



Local History of a Charismatic Catholic Base Community during the Pinochet Dictatorship

The *Dios con Nosotros* Community, 1973-1983¹

Fabián Gaspar Bustamante Olgúin, Universidad Católica Cardenal Raúl Silva Henríquez, Universidad Diego Portales, and Universidad de Chile

Abstract

The principle objective of this paper is to illustrate the experience of a community from the Catholic Charismatic Renewal – *Renovación Carismática Católica* – (RCC) in the Manuel Rodríguez section of Santiago, Chile (now Pudahuel) from 1973 to 1983. It analyzes how residents of this charismatic community developed a new way of living together in the face of a military dictatorship and puts forward a reflection on the following two aspects. First, it underlines the heterogeneity of the Ecclesial Base Communities – *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* – (CEB) in opposition to the tendency of some studies to overlook their distinct internal dynamics. Second, it highlights the importance of these communities as popular spaces for rebuilding the social fabric in the face of state repression.

Keywords: Catholic Church, military dictatorship, Ecclesial Base Communities, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, slum dwellers

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Introduction: Considerations for the Study of Catholic Base Communities during the Pinochet Dictatorship in Santiago Chile

As is well known, the military coup in September 1973 put an end to the presidency of Salvador Allende (1970-1973) and Chile's democratic system, marking the beginning of deep changes in the social, political, and economic life of the nation. The new state, marked by its extreme authoritarian character and adherence to a national security doctrine, employed state terrorism to pursue members of the deposed Popular Unity government (UP) and to dismantle major social and political movements.² In this context, a sector of the Chilean Catholic Church denounced the state's human rights violations and protected victims of political repression.³

This position was partly a consequence of the Church's social doctrine, expressed in the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Anno-Quadragesimo*, reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Second Episcopal Conference in Medellín, Colombia (1968), all of which produced a departure from prevailing conservative assumptions that had led the Chilean Church to support the Conservative Party in the fifties. Beginning in the sixties the Catholic Church gave its full support to the Christian Democrats and their leader Eduardo Frei (1964-1970). The Church took a position of non-belligerence toward the Allende Administration and even semi-support for the government, although most bishops took a critical view of the government's social policies.

Following the installation of the military junta, the Catholic Church did not face the same restrictions placed on labor unions and other social organizations. As a result it was transformed into a key actor defending human rights and fighting for sociopolitical change, even though its attitude toward the government could fluctuate between neutral observation and the desire for a rapid transformation of the military regime.

Acting as a democratic umbrella, the Catholic Church alleviated the hardships of daily life under a military dictatorship – perpetual fear and surveillance – by opening spaces to rebuild Chile's social fabric, especially in the *poblaciones* (poor neighborhoods in Santiago).⁴ The Ecclesial Base Communities (CEB) represented one of those spaces. The experience of these religious communities during the dictatorship is complex both in terms of pastoral work and conceptualization (see Castillo). Catholics used the names Ecclesial Base Communities and Christian Base Communities (CCB) interchangeably. To most, they had the same function. Spanish historian David Fernández, author of *La Iglesia que resistió a Pinochet* (The Church that Resisted Pinochet) defines the CEB as the Catholic Church at a

² The Popular Unity government was a coalition of left wing parties that included Socialist, Radical, and Social Democrats such as the Movement of Popular Unity Action (MAPU). Its candidate, Salvador Allende, was elected in the September 1970 presidential elections.

³ It should be noted that there were a significant number of bishops and priests that staunchly supported the military regime. Additionally, criticism of the military government came from other faith communities including the Greek Orthodox and Methodist Churches and the Jewish community.

⁴ Marizza Espinoza (390) argues that ecclesiastical protection made possible the first organizations for relatives of those who disappeared, the first protests against the military regime, and the first coordinated support for the people affected by the neoliberal economic reforms.

grassroots level in the parish; while he defines the CCB as the intimate space where the community shares life and faith and forms part of the larger radius represented by the CEB (24-25). He further states that the term CCB is older than the CEB, and that it has to be recognized as such since the Catholic hierarchy in Latin America saw the word “Christian” as something independent of themselves.

In spite of such conceptual complexity, the day-to-day dynamics of the two communities meant that in practice they were known as Ecclesial Base Communities or Christian Base Communities. That is to say, both terms indicate or signify exactly the same thing. Indeed, the conceptualization of the pastoral experience of the communities did not interest the lower classes very much given that these spaces constituted, for them, a spontaneous communal experience.

