3 The Hierarchy, the Vicaría and the Regime, 1976–82

THE FOUNDING OF THE VICARIA AND THE PASTORAL OF SOLIDARITY

Whereas the initiative behind the founding of the Peace Committee had been very much a joint evangelical–Catholic one, that of the Vicaría was not only exclusively Catholic, but specifically a decision of Cardinal Silva Henríquez himself. He proposed the creation of a new Vicariate to continue the work of the Peace Committee at the New Year Council of the Vicars of the Archbishopric of Santiago. The vote in favour was unanimous, and, on 1 January 1976, the Vicariate of Solidarity was created by decree of the Archbishopric.

The central significance this initiative was that it represented an institutional act of the Catholic Church of Santiago. The Vicaría represented the Church working in the field of human rights; its vicar by virtue of his position was a member of the hierarchy of Santiago. Gone from it were the ambiguities as to status and responsibility for decision-making that had been an inherent weakness of the Committee’s ecumenical character.² Gone, too, was the government’s ability to attack it along those fault lines: now to attack the Vicaría would mean direct confrontation with the institutional prerogatives of the Catholic Church. There was also a significant change of address for the new organisation: it was to set up in the old episcopal palace adjoining the Cathedral in the Plaza de Armas, the Central Square of the city. A more prominent and symbolic site would have been difficult to find.

The pressures on the cardinal not to continue with such work, still less in such a public, institutionalised fashion, were clear enough from the campaign against the Peace Committee. Despite such government pressure, however, the creation of the Vicaría did enjoy the support of the majority of the hierarchy. This was evident from the bishops’ outspoken praise of the Committee at the time of its closure, including their assertion that ‘at an hour of such responsibility the Church cannot evade a testimony of charity and the commitment of itself to fraternal service for all who suffer’.² The Vicaría represented just such a testimony.

A further attraction, just as with the Committee, was that such testimony did not amount to an outright, prophetic condemnation of the regime.

P. Lowden, Moral Opposition to Authoritarian Rule in Chile, 1973–90
© Pamela Lowden 1996
as a whole. Indeed, during the period in which the Committee functioned, the key joint declarations of the Episcopal Conference had remained extremely cautious even with regard to the human rights issue. None the less, their support for further testimonial action and defence of the victims of repression was also extended by the formal establishment of sister offices of the Vicaría in twelve dioceses within a year of the Santiago Vicaría’s creation. In the other dioceses the contact groups established in conjunction with the Committee continued to function and the process of formalising their status continued.

Importantly, too, the support which Silva Henríquez enjoyed from his own national hierarchy was also a reflection of that of the Vatican. The Pope’s attitude towards the repression in Chile had been clear from the start of military rule. Moreover, the commitment of the universal Church to the cause of human rights had recently been underlined by the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission of 1974, and reiterated in Paul VI’s Evangelii Nuntiandi of 1975.

Notwithstanding those factors in its favour, the creation of the Vicaría was nevertheless a remarkable act on the part of Silva Henríquez. On the one hand, the only sectors of lay society clearly favourably disposed to a new Vicaría within Chile were, of course, its actual and potential beneficiaries. By the same token, they were also the weakest and most vulnerable. Neither, as emphasised, was there any Catholic precedent for such an organisation as the Vicaría, either in Chile or elsewhere. In Santiago the vicariates which existed were territorial divisions designed to facilitate the efficient management of a large archdiocese. A functional vicariate, and one intended to promote human rights, was an entirely new departure.

Throughout his career, Silva Henríquez had demonstrated a certain flair for organisation combined with a preoccupation for the welfare of the poor and had created various institutions, both before and since becoming primate. Now, under an authoritarian regime, he saw a renewed need for Church-sponsored institutions to help fill the void left in civil society. Already in November 1975 he had taken the important step of creating the Academy of Christian Humanism, an academic institute which employed many of the staff dismissed from the Catholic University. The Vicaría was to be a further representation and institutionalisation of the particular sensibilities of the cardinal. Some of these he had recently outlined in an important pastoral letter, entitled the ‘Pastoral of Solidarity’.

‘Solidarity’ as Silva Henríquez defined it, meant ‘the mutual dependency among men which means that some cannot feel contented when the rest are not’. The social dimension of the pastoral was presented as a natural development of the social doctrine of the Church in the line of the