

RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



The Institute
on Religion &
Democracy

April 1989

The Elva Harper Circle Meets the Christic Institute

There is an irate group of ladies from Jacksonville, Illinois, who have decided that they have had enough. The Elva Harper Circle does *not* want its mission pledge to go to support the bizarre Christic Institute.

The Elva Harper Circle is the oldest continuous women's group in the Grace United Methodist Church in Jacksonville.

The Christic Institute is a self-described "radical" public-interest law firm which is promoting an incredible conspiracy theory, alleging that a diabolical, CIA-spawned "secret team" has hijacked U.S. foreign policy in order to sponsor war and drug smuggling. (See *Religion & Democracy*, November 1988.)

In March 1988, the Elva Harper Circle wrote to Mrs. Ralph Dude, president of the United Methodist Women in Central Illinois. Circle members explained that they believed their mission gifts "should be used to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to unbelievers, to plant churches in developing areas, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the sick...."

"Most recently," they explained, "we have become extremely concerned, some even enraged, to learn of the [United Methodist] Women's Division gift of \$13,500, along with \$10,000 each from the World and National Divisions of the Board of Global Ministries, to the Christic Institute."

The women of Elva Harper cited several other groups which receive funding from the Women's Division -- including the Committee in Solidarity with Free Grenada and the Women's Coalition Against U.S. Intervention in El Salvador -- about which they had questions.

Then came the bottom line:

Therefore, it seems wise to us in the pledge for 1989 to withhold at least one-half of our pledge monies to the Women's Division, giving these funds to Advance Specials [designated projects] sympathetic to our understanding of what the Missions task of the church is all about.... Furthermore, if this political funding continues, we will have no other recourse than to withhold *all* our pledge monies from the Women's Division of the UMC.

Mrs. Dude sent the letter on to the Women's Division offices in New York. In early June, Ellen Kirby, who heads the Christian Social Relations Section of the Division, wrote back to the Elva Harper Circle.

Ms. Kirby assured the circle that the majority of mission pledges "are used for work that would be understood more



Photo courtesy of the Elva Harper Circle

The members of the Elva Harper Circle: (standing, from left) Sue Parrish, Lucille Rawlings, Gladys Wallace, Lucille Green, Melita Graber, Alice Wright, Peg Hagan, Martha Patterson and (kneeling) Alice McAllister and Miriam Anderson.

in the traditional mission context," but pointed out that the responsibilities of the Women's Division included contributing "to the establishment of a just global society" and formulating "concepts of contemporary mission." She cited Jesus's ministry to prisoners, the poor and dispossessed, saying "the fact that he was rejected by the people of his own hometown did not limit his willingness to confront the powers and principalities."

Then Ms. Kirby addressed the specific issue of support for the Christic Institute's lawsuit. She focused on Christic's (unproven) charges that "secret team" funds acquired from drugs and weapons trafficking were used to support the *contras* in Nicaragua. "Certainly the issue of drug trafficking in the United States," she continued with, one assumes, a straight face, "is one which raises serious problems and questions that affect the lives of many persons, particularly youth."

Apparently, the Women's Division sees funding the radical institute as its special way to "just say no" to drugs.

But there was more. The Christic Institute staff "all work for subsistence wages," wrote Ms. Kirby. Christic "needs the support of individuals, charities and foundations

(Elva Harper, continued on page 4)

IRD Conference:

Chile, the Church, and the Rebuilding of Democracy

What happened in Chile last October amazed and gratified the friends of freedom worldwide. A military dictator, trusting in the success of his economic policies, submitted himself to a plebiscite of the people. The vote was held under free and fair conditions, the people decided for democracy, and the dictator accepted their verdict. And in all these events, the Church played a crucial role.

It was quite timely, therefore, that the IRD hold a conference examining the church's role. On March 6, in conjunction with our award to Cardinal Fresno (see page 3), we invited speakers from Chile and the United States, both laypeople and church officials, to discuss how Chilean churches have contributed to the current hopeful movement toward democracy, and how they might be a model for churches elsewhere.

In his opening address, **Monsignor Cristian Precht**, the Vicar General for Pastoral Work of the Archdiocese of Santiago, helped set a "forward-looking" direction for the rest of the conference. "Today," he said, "Chile moves forward in expectation. On October 5 [1988], the country took a civilized step towards full democracy. It is gradually reorganizing the social and political fabric . . . of the nation."