In short, I understand the CEB and CCB as popular lay groups that gathered to express their religious faith, reflect on daily problems, and find communal solutions in light of the Christian scriptures. I also point out that, for the period under study, the formation and configuration of these communities depended on their members, and frequently on the mood of their priests, so much so that when a priest was replaced with another more “traditional” priest, many communities lost their dynamism and the laity ended up leaving the community. My impression is that the CEB, having its origin in the principles of liberation theology, was not necessary synonymous with this current, or better said, of “the popular church,” a term widely used during the dictatorship (Fernández: 236). In my view, this concept encompasses the charismatic communities, since the term ecclesial or Christian encompasses – forgive the repetition– all Christians, without distinction, not a particular sector or tendency. Moreover, the term “base” refers to the fact that these communities were composed of a relatively few members, mostly from humble backgrounds.

All of this raises a series of questions regarding charismatic communities in poor neighborhoods. Were they ecclesial base communities? Might such communities have had different internal dynamics than those proposed by liberation theology? Did conservative communities exist at a popular level, which have not been studied by social scientists? Studies are needed to address these questions and, naturally, the realities of individual communities were far more complex than is presumed. Often, they have been pigeonholed by a single definition or set of assumptions that overlook their dynamics at a local level. In sum, these questions point to the fact that ecclesial base communities, in spite of having emerged from the tenets of liberation theology, did not always have the characteristics proposed by liberation theology.

In that sense, and related to the above, it was in 1977 that priests, nuns, and laypersons from Santiago’s various zones gathered together for a retreat southwest of the city. At that reunion an interesting typology manifested itself, reflecting the complex, heterogeneous nature of the communities’ daily activities: 1) closed communities, defined as “inward,” or intra-ecclesial, and having little explicit contact with the general population; 2) open communities subdivided into a) assistance communities, carrying out diverse activities such as job boards, popular kitchens, and basic assistance health care, and b) participatory communities that shared responsibility with the beneficiaries to socially organize the population; 3) consciousness-raising communities that questioned the causes of current

events and viewed themselves in a permanent state of confrontation; and lastly, 4) commitment communities concerned principally with the interests of the working class and raising the question of the root causes of their day to day situation (Fernández: 237). As one can see, the heterogeneity depended as much on the orientation of the priests in charge of the communities as it did their members. Therefore, we find a variety of communities ranging from those defined by intra-ecclesial exclusivity to those on the frontlines of political activism.

Furthermore, studies on the CEBs approach them in relation to protest. Although some of them did protest, it seems to me that the studies ignore their internal characteristics and rely on general analysis. Not to dwell on this point, but I will mention the studies of historian Marcio Garcés and sociologist Gonzalo De la Maza, the already cited study of David Fernández, and the undergraduate history thesis of Viviana Cherkashin. With respect to the first two authors, they analyze each of the eleven protests that began in 1983, examining their duration and the subjects involved in each one of them. Being a situational analysis, they propose that one of the most important protagonists of these protests were the people who helped the Catholic Church and the CEB rearm the social movement attempting to overthrow Pinochet. Without questioning or denying their analysis, Garcés and De La Maza visualized the “liberating” communities that protested in the *poblaciones* as historically tied to the left and their protests therefore reflected traditions of political protest, not religious practice. Implicitly, one can also infer that the principle objective of the authors was to revitalize the social movement of the popular left, recognizing the Christian communities as part of this broad movement. Fernández, one of the few historians to undertake a more detailed discussion of the CEB during the military dictatorship, and who demonstrates its diversity, is similarly focused on its “liberating” communities. Finally, Cherkashin argues that the experiences and reflections of the base communities facilitated the formation of social actors but, after the protests, they disintegrated and failed in their attempt to consolidate the social movement.

It might seem, at first glance, that all of these communities formed part of the politically assertive social movement made possible by the Church and the communities themselves. But it should be said that the CEBs had neither the strength nor importance of their counterparts in Brazil. Rather, I argue that the Chilean CEBs were more about containment and resistance than direct action against the dictatorship. What these communities established, in short, were alternative realities to those imposed by the regime, namely: communalism, solidarity, and social organization rather than individualism, demobilization, and social authoritarianism. However, I am aware that to have a complete picture of the CEB in Santiago during the period would require an analysis that recovers this diversity and that is yet to be done, especially in the national historiography.

Finally, it is clear that research on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is scarce; only two books refer to it: the first is *La Renovación Carismática en Chile* by Gilfeather Katherine, published in 1977, and the second is *Católicos carismáticos y protestantes pentecostales; religiosas* by Carmen Galilee, published in 1992. The research lacuna alone justifies the present investigation. To study the *Dios con Nosotros* charismatic base community it was necessary to use oral history, which, in short, is a research method that relies on a base of oral testimonies

to overcome the lack of written records.⁵ Specifically, I conducted six semi-structured interviews to obtain the desired information, which also impelled my interviewees to elaborate on issues they considered most relevant, and therefore, it became easier to understand the key elements of the charismatic experience that have been marginalized. Finally, my objective is to complicate the concept of the CEB and open the range of research to the influence of religiosity in the social terrain, understanding that religious history has to do with the human religious dimension as well as the particular religious vision that inspires human action. Based on the characteristics of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (RCC), I hypothesize that *Dios con Nosotros* permitted members of the Manuel Rodríguez population to maintain their social fabric, resist the military dictatorship, and articulate themselves over and above individual ideological tendencies from 1973 to 1983.

