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Being a Church in a Time of Violence: Peruvian Church during the Armed Internal Conflict 1980 to 2000

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Abstract: During the war with Shining Path (1980–2000) violence in Peru was brutal and extensive. Massive violations of human rights were common, with victims from all regions and social classes, but were particularly intense in rural areas like Ayacucho where the insurgency began. The churches supported and defended rights by providing organizational space, legal defense, publicity (through their radio networks) and by remaining among populations in danger, working with them and often sharing their fate. Important elements in the churches including leaders, priests, members of religious orders, sisters catechists, and ordinary people working through church organizations, were prominent among the victims. They were attacked both by Shining Path (who saw them as competitors) and by army and police forces, who saw their commitment to social justice and collective action as subversive. The choice to defend human rights in theory and action is rooted in a long term process of transformation in the church which drew strength and inspiration from the “option for the poor” articulated at the Catholic bishops meetings in Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979), and in numerous statements and organizational efforts since then. The process of violence in Peru and the role of the churches is documented in the reports of the Peruvian Commission for Truth and Reconciliation and others from the Peruvian church as well from as regional and local groups.

Keywords: violence; human rights; church; liberation; option for the poor; Peru; Shining path

1. Introduction

In 2001 the government of President Valentin Paniagua created the Truth Commission and charged it with elaborating a full report on the twenty years of violence that had bloodied the country starting in 1980¹. The succeeding government of President Toledo ratified the Commission and added the term Reconciliation to its name, along with several more members². The CVR (Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) presented its final report on 28 August 2003. This report dedicates an entire chapter (3) to the role of the churches, and states:

Through its analysis of many documents, interviews, and other studies, the CVR affirms that during the process of violence, the Catholic and Evangelical Churches contributed to

¹ This article draws on the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume III (CVR 2003), Tomo III, Chapter 3.1, on “La Iglesia Católica”; on (Tovar 2006); on “(Tovar 2011); and on (Coll and Tovar 2005), on (DESCO 1989); on (Informativo CEP n.d.), on (Signos n.d.). On (CENDOC IBC n.d.) for the documents and communiques cited here.

² The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación) worked with many experts and specialists in the study of armed conflicts. Members of the Commission included figures like Carlos Iván Degregori (2018), Enrique Bernaldes (1989), Rolando Ames, Carlos Tapia, along with others who had studied the causes of the outbreak of massive violence, its duration and how it ended. Others had examined the particular characteristics of Shining Path which made it so violent, and coordinated gathering systematic data on human rights violations. Following the publication of the CVR’s Final Report there have also been numerous studies, seminars and publications on these issues. An extensive list is in the Bibliography.

defending the people from crimes and violations of their human rights . . . The CVR pays tribute here to those Christians who defended life during the period of political violence and condemns the assassination of numerous priests and sisters who were fulfilling their mission among the poorest and most marginalized populations of the city and the countryside". (CVR 2003, *Informe Final*, Conclusions, n 141)

The section devoted specifically to the role of the Catholic Church (3.1) begins with the following paragraphs:

"The Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (CVR) has found that during the period of violence in Peru, the Catholic Church played an important role in accompanying and protecting people battered by the violence inflicted on them [both] by subversive organizations and by the security forces of the State. In numerous regions of the country, the Catholic Church was a voice in denouncing crimes and violations of human rights, in proclaiming and defending the right to life and the dignity of all people, The majority of bishops priests and sisters, along with a great many lay men and women, constituted a moral force and a source of hope. At the same time, the Commission has also confirmed that in certain regions ecclesiastical authorities kept deplorable silence in the face of violations of human rights perpetrated by the forces of order.

In the majority of dioceses, the emphasis on solidarity strengthened bonds of cooperation within communities affected by terrorism, in the Andes, in the jungle, and in poor neighborhoods of the cities. There was a clear orientation to the defense of life. Inspired by this, many bishops, priests, sisters, catechists and committed lay people stood with the people against threats from terrorists and from the forces of order. This kind of commitment has its roots in the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and in its expression in different parts of the world". (CVR 2003, ch. 3.1, pp. 263–64)

In effect, this deep commitment by the religious community to the defense of life and of human rights, above all among the poorest of the poor, during the worst years of the armed conflict in Peru, is the fruit of an intense process of renovation within the Church of Peru that began in the middle of the twentieth century. This is no sudden improvisation, but rather forms part of a broad process of intense change in the Catholic church at all levels: global, Latin American, and specifically in Peru; a transformation that has gained form and substance in only a few moments of the church's long history³. I mention it here to underscore the general context before passing to a detailed analysis of the role of the Peruvian church in this time of violence.

In the first section of this article I present a chronology of the major events that affected the Peruvian Catholic Church during the various phases of armed internal conflict. The second section, "The Core Theme: Option for the Poor and the Defense of Life", discusses how the Church responded to this situation through its pastoral work in the defense of life, through organizing actions along with moments and spaces for Christian reflection on the meaning of events and how to respond.