Michael Novak, a founding board member of the IRD, expressed similar sentiments:

I noticed in my first visits to Chile . . . that one could still meet people of the Right who were anti-democratic -- that is, Pinochet supporters who thought that democracy was a bad

mistake. And one could still meet people of the Left who thought that democracy was a bourgeois illusion.... I don't find that today.

Those on the far Left -- even Marxist but not Leninist Left -- who would have tended to think that democracy was a bourgeois illusion discovered that Pinochet was not an illusion. He was a reality and they preferred something else.

And on the Right, people who were in favor of something like Pinochet and suspicious of democracy also came to think [the torture and the disappearances were] too much. And they figured that the only way around that is democracy. You can't trust anybody with too much power.

Douglas Payne of Freedom House warned against "acting as if democracy was already here" in Chile. He stressed that key institutions like the Church must continue to encourage responsible political participation to sustain the "democratic momentum."

IRD Executive Director **Kent Hill** observed in closing:

There seems to be considerable agreement here today that the credibility of the church is somehow directly affected by its demonstrated commitment to the defense of human rights -- regardless of whether the violations come from the Left or the Right.... The Catholic Church in Chile has epitomized that kind of defense of human rights.

The conference was attended by over 80 people, including many religious leaders, public policy experts, and human rights activists.



Photo by Miriam Kilmer

The Chile conference speakers (from left): **George Lister** (U.S. State Department), **Mark Falcoff** (American Enterprise Institute), **Michael Novak** (American Enterprise Institute), **Douglas Payne** (Freedom House), **Cristian Precht** (Archdiocese of Santiago), and **Thomas Quigley** (United States Catholic Conference).



Photo by Miriam Kilmer

IRD Deputy Director **Diane Knippers** and **Father Stan DeBoe** (center), of the Trinitarians, speak with the Most Rev. **Alvaro Corrada del Rio**, the Auxiliary Bishop of Washington, at the March 6 reception.

Religion & Democracy is published by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, 729 15th Street, N.W., Suite 900, Washington, DC 20005 (202/393-3200). **Kent R. Hill**, Executive Director and Editor; **Diane L. Knippers**, Deputy Director and Managing Editor; **Walter H. Kansteiner**, Director of Economic Studies; **Alan F. Wisdom**, Research Director; **Richard Sperbeck**, Research Associate and Assistant Editor. IRD membership is \$25.00 per year; a subscription to the newsletter is \$15.00 per year (and is included in the annual membership fee). Tax-deductible contributions in any amount are welcome.

The 1989 Religious Freedom Award

On March 6, 1989, the Institute on Religion and Democracy presented its 1989 *Religious Freedom Award* to Juan Francisco Cardinal Fresno-Larrain. Cardinal Fresno is a major figure in the renewal of democracy in Chile. Archbishop of Santiago since 1983, and a cardinal since 1985, he has been a clear, firm voice for Christian and democratic values. Under the cardinal's leadership, the Chilean Catholic bishops have spoken out against violations of human rights and denials of civil liberties. The Vicariate of Solidarity, under his archdiocese, serves as a

"Cardinal Fresno has long urged democracy and national reconciliation as the twin goals toward which Chile should be moving."

practical expression of this principled stand. The Vicariate's reports of abuses and its aid to the victims make it a model of church work for human rights.

Not only has Cardinal Fresno long advocated democracy, but he has also undertaken the delicate task of fostering its peaceful reconstruction in Chile. Through his mediation eleven political parties came together in 1985 to endorse a "National Accord on Transition to Full Democracy." As last October's plebiscite approached, the cardinal lent strong support to efforts to register voters and to ensure a free and fair electoral process. The exemplary conduct of the plebiscite, and the respect shown for its results, was due in no small part to the influence of the Chilean church.

In presenting the IRD's *Religious Freedom Award*, the Most Rev. Rene Gracida, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Corpus Christi and a member of the IRD Board of Directors, said Cardinal Fresno is "uniquely positioned" to play a crucial role in national reconciliation, as Chileans will undoubtedly continue to face further challenges on their road to democracy and economic development.

Bishop Gracida praised the cardinal's ministry for showing "an extraordinary empathy for and a sharing in the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of his fellow Chileans...." And while the cardinal has criticized both the Left and the Right in Chile, according to Bishop Gracida, "he has not ostracized either. His language is carefully measured so as to promote reconciliation rather than provoke confrontation." Indeed, "Cardinal Fresno has long urged democracy and national reconciliation as the twin goals toward which Chile should be moving."