From Manuel Rodríguez to *Dios con Nosotros*: Early Experience of the Holy Spirit among the Oppressed; Religious and Socio-Political Background of the Manuel Rodríguez Population

On February 14, 1969, some 5,000 people from the Manuel Rodríguez population inaugurated the occupation of a dump. It is important to highlight that this land seizure or *auto-toma*, part of the housing plan “Operation Site” promoted by the government of Eduardo Frei, was the result of the struggle between the “No House Committee” linked to the Communist Party and the “Committee of Residents” linked to the Christian Democrats.⁶ When priests came to this new population, not everyone was happy with them. Christian Democratic residents considered these priests “extremists” who neglected their ecclesiastical obligations. José Reyes, one of the community’s founders, tells us that in 1971 the first priest to arrive was an Irish priest of the Order of St. Columban, Alberto Buckwalter, who died in a motorcycle accident shortly after arriving. Other priests who came to Manuel Rodríguez did not spend much time in the community because they wound up renouncing the priesthood to marry. Following the death of Buckwalter, an Ecuadorian priest pejoratively called “Rogelio” (on account of his sympathy with the left) aroused such rejection among some residents that on more than one occasion he was beaten up. Regarding this situation, the president of the community’s mother’s center, Otilia Vera, recalls:

The atmosphere within the population was a disaster: Communist supporters fought with the Christian Democrats, there was a priest named “Rogelio”; he

⁵ The Chilean historian Mario Garcés understands oral history, as was done in workshops on the “recovery of popular memory recovery” as “a story that comes from the memory that people keep their past, and that testimony is normally expressed as significant experiences of the individual and collective past.”

⁶ The issue of housing for the urban poor has been at the center of the political struggles in Chile since the beginning of the sixties. The origin of the conflicts over housing developed in the 1940s and 1950s when families in the process of rural-urban migration began to build huts illegally on vacant land on the periphery of downtown Santiago. The settlements that led to land occupations were called “mushrooms” in Chile. From 1946 onwards, urban space expanded collectively through organized land invasions led by political parties: Communist, Socialist and subsequently by Christian Democrats. In the Manuel Rodríguez population, the land occupation was conducted by Christian Democrat leaders: Luis Becerra, Waldo Cáriz, Pablo Herrera, Carlos Martínez, Luis Roquera, Otilia Vera, and Ángel Calderón.

was a communist involved in the JAP [board of supply and prices]. Following the coup, the priest disappeared. As people said, he was an activist.

This testimony reflects what historian Maximiliano Salinas observes: from 1967 to 1973 missionary priests (mostly foreigners) had an uneasy relationship with residents due to mutual incomprehension and the priests' poor adaptation to the world of the *población*. Slum dwellers saw the missionaries as alien and therefore incapable of understanding their way of life; missionary priests serving in the slums felt overwhelmed by the complex challenges (emotional, political, ethical, and religious) associated with the world of the poor (18). The observations of Salinas and Otilia are consistent, and it is important to underline that the testimony of Otilia reflects the failure of the priests to meet the spiritual, sentimental, and emotional needs of the Catholic faithful since most priests left prematurely or spent most of their time devoted to political matters.

In the meantime, the Popular Unity government was facing severe shortages at the end of its first year following the boycott of right wing entrepreneurs and merchants, which made the state seek control over the price, supply, and distribution of foodstuffs. To do this, the state turned to the Directorate of Industry and Commerce (DIRINCO) and authorized its inspectors to establish such controls. However, a solution to the crisis proved elusive even as the government promoted a board of supply and prices (JAP) in each neighborhood unit with a population of 9-15 members, as well as in neighborhood centers, unions, sports clubs, and mother centers, etc. The severe shortages led to unscrupulous hoarding and abuse by opportunistic individuals who formed a black market. All of this unfolded in a highly polarized environment of political and ideological rivalries in which neighbors called each other *momios* (derogatory name for the center right Christian Democrats) and *UPelientos* (derogatory name for Communists and Socialists). Referring to this situation, José Reyes says:

I was chairman of the Christian Democratic base in Manuel Rodríguez and solely because I did not support the Popular Unity coalition some people considered me part of *Patria y Libertad* (an ultra right wing paramilitary group). Everyone was coming to see me. Nobody attacked me physically but they did so with words in spite of my status as party president and leader of the neighborhood committee.

However, both rival factions could not imagine a coup d'état and dictatorship that would bring such a ferocious level of violence: physical, symbolic, psychological, even spatial and institutional. It meant the beginning of a violent persecution of Salvador Allende's supporters as well as the dismantling of social organization (and of the Barrancas municipality).⁷ The main source of conflict for the inhabitants ceased to be the struggle for land; soon it was resisting repression. It goes without saying that the coup initiated the persecution of social leaders, activists, workers, and anyone else suspected of links to Popular Unity government, while also disarticulating intermediary organizations in the population such as sports clubs, mother centers, and neighborhood committees.

