

A land of fierce hope offers hard-won wisdom

By Father Charles Mulligan
Guest contributor

When St. Paul, frustrated by failure in his own all-Jewish community, turned to the Gentiles, he loosed a powerful process of change among those who had "missioned" him.

Those early and apostolic Christians felt they knew the Gospel message and sent preachers to bring light to other communities. But God's call to conversion was not reserved to the newcomers. Instead, amazed and quieted, the Jerusalem community listened to the wonders experienced among the Gentiles and recognized the need to drop Jewish dietary laws and circumcision as a prerequisites for membership in the Christian church. Painfully they discovered that the Gospel is not the possession of any community, but a two-edged sword that cuts and alters the community that sends people to preach as well as the community that receives them. That powerful feedback is *reverse mission*.

I don't have much of an edge on my sword. But I want to share some reflections on the last three years spent as a Maryknoll Associate priest in the parish of Jesus the Carpenter in Santiago, Chile.

To identify myself in my home town of Rochester, I am Father Charles Mulligan, Father John Mulligan's brother. After ordination in December of 1964, I studied or worked in parishes until September of 1971, when I became director of the Office of Human Development and later was named director of Social Ministry, a position I held until 1985. My brother John, ordained a year earlier than I, served quietly in a number of parishes while I was embroiled in problems such as riots among prisoners at Attica, controversy over the Vietnam War, boycotts, police violence, and programs addressing the issue of teen pregnancy — all issues of the '70s and early '80s in Rochester. John used to routinely state that he was not *that* Mulligan. The times have changed.

My mission has been in a troubled and poor section of Santiago. The parish has a large bare hill on one side and, on the other, railroad tracks and the Pan American Highway. No one just passes through Huamachuco — the name of our neighborhood barrios — since there is no where to go to next. We have four bus lines that end in our neighborhood.

Chile has been controlled by a harsh dictator for 16 years. He doesn't need the votes of my people and it shows. Everyone works hard, but among the 55 percent who get paid, the vast majority earn less than \$100 monthly. There is only one health clinic with one doctor for 30,000 people. An internist who was treating me in a modern, private clinic told me that he once worked in a clinic like Huamachuco's. "You see 30 adults in the morning and 30 children every afternoon," he said.

There is a lot of drinking, single-parent families, broken marriages, addiction (airplane glue and ground-up pills that are sniffed), and sickness. I asked a group of 11-year-olds preparing to make their First Communion how they prayed. Many told me that they prayed for the sick nightly. I understood why.

Life blossoms here too. There are lots of dogs and young children, and every house has its fruit tree or flowers. People actively care for one another. The family unit is central. Most young people are in school until they are 16. Life is folksy, and people

make time for each other even if they don't have it. The parish began only five years ago.

Enough of Chile. My subject is reverse mission. What has Santiago, Chile, said to me about the local church in Rochester?

Listen to what people mean when they say "church." The word has many meanings.

In Chile, the church is formed by lay people. Over time, some are identified by their neighbors as involved or as knowing what is going on. Those lay people become advocates for their friends, neighbors or relatives who want to come closer to God, but who are afraid to make a direct approach to the priest.

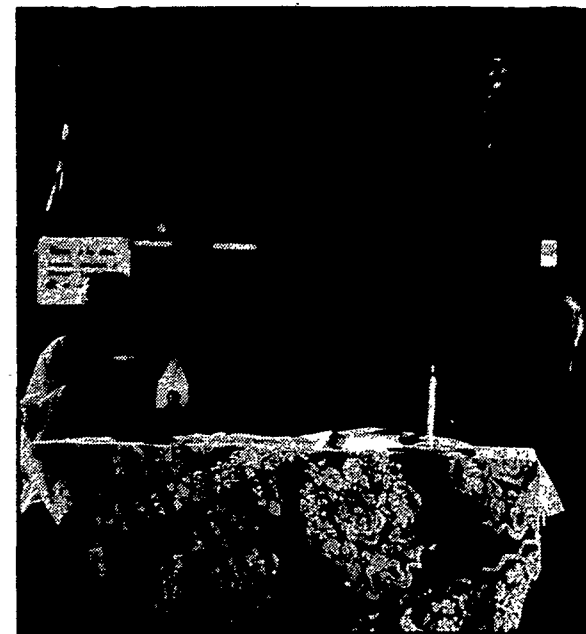
Church is a place to comprehend God's mysterious presence in a new way. People seek help when they are afraid that a baby will die or when their marriage is taking a turn for the worse. Instruction or listening opens up new ways of living as a couple or as parents. That instruction comes from a neighbor prepared for that work in the parish or by the diocesan church. Often we discuss the incomprehensible that happens in our lives during the liturgy on Sunday. The search to comprehend God is a community search.

