

Witnesses of an era 1

Daniela Sánchez Stürmer's conversation in November 2023 with students and academics from the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile, as part of the activities to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état in Chile. .

Can you help us understand how human rights advocacy by churches comes about? In what context is this link forged?

The origins of the Peace Committee

CA few days after the military coup, in October 1973, the Catholic Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, Archbishop of Santiago, together with the Christian Churches, the Orthodox Church and the Jewish Community, created the Pro-Peace Committee to take in people who needed help because of “serious irregular problems” that were occurring in the country.

The Committee was an ecumenical body, chaired by the Catholic bishop Fernando Ariztía and the Lutheran bishop Helmut Frenz, and its executive secretary was Fernando Salas (a Jesuit priest). For a few weeks it functioned in the offices of Cardinal Silva (today Alberto Hurtado University) and soon moved to 2338 Santa Monica Street due to the large number of people attending in relation to the life or death of a family member.

Those who come to ask for help begin to tell us about people detained in the National Stadium, in the Chile Stadium, in regiments, on navy ships. They tell us of torture, of people shot, of relatives who have disappeared from their homes and want to know about them, some want to leave the country, others have been fired from their jobs. The people, mostly women, come in shock, but knowing that there is someone else in the same situation; despite the pain, they regain the strength to continue searching for their relatives.

In the midst of all this, we are the workers of the Committee, who come from different places to “help in the emergency” people who need it more than anyone else. We are young people, believers and non-believers, with a great love for life, for peace and justice, and above all, with a commitment to action for the oppressed, who in this case are those most affected by the repression.



In those early days, the professionals who arrived “to welcome, to defend, to assist and to denounce” organised themselves to be more effective in an emergency task in the face of a great cataclysm, which, like the “bombing of La Moneda”, had destroyed our projects for life and society. When we began our work, we had no previous experience of working in repression, nor of the massacre it meant for the population. Our ways of working and theoretical frameworks were not useful for us to diagnose and act in response to needs, but the ethical principles of our work and profession enlightened us, and this is how the Pro Peace Committee’s march was organised.

How do you organise yourselves to provide assistance to this spontaneous demand?

There were different Units or Departments. The Welfare Department is where the social workers are concentrated, who interview and record the stories and testimonies received and refer the people already interviewed to the Criminal and/or Labour Departments, where they are attended to by lawyers and solicitors. In addition, given the conditions of fear and isolation of the families who are victims of repression, food assistance is provided and they are referred to some doctors who collaborate with the Pro Peace Committee. The organisation of family members was promoted and they were accompanied to visit the detainees in the Chacabuco prison camp and others; and accompaniment was provided to those in prison, through visits and handicrafts that were sent outside Chile in diplomatic pouches.

In the legal units there are defenses of war councils, appeals for legal protection are filed with very little success, because the justice system does not work. At the same time, there were mass dismissals in the public sector and the abolition of trade union, peasant and neighborhood organisations.

The Committee also had other units, one to assist those seeking to leave the country, one to support students expelled from universities, one to coordinate defense and information actions in the regions, and other units for IT support and administration and finance. A team is also formed to provide spiritual assistance to those who request it. The Pro Peace Committee receives early recognition and international solidarity, not only symbolically, but also with financial support and personalities who come to visit us. They tell us that what we do on a daily basis is to work for the defense and promotion of human rights and this is recognised by the United Nations.

At the end of 1974 the repression became systematic and massive, the torture and disappearances of detainees did not stop; on the contrary, it became institutionalised, and the DINA (National Intelligence Directorate) was already operating. Members of the Peace Committee were arrested, Bishop Frenz was expelled from the country, and finally, Cardinal Silva, under direct pressure from Pinochet, was forced to close the Pro-Peace Committee in December 1975

How do you evaluate that initial experience?

For me it was a privilege to be able to work in the Committee, but it was also a very hard experience and we often went through difficult personal and family moments.

At the same time, it presents us with an experience of humanity, and in my case, of a prophetic Church, bringing together believers and non-believers. An ecumenical experience of churches that responds to the imperatives of justice, truth, solidarity, that seeks paths of dialogue between adversaries and not enemies, as the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us. An experience that knows about human rights and their universal value.

The defense and promotion of human rights did not end with this closure. Cardinal Silva Henríquez accepted the Committee's mission and created the Vicaria de la Solidaridad under the aegis of the Catholic Church, which began to operate in the Plaza de Armas in Santiago in March 1976.

Can you tell us about the work of the Vicarage of Solidarity as an ethical-political principle and the link with human rights?

The central and best known aspect of the Vicariate's work is the criminal legal defense of individual and political human rights. Today I will refer specifically to its work in the field of second generation rights, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR), which are the subject of a Department called Zonas, because its professional teams operate on the ground, in the impoverished sectors of the city, in marginalised urban settlements and in rural sectors close to the city.

Why choose this form of human rights advocacy?.

Experience had shown us that when a person's right to life is violated, the socio-economic and cultural rights (ESCR) of that person, of his or her family environment and of the population in general are immediately violated. We said at the time that "they are two sides of the same coin".