⁷ Following the dismissal of Communist Luis Neira as mayor, the military regime named Christian Democrat Fernando Quezada Vergara mayor on May 19, 1974.

The government initiated raids across greater Santiago that resulted in mass arrests.⁸ *Población* Manuel Rodríguez was no exception. Alicia Pastore, a supporter of the UP and catechist for *Dios con Nosotros*, recalls the arrest of her husband, Ofelio Lazo, who was a member of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) by the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA), on July 30, 1974:

They arrived after curfew, at one in the morning in 1974 . . . The DINA agents did not arrive with a show of force, they thought my husband was going to flee because we had the entrance on the other side, not where it is now, at that time we had the bedroom on that side. If we opened that door it brought in so much cold air that we put a lit stove there so opening the door turned off the stove. My husband went to close the door so it would not turn off the stove and there . . . I don't know what they told him because he closed the door and they thought he was going to flee, so they leaped over the fence to come upon my husband. He spoke with them and then came in the house to dress; they said they were going to take him in to "give a statement." After that I never heard from him again.

Ofelio Lazo had been one of the second held in a raid that began with the arrest of a MIR militant Juan Barrios Barros (who also lived in Manuel Rodríguez) and Eduardo Alarcón Jara, also linked to the MIR but from the nearby *población* Robert Kennedy. Both were never heard from again.⁹

Father Miguel and the Spiritual Renewal, 1973-1977

Under these circumstances the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (RCC) entered the neighborhood by way of an Irish priest from the Congregation of St. Columban named Miguel O'Boyle.¹⁰ He came to know this brand of religious renewal during his stay in the United States with the parish of the Church of Holy Baptism in Los Angeles, and it was reaffirmed at the first meeting of the RCC in Chile, at a retreat in Puente Alto in 1972.¹¹

⁸ The DINA constituted the nucleus of the state's terror apparatus. Its director, Army Colonel Manuel Contreras, was leader of the hard line anti-Marxist faction inside of the military government, who received the consent of General Pinochet to detain, torture, and assassinate opponents of the regime: the MIR, Socialist, and Communist party members. The DINA's secret torture centers in Santiago were: Cuatro Álamos, Londres 38, José Domingo Cañas 1367, and Villa Grimaldi.

⁹ For more information on this case see http://www.memoriaviva.com/Desaparecidos/D-L/ofelio_de_la_cruz_lazo_lazo.htm.

¹⁰ At the time, O'Boyle was 38 years old and had been a resident for Chile for eight years, working in the community of Conchalí. Currently he is working in a parish in Ireland.

¹¹ *Revista Pentecostés* N° 3, July 1976: 19. The RCC came to Chile in early 1972 when it held its first retreat of renewal in the Holy Spirit in Santiago at the house of *Ejercicios de las Rosas* February 1-5, led by Father Francis MacNutt, Jim Burke, and Patrick Reardon (all Dominicans), from which came the first prayer group; from that point on it spread throughout Chile, which led to the formation of the first "Service Information Center" to make withdrawals in Santiago and in other regions (Concepción, Valdivia, Longotoma, Temuco, and Osorno). According to the data provided by Katherine Gilfeather, by 1975 there were around 40 charismatic groups in Santiago and more in the provinces. Among the activities charismatic communities engaged in were healing masses, prayer groups, retreats, and social action and counseling ministries.

Within days of the coup, Father Miguel, as he was called, rented a small wooden house and gradually visited the homes of people to invite them to form a new Christian community. Of this process, José Reyes recalls:

In the beginning we met at the home of Father Miguel. I was among the first group of men he invited; we went to pray at his home. Then, we started to talk and get along well. After that we brought our wives and children, and from there we built the wooden chapel where *Dios con Nosotros* is to this day.

Father O'Boyle's possession of spiritual gifts had an impact on the behavior of the neighborhood Catholics; they were not used to the idea that the Holy Spirit put them in a position of equality, all the more striking in the context of extreme authoritarianism. Additionally, O'Boyle acquired an undisputed prestige among residents due to his role as mediator with the military. The organizational work of Father O'Boyle proved to be the only way to maintain social organization in the face of the dictatorship; it also made possible a "horizontalism," or rather, a "revolution" in religious matters, since residents could partake of the gifts of divinity. In this context, the *Grupo de Ayuda Fraternal* (Fraternal Aid Group) was formed in October 1973 to collect food and clothing to meet the needs of adults and children in the neighborhood. Otilia Vera, the leader and founder of the *población*, recalls:

There was a heavy-handed dictatorship, a lot of repression and harassment by the military. The people were scattered, confused, not knowing where to go. Slowly people in the community began to approach each other, whether it was because they were hungry or wanted to be in someplace safe. It was at this point that they formed a nursery to care for the children of women who worked and "soup kitchens" to feed all the people who asked for it.