The local community welcomes the poor not with solutions, but with readiness to enter into problems. Often the "helper" has struggled with the same difficulties as the person seeking help. In that sharing, both feel that they can not only survive, but also reach out to others in their turn.

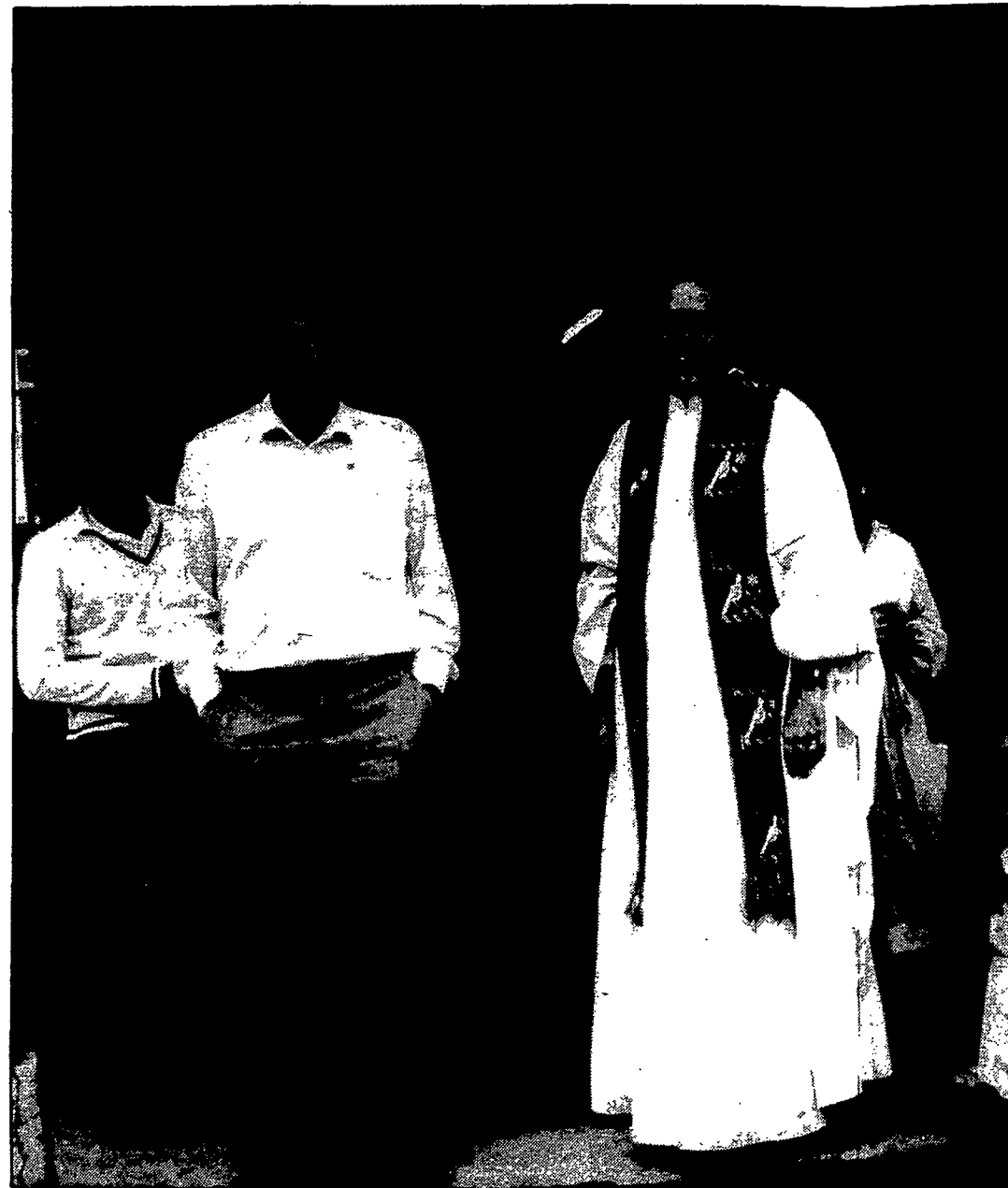
Church is a place that helps youth move beyond the framework of neighborhood, enabling them to form new friendships and engage the world beyond current boundaries.