2. The Church in the Times of Armed Internal Conflict

The political violence in Peru emerged and took form during democratic governments, and not under military dictatorships as was the case in the Southern Cone of Latin America [Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay]. The CVR's Final Report shows that in certain regions and in particular moments, the security forces of the state were also guilty of systematic and generalized violations of human rights, and guilty of a third of the total of 70,000 deaths that the CVR estimates for the period. Nonetheless,

³ Cf. (Romero and Tovar 1987). Also (Romero 1987; Gutiérrez 1968, 2018; Mons Dammert 1989).

the major perpetrator of violence, responsible for more than half the deaths, was clearly the Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path (PCP-SL) a group of Maoist origins whose cruelty and fundamentalist fanaticism reach levels seen only in cases like Cambodia's Pol Pot. This is a radical difference with the experience of other countries in the region where security forces of the state were responsible for most abuses. Another subversive organization, the Revolutionary Tupac Amaru movement (MRTA) was also active, but accounted for only 1.5% of the total number of victims. The distinctive elements of the violence in Peru (democratic government and the specific character of Shining Path) provide a basic context for understanding events and the response of the churches, who often found themselves, like the much of the population, caught between two fires⁴.

Shining Path attacked the Church for several reasons (cf. [CVR 2003](#), Vol III, 380 ff). They saw religion as the opium of the people, destined in the long run to disappear and they saw the institutional church and its associations and social efforts as competition, part of the old order of things which they hoped to abolish through armed struggle. Shining Path wanted total domination. Their long term goal of territorial control, part of expanding the war from the countryside to the cities, lead them to attack other institutions in areas they saw as of strategic importance. This process was advanced steadily and aggressively and in 1989 Shining Path declared that it had reached a "strategic equilibrium" with the Peruvian State. The violence rose to new heights of intensity and barbarity.

At the same time, the Peruvian State and its security forces also had issues with respect to the Catholic Church. Accusations of subversion, verbal attacks and repressive actions were common. The basic cause of these actions was a confusion by public authorities of demands for social justice with subversion, and resentment of accusations of violations of human right committed by agents of the state. ([CVR 2003](#), Vol III, p. 386) The solidarity of the church [bishops, priests, sisters, catechists and organizations) with the poor and with their demands were viewed with suspicion by the authorities, who commonly saw the defense of human rights as a defense of terrorism.

The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ([CVR 2003](#), Vol 1, pp. 74–92) states that the twenty years of armed internal conflict can be divided into five distinct periods. I discuss these as they relate to the Church⁵.

First Phase: The onset of armed violence (May–December 1980), runs from the first public act of violence committed by Shining Path in Chuschi, Cangallo (Ayacucho) in the Andean South on 17 May 1980⁶ to the presidential decree of 29 December 1982 which provided for an active role of the Armed Forces in the anti subversive struggle in the Department of Ayacucho. This period witnessed various armed actions like Shining Path's attack on the Institute of Rural Education Juli (Puno) but these were for the most part isolated incidents with little follow up, perhaps because of the strong negative reaction they aroused in the population. During this period, the Church also experienced tension with the State, arising from the denunciations by CEAS (*Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social*, Bishops' Commission for Social Action) of torture inflicted on detainees and of a police raid on the offices of the Prelature of Ayaviri, in Puno, where several employees, including peasants, and young people from the parish, were arrested. In their first Assembly since the initiation of the violence, the Bishops made a strong statement denouncing the growing violence in the country.

⁴ Nonetheless, during the long years of the conflict, the violence spread throughout the country, and many pre-existing disputes within peasant communities turned violent. For an excellent study of this phenomenon see ([Theidon 2004](#)).

⁵ Data from ([CVR 2003](#)), ([DESCO 1989](#)), ([Informativo CEP n.d.](#)), ([Signos n.d.](#)) and ([CENDOC IBC n.d.](#)).

⁶ Burning ballot boxes and other materials for the elections of 18 May, which marked the country's return to democracy after twelve years of military rule. This was the first public statement of Shining Path's armed rejection of "bourgeois democracy". The name of the Department, Ayacucho, comes from a Quechua word that means Place (literally Corner) of the Dead, a name that sadly came to characterize this period. From its origin in Ayacucho, it spread rapidly to neighboring Andean departments including Huancavelica, Apurímac, Puno, Junín, Cusco, Ucayali, San Martín. Peru is divided from North to South by the Sierra of the high Andes, with only a narrow coastal strip to the west and to the east the lightly populated Amazon region which occupies 60% of the national territory. Ayacucho is located in the Andean South.

“The political and social context of Peru is marked by grave phenomena of violence and terrorism. Though only a few groups have assumed responsibility for these acts of terror and intimidation, the resulting harm caused and the larger repercussions of these actions have created an enormous social cost. We must not forget that violence engenders more violence, thus creating a vicious cycle which can lead the country to unpredictable situations.” (Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 1981)

The Assembly’s strong concerns and its repudiation of violence were echoed in documents and declarations across the country, which also affirmed the church’s commitment to stand with the poor.