At this point it should be clear that from the onset the Manuel Rodríguez community responded to two intertwined problems. On the one hand, the social problem of police searches and deprivation of liberty combined with the growing unemployment of the population, and on the other hand, the religious problem of a Catholicism that produced dissatisfaction among its believers. On this point, Father Miguel inspired prayer groups, something characteristic of the RCC, which achieved a harmony between inhabitants who had once been enemies.¹² According to the father himself, during a 1976 interview with pro-regime *Ercilla* magazine, he said:

For a long time we had pure prayer. It was the time of personal conversion. And little by little, God began to show everyone that they were members of a body, whose head was Christ. And then there was a movement towards one's brother. Love of one's neighbor. No one forced social action. It took more time in some places than others, but it was born of the people themselves. Now they are working together on different projects; in prayer seeking the Lord's plan for a closer community (*Revista Ercilla* N° 2109, 1976).

¹² Initially, members of the Manuel Rodríguez community prayer group included: José Leiva, Fernando Muñoz, Mario Cruzat, José Reyes, Guillermo Cabrera, Luis Vásquez, Carlos Núñez, Enrique Cerda, Mario Faúndez, Antonio Molina, Tomás Pérez, and Luis Miranda.

José Leiva, a founder and leader of the prayer group, emphasizes that the community maintained this harmony:

We all practiced the same religion. Some had their political “stripe” but “we were all on the same side” . . . We were Christians, in spite of everything. Through prayer the RCC imprinted a common identity on our community. Prayer produces action, in a community that has no prayer, there is no action. The Bible shows that. A community that has no prayer is a selfish community.

It is worth reflecting on this testimony. Prayer was the vital engine of community for these charismatic Catholics. Was the community using prayer to praise God while at the same time criticizing the government through the code of religion? Or rather, did prayer facilitate the development of action that privileged the needs of Manuel Rodríguez residents over a partisan political position? In this sense, it is important to distinguish between “politics” and “political.” Most interviewees viewed “politics” as a divisive force related to political parties pursuing power, while “political” had to do with any political action taken to achieve the common good, but without directly seeking power. During that historical period, the common good was about solving the most immediate problems of survival in the context of a population being terrorized by arrests, raids, torture, and disappearances. In that sense, harmony for these charismatic Catholics was found in gifts of the Spirit that allowed them to continue being citizens in the face of a dictatorship that restricted the rule of law. The dictatorship imposed its laws to be obeyed, but the laws governing how people lived in their own political community were different. If “prayer produces action” in the words of José Leiva, the community achieved a certain protected autonomy that incorporated Catholics and non-Catholics. As a result, several community members assumed their civic commitment to resist the dictatorship. Furthermore, charismatic Catholics had the pragmatic ritual of responding swiftly to social problems, which produced the confidence necessary to maintain community ties and connections that were much more rooted in community needs than connections to party politicians. Enrique Cerda, trade union leader of the company MADECO, Communist Party supporter, and a member of the RCC’s central coordinating committee in Santiago, emphasizes:

We would meet regardless; often we had problems with police but we didn’t care . . . we got together to pray for all those who were unemployed, we asked God to help the people who needed a more dignified life.

Echoing those remarks José Leiva recalls:

People from the CNI (secret police) watched us but they couldn’t do much . . . We were helping people in the midst of difficult times. We always attended masses and meetings peacefully.

Although Father O’Boyle was responsible to church authorities, it was the laity that organized themselves to elect coordinators or “servants” to manage the various social aid

activities: the *ollas comunes* (soup kitchens)¹³ and *Comprando Juntos* (Buying Together).¹⁴ As anthropologist Elizabeth Juárez Cerdi has stressed, one of the most important developments of the RCC was to deepen the sense of community so that it formed one big family of “brothers and sisters.”¹⁵ In this regard, María Bravo – current catechist of the community – says:

At the end of 1973 we formed kitchens for children and their unemployed parents. We also began to ask butcher shops, stores, and fairs to prepare the food for all families, not just those in the community but for our entire *población*. Some people thought we were playing politics with it, but no . . . we believed God called us to do it.

While efforts to satisfy the social welfare needs of the community were underway Father O’Boyle carried out the first seminars and annual retreats for community members, which facilitated more intense religious experiences and unquestionably helped to forge connections and strengthen social networks among Santiago’s other charismatic groups. According to the *Revista Pentecostés*, journal of the RCC in Chile, the first retreats for the Manuel Rodríguez *población* took place in November 1973 and the last one, on December 30, ended with an RCC meeting and a mass celebrated by Vicar Monseñor Fernando Ariztía (1967-1975) of Santiago’s western zone (N° 8, 1974).

