

Church officials charged for activities during Argentina's dirty war

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Roman Catholic leaders in Argentina, accused of complicity with the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, have announced an "examination of conscience" for next December. The program will allow the church to evaluate "its most serious sins" during the country's so-called "dirty war".

The Argentine Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic) closed a week long meeting on May 1 during which it debated recent allegations that the church cooperated with the dictatorship in the killing of detainees.

Meanwhile, a Roman Catholic bishop has forbidden his priests to offer communion to those who took part in the actions and have not repented.

The church has been accused by human rights groups of complicity and remaining silent about the violations of human rights committed by the dictatorship. Reports say that between 9,000 and 30,000 people disappeared during the fight against left-wing anarchy.

Numerous human rights groups have charged the church with complicity during the violence.

The debate was revived after declarations by representatives of the various branches of the armed forces that they had been guilty of illegal methods to eliminate leftist guerrillas.

One high ranking official told how detainees were pushed alive from airplanes after being drugged. He charged that church officials offered counsel to soldiers involved in the operations.

Some bishops, including the Archbishop of Guilmes, Jorge Novak, have asked pardon for the passive attitude of the church during those years.

Archbishop Miguel Hesayne of Viedma said that both the church and the armed forces carry grave responsibilities for their actions.

Monsignor Juan Carlos Maccarone, president of the Episcopal Faith and Culture Commission said that the church wants to undertake its examination "with time and serenity" because it is not easy to understand historic truth.

The announcement of the "examination of conscience" came as part of preparation for a celebration of 2,000 years of Christianity ordered by Pope John Paul II.

During their meeting, the bishops discussed whether to ask society for a pardon for its silence and lack of faith with the victims during the war.

Conservative elements within the bishops asked for the discussion to be delayed, suggesting it was not wise to make any

statements in the heat of revelations by various military figures concerning human rights abuses.

The bishop of the southern city of Viedma said "dirty war" leaders could not take the sacraments of bread and wine because, unlike current military leaders who have repented on behalf of their forces, the old guard has not sought forgiveness.

"I have prohibited communion in my diocese for the jailed and pardoned commanders because to violate a person is to violate God himself," said Monsignor Miguel Hesayne.

Meanwhile, church officials in Chile are also demanding that their government provide information on those who disappeared during the rule of General Augusto Pinochet from 1973-1990.

Recently, 163 bodies were discovered in Chile out of 1,086 people who were reported to have disappeared at the hands of the rightist government.

Veronica Reyna, chief lawyer for the Foundation of Social Support of the Christian Churches (FASIC) told the Chilean newspaper "Las Ultimas Noticias" that "never have we lost hope to find these people, either dead or alive, however with the passage of time it is very probable that they are dead."

The church group has obtained tissue samples of those bodies which were uncovered to submit them to various tests to determine their cause of death.

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