Upon receiving word of the distinction awarded me by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, my first thought as a Christian and a pastor was to praise the Lord. I truly feel that all that we have done, and that for which we are honored today, finds its fundamental reason and its explanation in the love and strength of God Himself. He has been the first source and the permanent support of our work for reconciliation and the promotion and defense of human rights within the framework of religious liberty -- fundamental values in all authentic democracies.

Without doubt, the problems of Chile are not few and they will not be resolved automatically with a return to full democracy. Nevertheless, we have hope that good will and a realistic attitude will triumph. With the help of God and the collaboration of all, we will continue our search for peace.

Your award is an endorsement and a support . . . for efforts already achieved; it helps renew our energies in order to continue the struggle and even strive to perfect our involvement in this task to which we are committed.

-- Juan Francisco Cardinal Fresno
from remarks made after receiving the
IRD's 1989 *Religious Freedom Award*



At the reception held in his honor on March 6, Cardinal Fresno (left) accepts the Institute on Religion and Democracy's 1989 *Religious Freedom Award*. Bishop Rene Gracida (right) presents the award, as IRD Executive Director Kent Hill (center) watches.

Photo by Miriam Klimer

Christic Update

The incredible Christic story has taken several fascinating turns since *Religion & Democracy's* November 1988 report.

In May 1988, federal Judge Lawrence King had dismissed the Christic lawsuit against 29 supposed "secret team" members, for lack of evidence. In December, some two dozen church groups filed court papers in support of Christic's appeal of that case. These church groups included offices of the American Baptist Churches, the American Friends Service Committee, Church of the Brethren, Church Women United, the United Church of Christ, Maryknoll, and -- the Elva Harper Circle will be disturbed to learn -- the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church.

In early February, Judge King moved a step further and ordered the Christic Institute and its clients to pay the \$1,200,000 in legal costs its frivolous suit had imposed upon the defendants. The judge said the suit was "based upon unsubstantiated rumor and speculation from unidentified sources with no firsthand knowledge." Among other defects in the suit, he explained, was that many of the 79 supposed witnesses for the Christic case "stated under oath that they did not know [Christic attorney Daniel] Sheehan, had never spoken to him or flatly denied the statements he had attributed [to] them in his affidavits."

For a while it looked like the money raised by Christic was going to go to the likes of Maj. Gen. John Singlaub, Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, and the other defendants in the suit. Presumably, the members of the Elva Harper Circle would be less-than-pleased with *this* use of their mission money, too.

But now, after a major fundraising campaign, the Christic Institute has raised \$1.2 million more. This money will be used to post a surety bond, thus enabling

the institute to continue its appeals of both Judge King's dismissal and his financial judgment.

Fortunately, the United Methodist Women's Division has not met yet this year, and so was unable to participate in this latest Christic funding drive.

The Christic Institute has also tried to horn in on a better-known case -- the trial of retired Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North. Christic activists attempted to reach the federal judge in that case, Gerhard Gesell, by strewing copies of a "friend-of-the-court" brief around his courtroom. The judge publicly rebuked the institute for this tactic, calling it "highly unprofessional" and "so clearly improper that any responsible lawyer would have prohibited it."

Other religious funders of Christic include the Church of the Brethren, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, the United Church of Christ Board for World Mission, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

It is interesting to note that Christic was more forthcoming about the latter donation than the Presbyterians themselves have been. IRD's friends at Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom (PDRF) have been wrestling with their church leaders for full financial disclosure. At a January 31 meeting with PDRF, Presbyterian agency heads refused to reveal anything about their funding of Christic. But a change of heart may be in store. In a March 1 letter, another top Presbyterian official, David Stoner, promised PDRF that the church agencies would compile a list of names of organizations and amounts funded by this fall. Stoner concluded "that full disclosure of the names of the organizations who receive contributions and grants from General Assembly entities is a reasonable expectation of the members of the Presbyterian Church (USA)."

That's the kind of thing that the Elva Harper women would agree with.

-- DLK

(Elva Harper, continued from page 1)

in order to carry out their important work," which includes collecting data that has "already been used by various congressional committees." (Ms. Kirby did not mention that those committees have found Christic's accusations without merit.)

Ms. Kirby finally assured the women of the Elva Harper Circle, "Our contribution is very small in terms of the overall cost of this case and certainly is very small in the context of the total Women's Division budget."