The action of this Zonal Department was deployed in the territories, but housing was not its only focus. It was the understanding of poverty in its complexity and of human rights in their interdependence that guided the solidarity work. Between 1975 and 1976, poverty in the villages was aggravated by the application of the military government's economic shock policies. To this is added the fear produced by repression and the official discourse that tells them that individualism leads to success.

It is in this climate that solidarity work takes place. Its actors are a diversity of territorial organisations: soup kitchens, unemployment benefits, craft workshops, youth groups, summer camps, health groups, alcohol rehabilitation groups, groups of relatives of detainees and other initiatives. There were more than 300 soup kitchens at this stage alone, with some 35,000 people participating.

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All these organisations were accompanied by professional teams and resources administered by the Zonal Department, which were granted once the organisations demonstrated their willingness to act and presented a consistent solidarity initiative. Institutional accompaniment consisted of training for the specific tasks of each organisation, "popular education", understood as "becoming critically aware of reality", developing forms of democratic participation within each organisation, and coordination at the territorial level to anticipate the return to democracy.

At the same time, the aim is for leaders and participants of grassroots organisations to "develop their own capacities" in order to achieve greater autonomy from the political parties and the official institutions of the dictatorship and the future democracy.

The provision of polyclinics and health equipment in some communes was very important, because it covered the needs of people who did not have access to public hospitals, either because of unemployment or political dissidence.

In this context, skipping stages in which solidarity organisations experienced high and low moments of mobilisation, we arrive at 1988, the plebiscite and the NO campaign.

Can you comment on some lessons learned from the collective memory of Social Work?

In my own words: “The various forms of professional intervention were framed within broad shared orientations, such as: the affirmation of the value of life over death, the open and active denunciation of injustice and repression, and the conviction that the present situation could not go on as it was. Under these conditions, we longed for a more humane, more just, freer, truer and more fraternal and supportive society” (Sánchez, 1990).

We were also learning about the intervention, because the previous theoretical and political frameworks were no longer useful to support the action and we were forced to recreate the look, to relate very directly to the subjects and to the suffering and injustice; but, once we were able to recognise the theoretical insufficiency, we were able to search for new perspectives to act with the required rigorousness.

Thus, we understood how the violation of one right affected all human rights (Precht, 1986) and undertook the task of reconstituting the social fabric and grassroots organisation as a space for participatory and democratic coexistence, together with the development of self-esteem and personal identity in grassroots women’s groups.

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We also promoted self-management and the development of one’s own capacities, in the idea that the exercise of rights entails correlative responsibilities. In both ways, we envisioned a democracy that would be built on the basis of a historical conception of human rights, close to lived experience and with the participation of all citizens, without exclusion.

And your vision of human rights today?

However, the reality has been different. Human rights have now been trivialised; they are invoked from the most opposing positions and have become an ideology that justifies the most adverse points of view that coexist within society. It could be assumed that the social imaginary is dominated by a naturalist (liberal) conception that considers that human rights are inherent to human nature, and therefore prior to the state. On the other hand, there are ideas (real socialisms) that the state has inalienable rights to exercise, even against the freedom of individuals and peoples.



In this presentation, human rights are seen from situated and collectively lived experience. Human rights were understood as social rights and responsibilities, and historically developed as values of the good that human collectivities have formalised at different stages of their history. Human rights are a product of the social, generated by social groups in their struggles to determine, qualify, extend or deepen the right to life of human beings and creation (Garretón, 2000).

Bringing this experience to the present day means combating silence and remembering the profession. Because, if yesterday human rights were systematically violated by the State, today we are not so sure that the rights of all citizens are protected in societies where capitalist market development models are applied, which entail inequalities, lack of respect for citizens, exclusion and violation of socio-economic and cultural rights, together with an obsessive social and political silence on the responsibilities that correspond to each of the human rights proclaimed in the Universal Charter.

Human rights can and should be a socio-historical and political reference point for social coexistence and the well-being of the subjects and actors of the democratisation processes in Latin America. Their study and the updating of human rights thinking could provide valuable criteria and foundations for the design and evaluation of public policies, as well as for collective action and social peace. From this perspective, the re-reading of the historical experience of the defense and promotion of human rights in the recent past allows us to raise a critical reflection with the capacity to confront the inequalities generated by the dominant development model and to unveil the extreme populisms that coexist in the region.

What challenges do you identify?

I believe that as citizens we still have pending tasks: to combat “forgetting” and the dignification of memory; we need to know the truth of the facts and the recognition of the perpetrators; justice must be done and there must be physical and symbolic reparation for the victims and their families.

As professionals, it is especially incumbent upon us to take reparative action; along with the construction of a new memory that overcomes the traumas of the past and warns us of the obstacles that stand in the way of the process of democratisation of society and social coexistence; we need professional memory to project us into a more humane and sustainable future, respectful of human, environmental and technological rights.

We need to distance ourselves from the naturalistic and legalistic conception of human rights; to reaffirm the need for collective action and formal and non-formal education so that “never again” will violations by the state be repeated.

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