Other charismatic communities in Santiago, in Chile’s provinces, as well as groups across Latin America, and the United States participated in the seminars and retreats, thereby strengthening the social interaction of residents with very distinct realities. For example, members of the Manuel Rodríguez community comfortably participated in several retreats with their “upper-class brothers” of the Santo Toribio parish in Las Condes with the latter lending both financial and spiritual assistance to the former; its aid consisted of money, goods, words of encouragement, and moral support in the form of communal prayer to God for their “brother” and his family.

The charismatic movement had an impact on the mainstream Catholics, evinced by the newsmagazine *Ercilla*’s reporting on the RCCs and the Manuel Rodríguez community in December 1975. On that occasion, *Ercilla* described the community as “open and loving people who are not ashamed to show their love for God or their own human weakness” (*Revista Ercilla* N° 2109, 1976: 22). With some astonishment, the magazine explained that church services depended on the parish assistant or charismatic servants, a “servant” being someone inside of the movement who prepares for leadership by taking courses and who, generally speaking, has already served the community for several years and has been granted extraordinary gifts – *carismas* – from the Holy Spirit. There were no guidelines as to how

¹³ *Ollas comunes* (soup kitchens) were voluntary private organizations created principally by women in the *poblaciones* who pooled their resources to prepare meals and palliate the effects of unemployment and the lack of resources during the military dictatorship.

¹⁴ *Comprando Juntos* (Buying Together) were groups of better off families in the *población* who would buy food at wholesale prices so it was cheaper.

¹⁵ According to Juárez Cerdi, the sense of community made a resurgence in the sixties in the Catholic Church. That was what was so new about the RCC.

things would develop at meetings; prayers arose from the group based on Biblical passages each member was reading. They would read a line of prayer that they felt the Holy Spirit communicating. Additionally, *Ercilla* commented on the harmony and “brotherhood” of its meetings:

. . . We saw young and old, men and women, rich and poor, healthy and sick attending as well as children. Some came with their guitars on their shoulders . . . They were all friends (*Revista Ercilla* N° 2109, 1976: 22).

Referring to the working condition of charismatic communities, the magazine *Ercilla* sought the views of other priests on the RCC. Particularly striking is the opinion of *Opus Dei* priest, José Miguel Ibáñez, who said:

Catholics have not needed any charismatic movement to worship God, the Holy Spirit. If they say to me that it is the Holy Spirit that possesses a person crying out, convulsing, muttering strange sounds . . . I think this is a clinical case (*Revista Ercilla* N° 2109, 1976: 22).

Of course, Ibáñez’s position did not take into account that the charismatic faithful took the official discourse of the Catholic Church and reworked it according to their own reality inside of their own universe of meaning. The message was the same, but the interpretation and experience of it was different.

Departure of Father O’Boyle, Autonomy of the Laity, and Coercion of the Charismatics (1977-1983)

In April 1977 Father Miguel left the community to visit his native Ireland and from there he was sent by the Columban Order to work at a parish in the United States (*Revista Pentecostés*, July 1977: 23). His departure presented a major challenge for *Dios con Nosotros* because its lay coordinators were left in charge of the movement and Columban pastors from the parish of St. Gabriel (part of *Dios con Nosotros*) only came to perform the Sunday liturgy. The priests who came during this stage were: Luis Connoughton (1976-1983), Patrick Brown, and Brian MacMahon (MacMahon was removed in 1983; reported by Fr. Alejandro Vial of the St. Gabriel parish).

Referring to this situation Enrique Cerda explains:

In spite of [Father] Miguel’s departure in ’77 and the lack of priests Sunday masses did not drop below 500 people. The Columbans from the San Gabriel Parish came when we needed them.

The experience of autonomy was a challenge of maturation, both in a human and Christian sense. Interviewed in 1982 for the magazine *Pentecostés*, Enrique Cerda commented:

My group experience with *Dios con Nosotros* has been very rich. I see a big difference since I assumed leadership about 3 or 4 years ago. I’ve learned to listen to the Lord and lead the brethren.

In an atmosphere of growing maturity, *Dios con Nosotros* maintained contact with “liberating” communities in the Dean of the western zone of Pudahuel, including the chapel of *San Luis Beltrán*, Christ at Emmaus, and Jesús Pastor, John XXIII from the population

Teniente Merino, and *San Manuel de Jesús* from the La Estrella population.¹⁶ While it is true that charismatics were not involved with mainstream Catholics in their area, their relations of tolerance and respect allowed them to maintain a friendly cordiality with other liberating communities that were reluctant to engage with charismatics. The testimony of Enrique Cerda speaks to this issue:

The relationship with the communities of our parish was normal, with other communities of the Dean there were some problems because priests did not accept us for being charismatic . . . They said we carried on praying and “looking at our navels.”