Second Phase: Militarization of the Conflict (January 1983–June 1986). This period begins with the creation of the Ayacucho Political Military Command, under the direction of General Roberto Clemente Noel Moral, and runs through to the prison massacres in 18–19 June 1986⁷. During this time, violence reaches unheard of dimensions of cruelty in the South Andean Departments of Ayacucho, Huancavelica and Apurímac. The civilian population of the region was trapped between Shining Path and the Armed Forces whose encounters took an increasingly violent and barbaric toll of victims. But for the most part, the rest of the country remained relatively untouched by the violence and indifferent to its effects, despite some, still limited violence in Central Andean regions like Lima or Junín.

The Peruvian Church was active at the national level and in many regions working through the Bishops Commission on Social Action (CEAS, *Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social*), the Pastoral Net of Human Dignity, the Defense of Human Rights Commissions in (CODEH, *Comisión de Derechos Humanos*) in Puno and Huacho (a city to the north of the capital, Lima), and related groups. The Bishops Conference, along with many individual bishops, priests, sisters and lay movements made repeated declarations rejecting terrorism, violations of human rights, torture and disappearances. The following statement is representative:

Shining Path must be told that a more just society cannot be built on a foundation made from the blood of innocent people whose democratic agreement has never been sought or given. At the same time, the government has to change its strategies of political and military control and find ways to combat injustice. The Armed Forces and Police must be told that the life of every citizen is sacred and that they cannot continue with practices that are contrary to a basic respect for life . . . We are obliged to point out firmly that there is no excuse, no political ideology or military or state belief that can justify the murder of a human being. We denounce the tortures, the deaths and disappearances, and any other act of violence. All are in radical contradiction with our basic humanity and our faith in the God of Life. We hereby commit ourselves, in all our activities, and wherever we may be, to see that not another life is lost. (El Quinto: no Matar 1985)

There were, of course, other positions in the Church, in particular, as the CVR Report notes, in some of the regions hardest hit by violence (like Ayacucho, Huancavelica, and Apurímac) where ecclesiastical leaders were more conservative or affiliated with Opus Dei. In these regions church leaders refrained from denunciations and discouraged human rights work.

Local and national authorities leveled many accusations against the church for its supposed toleration of subversion. A case in point was the police raid on the offices of CAAP (*Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica* (Amazonian Center for Anthropology and Practical Applications) a group related to the Church of the Jungle region. One of the worst incidents affecting the Church in

⁷ On these dates prisoners accused of terrorism mounted a rebellion in various prison centers in the Lima. In response, the government of then President Alan García ordered the Armed Forces to control the situation. More than 200 prisoners were killed. Cf. (Ames 1986).

these years was the assassination of F. Vicente Hondarza, from the diocese of Huacho (north of Lima) in 1983, presumably by the police.

Third Phase. The Spread of the Violence Nation Wide (June 1986–March 1989). This period opens with the prison massacre of mid-1986 and runs through to a 27 March 1989 attack by Shining path (in alliance with drug traffickers) on the police post of Uchiza (Department of San Martín) in the north of the jungle region of the country. Throughout this period, the violence intensifies and expands geographically spreading across the Central and Southern Andes (Departments of Junín and Puno). A new paramilitary group emerges the Rodrigo Franco Front (named after a leader of APRA, then the governing party who had been assassinated).

In a widely publicized incident that tells the tenor of the times, security forces in Ayacucho arrested a human rights delegation which included members of CEAS, the Bishops Commission for Social Action. They were liberated after considerable pressure from the civil society and from the Church.

During this period, the church created and sponsored a series of local and regional human rights organizations including the Archdiocesan Commission of Social Action of Huancayo (capital city of the Department of Junín) the Vicariates of Solidarity in the Andean South, The Vicarial committee of Human Rights of Pucallpa (Capital of the Department of Ucayali in the Central Jungle region) the Archdiocesan Office of Social Action, Oficina Arquidiocesana de Acción Social) established in Ayacucho by the Jesuit priest Carlos Schmidt). Numerous lay movements participated in the widely diffused 1986 public statement Death is not the Way (*La muerte no es el camino*) which followed the prison massacres. In 1986 the Church in Puno promoted a broad based front, Puno Wants Peace (*Puno Quiere la Paz*) with the goal of keeping Puno from turning into another Ayacucho. The national conference of religious congregations organized several missions to Ayacucho. There were bi annual Days of Fasting and Prayer for Peace, numerous marches for peace and for life in different regions and in the capital city of Lima in the face of threats from both Shining path and the security forces of the state. There were multiple documents and declarations by bishops, priests, sisters and lay movements in defense of life and in condemnation of the seemingly endless acceleration of violence both by subversives and by official security forces:

