to each other. Shortly after the sisters arrived, they attended a young girl's birthday party. Although most people had no gifts to bring, each greeted the child and each other with unforgettable kindness, Sister Julia said. The birthday meal was only bread and tea, yet the group sat talking for more than three hours.

"They are like no other people, warm, welcoming, loving. The people have nothing, but out of their nothingness they give everything," said Sister Anne. She added that their nature makes what they offer easy to accept. "I felt humbled, especially compared to the way we are about what we have," she said. "In the midst of overwhelming poverty, we do; they are just with."

Sister Anne said she was overwhelmed by how strange Chile looks. "Everywhere there are people walking, buses, horsedrawn carts. Shacks are piled on top of one another, row after row ... There's no space, no green or parks." The prevailing color of Santiago, at least the poor areas the sisters saw, was brown. But the scene was crowned by snowcapped mountains that Sister Carol called "a sign of hope," even when they were obliterated by smog.

Oppression and fear were visible in the constant presence of armed soldiers and police buses in the streets. It was a new experience that none of the sisters enjoyed.

"Even hearing about the tortures and kidnapping first hand, the inhumanity of it is so hard to believe," Sister Anne said, but Sister Julia observed that "you hear it so many times, it can't be exaggerated."



On their way back from Mass, Sisters Julia Norton, Anne Curtis and Carol Wulforst visited the site of the new San Jorge parish church with most of the parishioners. The Sisters of Mercy now live in two Santiago parishes, with their main house in San Luis.

The United States certainly has its own share of violence, but it is the type that emanates from within individuals, homes and neighborhoods. In Chile, violence is imposed upon individuals from outside, Sister Anne noted.

"Our (government's) support for the military government (of Chile) makes us responsible," she said of the violence. Chileans ask why people in the U.S. can do this to them, but more in wonder than anger. "We became angry, but they didn't," Sister Carol observed.

The sisters described the Church in Chile as "alive and well," especially in speaking out against poverty and persecution. "It's not the role or place of the Church to align with any group or party, but to preach the Gospel in light of a situation's reality," Sister Anne explained. "It's just a recognition of the people's dignity," Sister Julia added.

The scarcity of priests and religious has prompted lay people to recognize the Church in themselves. Often one priest is stationed at a main church, but has responsibility for many satellite parishes. Thus, people may only have full Mass once a month, with paraliturgical services in between. The Sisters of Mercy in Santiago work in pastoral ministry, as administrators and organizers, trying to enable Chileans to gradually replace them.

During their visit, the sisters celebrated with the first six graduates of the mission's beauty school, part of the adult education program run by their congregation. Some family members wept as the students received their diplomas, Sister Julia said. Since a teacher is only available once a week, the program takes two years to complete.

None of the sisters has yet fully absorbed the impact of her visit, but each acknowledged that their views of life and ministry have been thoroughly shaken. "We're changed," Sister Carol said. "I recognized my own poverty and have seen so much weakness in myself."



Sister Carol (center) and Sister Anne (far right) are with Chilean candidates for the Sisters of Mercy. They are Lia Gonzalez and Maria Elena Prado (left) and Soledad Cantillana (right).

The Chilean schools she observed are far different than her school in Penfield. Children attend one of three staggered sessions each day to deal with overcrowding. Most classrooms are unheated, so the children wear their coats all day. Each school child has just one book. She found the students similar to those in Penfield except that they express appreciation more readily.

In her ministry here, Sister Carol plans to share her new awareness with others. "I'd like to involve my parish in tithing to Chile ... I want to proclaim the cries of the poor," she said.

Likewise, Sister Anne said that the experience will affect her work at Mercy. "Teaching classes, I feel like I stand in the middle — between the students and the Chilean people."

Sister Anne feels personally compelled to use her rights and voice as a citizen to speak about the choices our government makes in Chile and elsewhere in the Third World. "I will have to make some changes in my life and ways of dealing with people and allow the Chilean people to convert me," she said.

"Knowing what we know now, indifference would be sinful," Sister Julia added.

Gerould's Pharmacies
Two Locations
— S. Main Street
8 Church & Hoffman
Elmira
Delivery Service — 733-6696

CENTER OF RENEWAL
Fall Programs including weekend retreats, guest lecturers. Send for our Fall Brochure:
Center of Renewal
4421 Lower River Rd.
Stella Niagara, N.Y. 14144
(716) 754-7376

Let the Courier-Journal assist you in wishing your family, friends and relatives a Happy Birthday or Anniversary, or extending congratulations for a Graduation, Job Promotion, or whatever occasion you may be celebrating:

Just send in a photo (recent, or from days-gone-by), and a few special words you would like to say (30 word limit). The cost is \$25.00.

Send all material to: The Courier-Journal, 114 South Union St., Rochester, N.Y. 14607.

The Courier Journal will return all photos if accompanied with a self-addressed, stamped envelope, and is not responsible for photos damaged in the mail.

SCHOOL BAND INSTRUMENTS SALE!
AT THE GREAT ... GREAT
HOUSE OF GUITARS, INC.

BAND INSTRUMENTS SPECIAL! (Assorted used trumpets, trombones, cornets, clarinets, violins, snare drum kits \$99 up); (New flutes \$99; good used Gemeinhardt & Armstrong flutes \$149; New Armstrong & Gemeinhardt flutes \$199; New Gemeinhardt, Armstrong & Yamaha silver plated open hole flutes \$279). New Artley silver plated piccolo \$199; New trumpets \$99;

Used Bandy trumpets \$79; New King trumpet \$289; New clarinets \$125; Good used Bandy clarinet \$89; New Bandy clarinet \$199; New saxophones \$249 up; Good used Conn alto sax \$249; New Conn alto sax \$395; Student Guitars \$19.98

STUDENT DISCOUNTS

**We Take Special Orders on any School Band Instruments (All Brands and Models) FIRST DELIVERY BY VOUCHER ORDER!*

NEW!
HOUSE OF GUITARS SCHOOL OF MUSIC
FALL MUSIC LESSON INTRODUCTORY SPECIAL
DRUMS, GUITAR AND BASS 6 WEEK COURSE \$30
(Private or Class Lessons) (JAZZ-CLASSICAL-FOLK-ROCK) With Norm Tibbitts, Over 20 years' experience...graduate of University of Miami, School of Music... Degree in Classical & Jazz; Tom Brunett—HARD ROCK, Bill LeFleur, Entire Hard Rock Band Instruction

DRUM INSTRUCTION with John Graham; KEYBOARD INSTRUCTION
FULL STOCK OF INSTRUCTION BOOKS, 2-B DRUM STICKS, REMO WEATHER-KING PRACTICE PADS, UPSTAIRS; LARGE SELECTION OF SHEET & MUSIC BOOKS, PADS, MUSIC STANDS, AND MUSIC ACCESS (Student Discounts!)

FINANCING NOW AVAILABLE
BUY • SELL • TRADE • RENT

645 Titus Ave. Open Mon.-Sat., 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sun. 1-5 p.m.