María Bravo takes a very similar view of things:

We met every 6 months in *San Luis Beltrán* with the leaders of all communities . . . they called us “the madmen of the Manuel Rodríguez” because we prayed, danced, and sang praises to the Lord; we were more like the evangelicals but that didn’t take away any importance. We were happy with the Lord and our way of living the faith.

Critics of liberating CEBs like *Dios con Nosotros* viewed the communities as “alienating” or insufficiently committed to social matters. Yet, they cannot be classified as closed communities or communities of resignation. In spite of their fervent religious attitude, members did not ignore worldly affairs. Interviews demonstrate their rejection of the existing order and attempt to create an alternate reality that pulled their neighbors out of the private sphere. Otilia Vera speaks of her experience:

I think the form of protest was very subliminal because people formed job boards for all the unemployed in the population, groups like “A Job for a Brother.” Ultimately, if someone needed a job he would go to the community and they would find him work. I think this was also a form of protest.

The dictatorship may have tried to dismantle the entire social network and shut down private sphere spaces for conversion and meetings, but it could not achieve such a goal because residents had built social relationships to help themselves both spiritually and materially from the earliest days of the military coup. Thus, this charismatic base community did not suffer permanent harassment from the intelligence agents who infiltrated it because they did not see political discussions or anything of the sort. Its members sought God’s strength to endure the precarious life they found themselves in. Might that be a form of resistance too? In the end, the 2,000 unemployed in a population of 15,000 people, according to data provided by the magazine *Revista Pentecostés* (Nº 2, July/August 1983: 14), formed part of the daily life of the population and the wider community. According to data provided by the magazine *Revista Solidaridad*, in 1977 30 percent of the population in the

¹⁶ In an interview in November 1976, Monseñor Enrique Alvear indicated: “The experience of the west zone has been, for me, the biggest push from the people that I have received from the working class, Christ in his moment of greatest poverty when on the cross” (*Revista Solidaridad* Nº 9, November 1976: 7).

western zone suffered from head lice, 26 percent from unemployment, 6 percent from alcoholism, and 69 percent of children suffered from malnutrition (N° 15, March 1977: 67).

In the late seventies and early eighties, the situation worsened even further with the economic crisis of 1981–1982. In those years, the military regime imposed the PEM (Minimum Employment Plan) and POJH (Employment Program for Heads of Household) as a way of dealing with unemployment in the general population. However, the precariousness of such work, which totaled between \$2,000 and \$4,000 pesos per month, generated a growing discontent over ill treatment and non-recognition of basic social and labor rights (Robles: 376). Even more than before the military regime's minimum jobs program broadened the marginalization, impoverishment, and humiliation of the poor, pushing them to the limits of survival. In this regard, Enrique Leiva states:

In 1980 there was a huge unemployment among the population. Even so, we served all of the unemployed; maybe that made us stand out from the other communities in the area and the Dean, because we did not send them outside of the community to work in the PEM, on the contrary, we taught the men carpentry and women to weave and cook. People came from other charismatic communities especially to teach. Everyone helped a little because no one earned much money.

In addition, through the Fraternal Assistance Group *fonolas* [cardboard sheets covered with tar used for modest roofing] were divided up to be put on the poorest houses of the community. On this, Enrique Cerda says:

On one occasion we had some *fonolas* that we bought and divided up together with the *poblaciones* Santo Toribio and Arturo Prat. Then we realized that the cardboard sheets made us appear poor and so the following year Santo Toribio helped us with *pizarreños* [flat rocks used for roofing material] and in this way we did the houses.

After a period of self-administration the *Dios con Nosotros* community experienced a radical change following the permanent arrival of Columban priest Juan Colgan, sent by the parish of San Gabriel from 1983 to 1985. This priest was not a charismatic and had a different vision for the community; the charismatic aspect of *Dios con Nosotros* began to wane. Colgan advocated a more traditional community, fewer songs and praises during mass, such that it brought about a reversal of what had been done since 1973:

With the group they were strict . . . they eliminated the coordinators because they should not be in charge of the community; if the community was Columban, they had to obey the Columbans.

Colgan suppressed the charismatic experience and dismissed lay coordinators, including Enrique Cerda:

. . . I was called to the parish of San Gabriel and he said to me: "Enrique, I do not want you in the chapel, you have a lot of power." And that made me think . . . indeed, I had a lot of power in the community, because I was in charge of it, I participated in the Charismatic Renewal, at a national and

international level and I realized it was true, but that did not influence the work I had done.

Already in 1983, the community was transformed into a community that was sympathetic to the liberating tendencies of the other communities in the sector. Slowly the youth of *Dios con Nosotros* began to openly express their rejection of the military regime, as did Colgan. This liberating posture produced a tense negative response in older sectors of the community given that it constituted a partisan re-politicization of the community:

. . . The new priests and religious people who came to the community favored that line [opposition to the government]. I was invited to the *Vías Crucis a favor de los Derechos Humanos* – Cross Roads for Human Rights – but I never wanted to participate because I feared they [security apparatus] would kill me. But I could fight in another way, by teaching men to respect the life of one's brother and have respect for God (interview with Mario Bravo, January 2007).