Violence in Peru has deep roots in the massive poverty of the country and in the marginalization of our countryside and poor city neighborhoods. The massacres of prisoners in the jails of Lima and Callao has horrified us and caused great indignation. This terrible event is only the most recent manifestation of the deep moral crisis our country finds itself in. The horror we see is not the result of what some might label excesses but rather from the very logic that maintains that blood must be shed in order to change a society or to defend its institutions. It is important to affirm that terrorism is not the way. What happened in the prisons of Lima and Callao has brought the whole spectacle of death and violence closer to all of us. Defending the life of every person is a fundamental ethical demand, no matter what they may be guilty of. ([Pronunciamento de sacerdotes y religiosas sobre la masacre de los penales 1986](#))

During this period, there were important theological reflection on the God of Life ([Gutiérrez 1989](#)), which inspired and accompanied all these groups as they worked to defend life, a theme which became central to much pastoral action. At the same time, in the ecclesiastical church there was a change in leadership, as Cardinal Landázuri (a major leader in the heritage of Medellín and the option for the poor) retired in 1988. His replacement, Mgr Ricardo Durand, was a noted conservative.

Fourth Phase. The Crisis Become Extreme: This period (March 1989–September 1992) witnessed a major offensive by Shining Path which was met with a counter offensive by the forces of the state. The period began with an assault by Shining Path on the security forces' post at Uchiza and ends 12 September 1982 with the capture and arrest of Shining Path's leader, Abimael Guzmán Reinoso in a safe house in Lima. Other leaders of the group were also arrested and important computer files were seized leading to an extensive dismantling of the group. The raid was carried out not by the military, but by the national police, specifically by the GEIN (*Grupo Especial de Inteligencia*, Special Intelligence Group).

This period is without a doubt the bloodiest and most difficult of all (CVR 2003, Vol I, pp. 86–89). In its effort to achieve strategic equilibrium with the Peruvian state, Shining Path drove violence to new heights, murdering students in the Central University of Huancayo, and assassinating local elected authorities like Maria Elena Moyano in Villa El Salvador (a district of Lima South) Alfredo Aguirre and Fortunato Collazos in Cantogrande (Lima East), committing violent and cruel attacks in the cities, including major bomb attacks on the Channel 2 TV station, and at Tarata, in Miraflores (a central area in Lima) with significant loss of life. Violence also intensified in Ucayali, where Shining Path controlled and defended the production of coca leaves, in the Padre Abad area. At the same time, the Armed Forces changed their own strategy, replacing massive repression with a policy of selective assassination. This was applied, for example, in the central regions of the country, where large scale massacres declined to be replaced by kidnapping and disappearances (for example of students in Huancayo the capital of the Department of Junin). The Armed Forces also supported and promoted the militarization of local selfdefense committees, new para military groups were created, like Colina which kidnapped and killed a professor and nine students at the technical University of La Cantuta in 1992, and also murdered residents in Barrios Altos (Lima) in November 1991. When he closed Congress and assumed exceptional powers with the support of the armed forces in a “selfcoup” in April 1992, President Fujimori increased the prerogatives of the military effectively ensuring impunity for continued violations of human rights.

During this period, the Church experienced the assassination by Shining Path of several priests and members of religious congregations: Fathers Michel Tomaszek, Zbigniew Strzalskowski and Alessandro Dordi in Ancash (a Department on the coast and Central Andes), Father Teodoro Santos, Sisters Agustina Rivas and Irene Mac Cormack and layman Jorge Cerrón in Junín. Shining Path also destroyed the Institute of Rural Education in Ayaviri (Puno) and also tried to kill Father Miguel Company in Chimbote (Ancash) and dynamited a building of the Diocese of Chulucanas (Piura). Radio stations at Quillbamba at (near Cuzco) and in Puno (Blue Wave) were also dynamited by unknown hands. The parish of Nazca was raided by the Armed forces and the priest arrested for supporting protests by peasants in the region.

In response to the violence, the Bishops Conference issued a series of major declarations and documents: *We Want Peace* (*Queremos la Paz*, Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 1996, February) and *Peace on Earth* (*Paz en la Tierra*, Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 1992, December), the same month as the killing in Barrios Altos.

Although it is true that all of us have been affected by the violence, it is important to point out that the victims are above all poor peasants and residents of the poorest city neighborhoods (*barrios*) . . . We must underscore the hatred and contempt for life that terrorist groups have demonstrated to the poorest and weakest among us, in this way they reveal not only that they do not represent them, but also that they fear them [referring to the assassinations of popular leaders] . . . We also condemn the violence perpetrated by the security forces. It is intolerable that those who have sworn to uphold the Constitution and the laws should be violating basic rights. (*Paz en la tierra*, Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 1992)

Eight hundred priests and sisters signed a document entitled “Firm in Hope” in December 1990. There were also declarations from the church in many regions of the country. The Episcopal Commission on Social Action CEAS (*Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social*) did important work on the theme of active non violence, and APEP (Asociación Peruana de Estudios por la Paz, Peruvian Association of Peace Studies) also carried out extensive studies and training on the culture of peace⁸. The armed conflict created many internal refugees and church groups organized campaigns of solidarity with the displaced, and intensified popular mobilizations for peace. The organization Peru Vida y

⁸ APEP was founded by Father Felipe Mac Gregor SJ.