My question for Rochester would be whether we listen to what people are seeking before we offer them "church?" As priests, religious, and lay leaders, could we adapt or set aside a parish format that served one group in responding to the needs of another? Would such a format address the problems we face among blacks, Hispanics, single parents or the younger generation? I don't sit in judgment. I can only share how hard it was for me to change my own sense of what church is. Priests especially are called to die to their own necessarily limited ideas here.

Choose what really matters and live by hope. Returning to the United States, I am amazed at the variety not only offered, but almost forced on you. Life seems a little jumpy, and events tumble forth in great profusion. That variety perhaps is a definition of our wealth as a country, but it can also be a source of uncertainty to a person or church. There



Father Mulligan says the homily during Mass while being assisted by a parish leader.



Father Charles Mulligan is joined by parishioners following a Mass at a chapel in the parish of Jesus the Carpenter in Santiago, Chile. Mulligan, a priest from the Rochester diocese, is in his third year of a five-year assignment with the Maryknoll Associate Program, sponsored by the Maryknoll missionaries.

are so many choices that one never chooses in a way that is profound.

Even more damaging is one's reaction to pre-packaged choices rather than answering at a deeper level, "What is it that I really want in life?" One opposite meaning of the word "focused" is "blurred" or "confused." Another might be "shallow" — particularly when we speak of persons or church.

In Chile, the choices are limited and the risks very high. Many choose and then are defeated by sickness, lack of resources, personal or system breakdowns. Some are broken people. But how they fight and believe in what they want! I have never encountered such fierce hope, and I think it is grounded in the capacity to choose or focus.

Hope is the result of choosing with all one's heart, mind, and spirit. It is based on choosing as part of a community beloved by God, and then surrendering one's life to that same God. One chooses in love and then hopes against hope that it turns out.

Parish plans are a great strength of the U.S. church. But to what extent does conservative — in the sense of safe — parish planning make for a riskless, boring community?

Give priority to the poor. The church in Chile has been transformed by this experience. Priority does not mean solving the problems of the poor or changing the framework of their lives. It is a call to live in solidarity with the poor, offering the support that is most needed in the present.

In Chile, before the military overthrow of the government in 1973, the church was at loggerheads with popular organizations and deeply suspicious of

the political parties of the left. After the church came to the defense of the rights committed to working with the poor, who people belonged to political parties or a statement after statement, church leaders persecution, attacks in the press, and a campaign to make the poor so afraid of participating in activities that they would simply stay at home. Leaders, pastoral agents, and bishops stood in this effort.

From this experience, I would single out priorities which mark a genuine commitment with and speaking out on behalf of the poor.

Focus on the basic need of the poor now. It is important to go beyond advocating for an immediate welfare grant allowance — without leav-aside. The more basic issue may be the support of single-parent families or of youth in poor neighborhoods. The need may be for family or job training. A basic need with which leadership neighborhoods would identify.

Be united in addressing this need — at the level of pastoral agents, region and diocese. Often the church is not really there, not really putting its weight on the line for that need.

Enough — I don't want to be preachy. I think the church today is called to be the human identity that goes beyond nationalities, an identity embodied in our pope's universal ground of nation after nation — one Gospel, one baptism. In this sense, all of us are called to go forth beyond the shackles of our culture or even our very successful history has put on our imagination.

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