At this juncture, the CEBs found themselves greatly stressed and under pressure for clear action to put an end to the Pinochet dictatorship. The Vicariate of Solidarity's archive reveals the grave damage caused by the repression in the municipality during the fourth nationwide protest of August 11, 1983. In the Manuel Rodríguez community the *carabineros* severely repressed *cacerolazos* (banging on pots), street barricades, and power outages.¹⁷ Criticisms of the economic model and state repression became explicit and channeled in broad, direct ways. In late 1984, *Dios con Nosotros* participated in the Fifth Area Assembly in the West Zone under the slogan, "In This Life People Are Looking for the Great Liberation," which included the participation of other CEBs: *María Madre de Los Pobres*, *Santa Isabel de Hungría*, *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*, *San Francisco Javier*, and *San Luis Beltrán*, among others. The representative of *Dios con Nosotros*, Hugo Lazo (son of Alicia Pastore), in an interview with the Bulletin of the West Zone, said the following:

The prophetic missionary Church interested me a great deal, especially at the crucial moment we have been called on to live in 1985 . . . It is not so novel anymore nor does the political term produce hives; now they are implementing it properly (*Vicaría de la Zona Oeste*, *Boletín* N° 142, 1985: 8-10).

Finally, what happened to the charismatic interviewees of *Dios con Nosotros*? Did they continue on in the community? Some, like María Bravo, José Reyes, José Leiva, and Alicia Pastore still form part of the community and belong to the RCC. Others like Enrique Cerda abandoned all religious activity. Today, the community has ceased to be charismatic and has returned to the rigid structure of the conservative Chilean Church.¹⁸

¹⁷ For more information about the repression in the municipality of Pudahuel see *Archivo Vicaría de la Solidaridad, Fondo Protestas 83-84, Informe 4ta protesta nacional Zona Oeste, 11 de agosto de 1983*.

¹⁸ John Paul II (1978-2005) asked the Chilean Church to return its pastoral role. He appointed conservative bishops to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, first Cardinal Francisco Fresno and then Cardinal Carlos Oviedo following the return to democracy.

Final Reflections

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize two important things underpinning my work. First, studying the *Dios con Nosotros* charismatic community has allowed me to observe the heterogeneity of Santiago's CEBs, something that leads me to think that all of these communities had a certain logic of liberation. It may be necessary to reanalyze these communities based on the lived experiences of their members. I believe this can help us to understand the reconstruction of the social fabric in poor communities that helped to break down the Pinochet dictatorship. The attitude of the charismatics was both religious and spiritual in nature but also social, which enabled a synthetic amalgam that created a new way of living; neighbors that during the Popular Unity had had political and ideological disputes, came together facing a military dictatorship that affected everyone equally. This charismatic community, moved by its deep faith and love for one's neighbor, helped their Catholic and non-Catholic brethren solve everyday problems. But it is also noteworthy that the penetration of the RCC, in the population, was deeply meaningful to the lives of the Catholics interviewed, impressing on them forever a new, less rigid religious praxis, which privileged the role of the layperson establishing more intimate and personal contact with God.

In this manner, the argument I have tried to present here is reinforced by the fact that the *Dios con Nosotros* community achieved an early manifestation of this synthetic amalgamation of different political positions which later crystallized into the "Transition to Democracy" of the nineties. Here it is understood that *Dios con Nosotros* represented a place of great importance because it was an experience in which members shared not only religious sentiments but also those material elements that permitted the group to survive.

Oral Interviews (2007)

Alicia Pastore

Settler, Popular Unity supporter, and member of the community who headed the service group. She is the widow of a disappeared person, Ofelio Lazo Lazo, a Socialist Party activist, who was arrested July 30, 1974 on Ingeniero Giroz Street, Villa Manuel Rodríguez.

María Bravo

Settler and current catechist of the *Dios con Nosotros* CEB.

Enrique Cerda

Settler and ex-coordinator of *Dios con Nosotros*. Communist Party sympathizer, former union leader at the MADECO Company, and ex-member of the central coordinators team for Santiago's Charismatic Renewal.

José Leiva

Settler and founder of *Dios con Nosotros* who was in charge of the community's prayer group. He currently works in the Office of the Charismatic Renewal in Santiago and still belongs to the community.

José Reyes

Settler and ex-president of the Christian Democratic base in Manuel Rodríguez. From its beginnings to the present, he has belonged to the community's prayer group.

Otilia Vera

Settler and leader of the Villa Manuel Rodríguez Neighborhood Association. A Christian Democratic Party activist, she participated in the community during its early years. She is currently president of the Villa Manuel Rodríguez Mothers Center.

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