Paz (Peru: Life and Peace) was established. An important moment came in November 1989, when in the face of an armed shut down (*paro armado*) declared by Shining Path throughout the nation, two Presidential candidates (Mario Vargas Llosa and Henry Pease) convoked a massive march to reject the shut down. Many christian groups and church related organizations participated, defying threats from Shining Path. As noted earlier, in this same period Cardinal Landázuri retired and was replaced as Archbishop of Lima by a more conservative figure, Msgr. Augusto Vargas Alzamora. At the same time, Msgr Jose Luis Cipriani, who had been Auxiliary Bishop, took over as administrator of the Diocese of Ayacucho. One notable result of these changes in leadership was a reduction in funding for OASA (Oficina Arquidiocesana de Acción Social, Archdiocesan Office of Social Action) in Ayacucho and a cut back of its outreach programs; another was a denial of the fact of human rights violations by the army.

Fifth Phase: Decline in Subversive Actions, authoritarianism and corruption in government (September 1992–November 2000). This period opens with the capture of Abimael Guzmán and other Shining Path leaders and ends with President Alberto Fujimori's exit from the country. This is a period of intense neo liberal economic reform ("shock therapy" for the economy to address hyperinflation) growing authoritarianism and corruption in the Fujimori government, which resulted in effective impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations in the security forces of the state. This policy was affirmed in the Amnesty Law of 1995. The capture of Abimael Guzmán and other leaders led to a general defeat of Shining Path and the collapse of its organization many more leaders were arrested. Isolated acts of violence and terrorism continued, most notably in the occupation of the Japanese Embassy in Lima by a command of the MRTA, with dozens of hostages. A long siege ensued, ending with an assault by security forces and the death of all guerrillas and one of the hostages. Violations of human rights continue in the country, although on a reduced scale. Condemning a public effort to deny the very existence of continued abuse more than 400 Catholics published a communique stating that

Violations of human rights do continue in Peru, with impact above all among the poor. These are carried out not only by Shining Path and the MRTA, but also by the armed forces and police, who appear to enjoy complete immunity. ([Comunicado de más de cuatrocientos católicos 1993](#))

One of the most important mobilizations of this period was the campaign against the death penalty. There was an effort to include this penalty in the new 1993 Constitution, and in response, the Coordination of the Pastoral Office of Human Dignity (of CEAS) together with the National Coordination of Human Rights, the Movement Peru: Life and Peace and the Bartolomé de las Casas Institute organized a campaign to oppose this penalty. Msgr Jose Dammert lead a delegation that presented the President of the Congress with a document signed by 45,280 people asking that the Constitution be modified so that it excluded the death penalty in Peru. CVR 2003 Tomo III, p. 394). In June 1993 the Episcopal Conference issued a communiqué opposing the death penalty ([CVR 2003, Tomo III](#)) Earlier that year in March they had also issued a message entitled "For a just and solidary society" (por una sociedad más justa y solidaria) This message also opposed the Law of Amnesty and demanded that those guilty of abuses be sanctioned by law.

In 1995, Msgr Jose Luis Cipriani is named Archbishop of Ayacucho, and intervenes in the occupation and siege of the Japanese Embassy. Another important leadership change for the church comes in 1999 as Msgr Vargas Alzamora retires as Archbishop of Lima, and is replaced by Msgr. Cipriani. But the Archdiocese itself had diminished in size, having been divided in three: the north cone (Carabayallo), the South (Lurin) and the east (Chosica) This new structure made it possible for the church to maintain close relation with the poor in the region of the capital city, which, swollen by migrants fleeing the war was by now a genuine megalopolis.

3. Core Theme: Option for the Poor and the Defense of Life

The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission makes it clear that the positions and actions taken by the Church in the face of Peru's violence find their origins and

explanation in the trajectory of changes within the church, specifically in the extent to which leaders, organizations and members accepted and incorporated the conciliar renovation articulated at the Bishops' Conferences at Medellín Colombia (1968) and Puebla Mexico (1979) Thus, In general, where the church had renovated itself along the lines of the Second Vatican Council, and the Bishops' Conferences of Medellín and Puebla, there was much more resistance to the discourse of Shining Path, the churches had already developed and active social pastoral that linked them closely with the population, which responded to their needs and concerns, with the promotion of change and demands for justice while steadily rejecting violence. On the other hand, where the Church had not taken up the renovations advanced by the Council, subversive armed movements found a much more fertile ground in which to take root. (CVR 2003, Vol. III, pp. 415–16)

This renovation within the Church is best expressed in terms of a “preferential option for the poor”, a position outlined at Medellín and further affirmed at Puebla where the term itself was coined⁹. The central point here is that the poverty that afflicts the majority of Latin Americans is something evil, inhuman, contrary to the Gospels and must be challenged and eliminated. This poverty is not something natural, a fate to be endured: it is a social and historical creation with clear and identifiable causes in unjust social and economic structures. As unjust historical creations, they can and must be changed. A preferential option for the poor considers the poor as both subjects and protagonists of their own process of development and liberation, and not simply as objects of charity or clients of some powerful patron. The goal is to respect and promote their own participation in actions and decisions, to support, strengthen and promote popular organizations, and to respect their autonomy. The point is for the poor to advance their own interests and goals to commit to and with the poor in many forms, from sharing their lives, to solidarity in social struggles, to providing material and moral support to popular organizations, support for initiatives of community development, production, health, formation of Christian communities, and broad participation as lay persons in the church community. This position is accompanied by a theological reflection and the development of a kind of spirituality that affirms the presence of God among the poor and the presence of Christ within them. It takes off from a reading of the Bible along with a theology of liberation that sustains the community and the promotion of its dignity as people with human rights rights as children of God. This position anchors the mission of the church in an active defense of human rights, and a continuing struggle against poverty and injustice. In a gloss on the German philosopher Theodore Adorno, who had asked how it was possible to do philosophy after Auschwitz, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez asked

How to do theology during Ayacucho? How to speak about the God of Life in the face of such massive and cruel murders in the “corner of death” [Quechua term for Ayacucho]? How can we announce the love of God in the midst of such profound contempt for human life? How can we proclaim the resurrection of the Lord in a land where death seems to rule all, the death of children, women, of the poor and the indigenous of the “worthless and insignificant” of our society? (Gutiérrez 1986, pp. 222–23)

During the years of armed internal conflict in Peru, the ecclesiastical jurisdictions, communities, and groups that in earlier years had developed a pastoral work oriented by the preferential option for the poor responded to the challenge of violence in ways that were coherent with that general position. The question before us is to be clear about how and why and in what ways that position was taken up. A close look at this issue reveals some key traits which we lay out below, and which are also recognized in the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A first trait to note is that church people *remained* in their regions during the worst moments of the violence, accompanying the people and in many cases attending to basic needs when agents and

⁹ (Cf. Medellín 1968; Gutiérrez 1988, 1978, 1996; Echegaray 1980a, 1980b; Tovar 2007; Menard 1995).

offices of the Peruvian state had left. This was notably the case in Pucallpa, and in other places that experienced extreme violence, such as Huancayo. Sometimes simply maintaining a presence was the only thing that could be done. But it was important. Priests and sisters and church groups stayed as part of being true to the people and to their ties with them. In many cases, their presence served to shield the people from some of the worst abuses. Unfortunately, the forces of “order” often did not understand this position which they attributed to complicity with terrorism. This was the cause of much tension.

Another important trait is that church people and groups created and inspired efforts in the *defense of life*, for example in CODEHs (Comités de Derechos Humanos, Human Rights Committees) in Huacho, Sicuani and Puno¹⁰), which played an important role in documenting and denouncing abuses, in following cases and helping victims and survivors regardless of whether or not they belonged to the church. They also worked to articulate rights efforts on a national level through the National Coordinator of Human Rights (of which they were members), to strengthen civil society on the regional level by providing relatively safe spaces where groups could join their efforts at a time when public organization was difficult and dangerous. The Coordinator of the Pastoral Office of Human Dignity played an important role, in Lima and on the national level inspiring and promoting initiatives like the national days of fasting and prayer for peace, and the national meetings of pastoral agents sponsored by CEAS. In the critical case of the Andean South region, these efforts clearly helped avoid an even worse escalation of the dirty war.

We have believed that it is indispensable that in Puno, citizens of all kinds, the Church the municipalities the university and professional associations, organizations representing peasants and workers, the CODEHs, public authorities and political parties all commit ourselves **A**, to affirm that human life is a fundamental right, and that there is no reason—not political, not military, not defense of the state, or any other—that can justify the assassination of a human being; **B** to the preservation and defense of democracy, of a state of law, the development of the lives of all (especially of the poorest among us) and the preservation of human rights; **C**, to the promotion of a peaceful and respectful dialogue between all political parties; **D**, to turn the anti subversive strategy of the State to methods that embody a strict respect for human rights, above all the right to life and respect for the right to organize; **E**, to call all those who have taken up arms, urging them to cease violence, to lay down their arms and respect human rights, and the democratically expressed will of the popular organizations, **F**, to demand justice and effective sanctions for any persons, members of the security forces or otherwise, who is responsible for the violation of human rights; and **G** to prevent the militarization and the declaration of states of siege in our departments, and thus closing the door on solutions to our problems that rely only on violence. (*Encuentro “Puno Quiere la Paz”* 1986 August)

Another important aspect of the Church’s response to the violence is visible in the extent to which ecclesial communities *supported popular organizations* who were in danger of being cornered or destroyed by subversive groups or by the forces of order. Many social leaders were assassinated by Shining Path which did not tolerate group not under its own control. They were also often detained, killed or simply ‘disappeared’, by the forces of order, who as we have seen often confused demands for social justice with terrorism. The moral support and resources that the Church provided over many years extending into the period of internal war made it possible for many groups to withstand pressure from Shining Path and gave them some legitimacy in the eyes of the public authorities. The Church’s network of radio stations also played an important role, in denouncing abuses and publicizing the

¹⁰ In Puno the CODEH was made up of various actors in civil society with an active presence of the church. In other cases, the church created the CODEHs, as in Huacho, and also Vicariates that later were turned into CODEHs, as in Pucallpa. All these groups were active members of the National Human Rights Coordinator.

fate of those arrested. This helped prevent disappearances (a common tactic at the time) while also transmitting information and warnings that enabled those in danger to hide or move out of the region to safer location. These radio networks also helped in transmitting information about human rights to the communities general while providing a space in which they could air their views. This general commitment to support popular organizations sometimes brought tension with other social groups and as noted with public authorities who saw any kind of popular demand as subversive when in fact the ability to express demands and work for social goals strengthened resistance the appeals and pressures of violent groups. The following statement is illustrative:

We hereby express our support for and solidarity with the clearly expressed will of our brothers and sisters in the province of Melgar. Spurred to action by the age old denial of their needs and by the current situation of hunger and misery, they have recovered (invaded and occupied) lands from Kunurra Rural Enterprises, as part of a demand for democratic restructuring of all rural enterprises of this kind. We hereby assume a pastoral commitment to 1. Work tirelessly to rescue and defend a space of hope, identity, and dignity for the community constituted by their lands, which is indispensable to their integral liberation; 2. Support peasant organizations fighting for the recovery and possession of their communal lands; 3. Reject those agrarian policies which under the pretext of “rational use” of the land, have excluded and marginalized the poor majorities of the countryside, denying their justified claims for communal lands. ([Pronunciamiento de la Iglesia del Sur Andino 1986](#))

It is important to underscore the fact that these christian groups organized and carried out *public actions* as marches, workshops, cultural events and religious celebrations with public masses, in this way standing against the prevailing fear and violence, rejecting the widespread violation of human rights, expressing solidarity with victims (often from other regions) and calling for peace and presenting solutions. All this strengthened local civil society in multiple ways: with hope, with resources and with connections to other groups. The great march of solidarity with leaders killed by Shining Path in San Juan Lurigancho (Lima) marked an important turning point in the rejection of violence in that area. Here, as in Huacho, there were numerous public acts expressing solidarity with those in other regions suffering from the heightened violence. This was at a moment when urban populations in the coastal region were still relatively untouched by the violence thus indifferent to what was going on in the rest of the country. The public forum Puno Wants Peace (*Puno Quiere La Paz*) brought many sectors and institutions together in a common effort to keep this region from becoming a second Ayacucho.

In all these regions, numerous *declarations*, statements and pastoral letters were published and widely diffused identifying concrete instances of violence and abuse, analyzing events and proposing solutions. In these difficult and dangerous times,, this was often the only public voice available and able to inform and orient the people Taken together, these documents expressed a way of “being church” that actively joined faith with social and political responsibility. They demonstrate a permanent attention to reality, they do not turn their backs on events but rather work to understand what is happening and to take a specifically christian position. They reject violence and abuses from all sides: be they from Shining Path or the security forces of the state. They proclaim solidarity with victims and propose concrete measures to reduce violence and sustain victims and survivors. The call for peace was forceful and consistent.

There are more than 20,000 dead, about 500 a month in the last period. Thousands of families have been forced to flee in search of safely. More than 3500 have disappeared, which is all the more scandalous given official attempts to hide this fact. To the structural violence of the existing social order and the victims it claims through poverty and disease, we now must add the criminal toll of violence from terrorism and repression. There is no sign of change in the anti subversive strategies whose limits have been pointed out by many. We must understand, once and for all, that respect for human rights is not an annoying obstacle or a

luxury to be set aside in the conflict. It is a vital necessity, essential to any true victory over violence, a victory that will affirm democracy, not destroy it. ([Firmes en la Esperanza 1990](#))

The Church (hierarchy, clergy, media, groups of all kinds) advanced regular everyday program of reflection, *education* and leadership on violence and the value of human life, of violence, rights, with the goal of providing the people with criteria and norms of conduct that would help orient their response to the continuing crisis. Through workshops and guided discussions, the effort was to analyze the realities of violence and politics in the community and the country, and to debate how construct a stand in opposition to the violence. In many ways this helped prevent many in poor neighborhoods and in the schools and universities, from being seduced by the appeal of subversive forces who worked hard to infiltrate and ultimately to control these spaces.

Taken together, these educational activities, declaration and public actions provided the basis for a *sustained ideological struggle against violence*, a struggle for the conscience of the people, a debate of ideas that rejected resorting to death as a legitimate tool for social change, or for the restoration of order. To achieve real peace it was essential to keep people from accepting that path as necessary or inevitable. This goal acquires even greater significance when we realize that the political parties—whose prime responsibility this is—were incapable to achieving this task. Some were too distant from the people to even see the need, others had ambiguous ties with the perpetrators of violence, be they from left or right. Extensive theological reflection on the value of life was essential to this process¹¹.

Last but by no means least important, *christian communities* throughout the country provided social and cultural spaces where people could meet in a climate of mutual trust, something all too lacking elsewhere. These safe and welcoming spaces provided people with an opportunity to speak freely, to heal, to recover strength and to find mutual support in the midst of fear and violence. These were often the only groups able to continue meeting. The communities provided people with resources and moral support, opportunities to repair their lives, to acquire allies, to become informed about events, and a to make contact with regional and sometimes national institutions even in the face of severe limitations.

Underlying all these characteristics of the christian response to violence in Peru is the firm conviction that *faith cannot be divorced from life*. This is why the defense of life and of human rights is not foreign to the mission of the church: it is an essential part of it. The mission of the church is not purely “religious” in the sense of being limited to ritual, sacraments, or catechism. This is the position of sectors of the church who have a very narrow understanding of what Christian religion means. For this reason they stood apart from the problems caused by the armed internal conflict, which they saw as not an appropriate part of their task¹². But to the contrary, spreading the Gospel and promoting human welfare are closely tied together, and the Church cannot separate itself or stand silent from the forms of violence that attack the lives of real people.

In its Final Report the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) affirmed that:

Through much testimony, public hearing and analyses, the CVR has confirmed the role of the Catholic and Evangelical Churches during the violence, as actors who helped to protect the population from crimes and violations of human rights. From the outset, the institutions of the Catholic Church condemned violence committed by armed insurgents, and in equal measure, violations of human rights by the forces of the state. These positions were made concrete through activities in defense of human rights and public denunciations of the violence. These began early through organizations like CEAS (Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social, Episcopal Commission for Social Action) and many others. The CVR has concluded

¹¹ Cf. ([Gutiérrez 1989](#)).

¹² Some conservative groups maintain that the church should not involve itself in “politics” and on this basis they opposed the defense of human rights. But of course they were involved in any case, by tolerating the abuse of human rights and endorsing or at least not questioning the government and authorities who committed them.

that many lives were saved and many abuses were prevented thanks to these actions, which were called for and recognized by the population. The same is true for the activities of so many priests, sisters and lay people who worked above to carry out their theological and pastoral orientations. In departments like Puno, Cajamarca, Ancash, Ucayli, or Amazonas, the role of priests, sisters, lay people and catechists helped to strengthen the social fabric and in this way create a barrier to the advance of Shining Path and the expansion of the so called “dirty war”. The CVR hereby pays tribute to those Christians who defended life during the time of political violence, and repudiates the assassination of priests and sisters who were fulfilling their mission above all among the poor and marginalized of the countryside and the city. (CVR 2003, Informe Final, Conclusions n. 141)

4. Conclusions

As noted at the outset, the Peruvian case differs from many others in Latin America. In Peru extreme violence emerged during democratic rule, whereas in the other leading cases like of other countries, such as Brazil, Chile or Argentina, this occurred under military dictatorships, or with civil-military governments like Uruguay. A further difference is that insurgent movements in Argentina and Uruguay were nationalist or *castrista* (following the Cuban model) or resistance to dictatorship as in Chile, whereas in Peru the Shining Path insurgency was clearly Maoist in character. In these other countries the principal perpetrator of violence and abuses of human rights was the State, but in Peru it was Shining Path. A further difference lies in the response of the Church. In Brazil, Chile, and Peru central elements in the Church denounced violations of human rights and worked to defend victims of abuse whereas in Argentina (as in some regions of Peru, like Ayacucho) the response was silence. Further research could fruitfully take up a comparative study of these varied responses.

Studies of the Peruvian case, for example by the CVR and by the present author strongly affirm the importance of the broad renovation in the Church begun at the Second Vatican Council and the option for the poor assumed at the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín in 1968 in shaping the response of the Peruvian Church to the violence. In effect regions where the Church had not experienced a renovation and remained untouched by the option for the poor, Church leaders remained silent in the face of human rights violations and even sided openly with the Army and security forces. But in contrast, where the Church had assumed the option for the poor, solidarity with the population and active defense of victims was the norm. The Council had underscored the close and necessary relation between faith and life, between pastoral action and social and political reality, a connection often ignored or rejected by more conservative sectors, who also rejected the option for the poor, in the same way that they now reject much of the teaching of Pope Francis. This fundamental theological and pastoral divergence within Catholicism, along with the similarities and differences between Catholics and evangelicals, offers an important area for future research.

It is the profound hope of our people that *never again* may there be in our country an explosion of political violence of the kind we suffered between 1980 and 2000) This must be the firm commitment of all. What we Peruvians do or fail to do will determine our future. We need to overcome the factors that made caused and enabled the rise and expansion of the conflict. We need to build a real political community in which all Peruvians can enjoy the same rights, without marginalization and without discrimination. This is the core of the true national reconciliation called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its final Report. At issue is not only to rebuild social relations broken by the years of violence, but *also*, and most importantly, to correct the injustices that existed in our society before the conflict and which contributed to its unleashing and development.

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