But maybe \$13,000 in Jacksonville is a larger amount than it is in New York. At any rate, Ms. Kirby's reassurances did not work. The women of Elva Harper finally wrote back in January 1989. (They don't meet in the summer, and it took several months, they said, to formulate their response.) They wrote:

We wholeheartedly agree with your assessment of *one* area of Jesus' ministry (i.e. "to prisoners... the poor... and the dispossessed"). Certainly we share your concern with the evils of drug abuse. But we do *NOT* share your sympathy with the work of the Christic Institute....

The letter from the Elva Harper Circle cited, in its criticisms of Christic, the *United Methodist Reporter*, the *Washington Post*, the *Religion & Democracy* newsletter, and even the *Nation* and *Mother Jones* magazines, hardly bulwarks of conservatism.

"The amount of money given to the Christic Institute may be 'small' to you, but it represents the pledges given in good faith that it would be used to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ -- not a political agenda," replied Elva Harper Circle.

And, they firmly reiterated, one-half of their undesignated 1989 pledge will be withheld.

-- Diane Knippers

Religious Liberty Alert

Mexico: More Space for Churches?

In separate incidents, not unlike scenes out of early church history, two young Mexican preachers suffered bloody martyrdoms this January. *Excelsior*, a prominent Mexico City newspaper, reported that Abelino Jerez Hernandez, a 35-year-old Protestant evangelist, was set upon by an angry mob in the village of San Diego Carrito, west of the city. A police spokesman said Jerez was "first chased out of town and then attacked with stones until his death."

Not long thereafter, the body of 21-year-old Julio Davalos Morales was found in the village of Los Reyes La Paz, east of the capital. The body was surrounded by blood-stained stones, and next to it lay a briefcase full of evangelical tracts. Davalos' brother Geraldo told investigators that Julio had often preached in the village on weekends. So far no arrests have been made in the attacks on Davalos and Jerez.

The conjunction of these two murders was coincidental, as only a handful of religiously-motivated killings typically occur in a whole year in Mexico. Clearly, too, such violence does not correspond to any policies of the Mexican federal government or the Mexican Catholic bishops. Nevertheless, the two incidents do show a climate of religious tension which affects all churches in Mexico. This tension has deep roots in Mexican history, and it has profoundly shaped Mexico's legal structure, imposing or threatening serious restrictions on religious liberty.

The nation's constitution was formed in the anti-clerical fury of the Mexican Revolution. Resentful of the role of the Catholic Church as a bulwark of the old regime, the revolutionaries designed a constitution to strip it of all power in public life.

The constitution of 1917, while proclaiming freedom of individual conscience, deprived churches of all corporate recognition under the law. Churches were prohibited from holding property; the state owns all religious sites, allowing believers to use them only at its indulgence. Under the constitution, priests and ministers were rigorously excluded from political life. They were not allowed to vote, to criticize the laws or the authorities, or to associate for political purposes. Even charitable groups could not be controlled by the clergy.

In addition, the constitution specified that all education, public or private, be "maintained completely separate from any religious doctrine." But on that provision, as on many others, the Mexican government has eased its enforcement. The ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), having lost most of its anti-clerical fervor decades ago, retains merely a lingering wariness of religion. Churches have been allotted a certain unofficial space on the margins of public life. Mexican Catholics now operate thousands of elementary and secondary schools. They are required, though, to follow the state curriculum and to use state textbooks, which reflect the PRI's secularism.



Photo by Chris Woehr / News Network International

A family of Chamula Indians who fled the village of San Miguel Mitontic, Chiapas. In 1987 the municipal president arrested over 200 Chamula evangelicals who refused to participate in traditional religious ceremonies.

Recent Struggles, with Some Hopeful Signs

In recent years the government has occasionally tightened the reins on the churches. A July 1980 order from the Ministry of Interior directed radio and television stations to cancel "any material of religious interest." State-dominated media do cover some Catholic events, according to whether it serves the authorities' political purposes to do so. But evangelical leader Jonas Flores says the 1980 order eliminated most Protestant-sponsored broadcasts, except in some outlying areas.

A new electoral code introduced in 1987 took aim again at clerical involvement in politics. Seeking to reinforce the constitutional prohibitions, the code fixed a penalty of up to seven years in prison and a fine of as much as \$4,000 for any clergyman who attempts to "exert pressure over the electorate." This measure was passed in reaction to a rising tide of Catholic political activism, on the Left as well as the Right.

For example, the bishops of the northern state of Chihuahua had joined backers of the conservative National Action Party in protesting a 1986 state election. Citing allegations attributing the PRI victory to fraud, the Chihuahua bishops said, "It is impossible to discern in them [the election results] the lawful will of the people." On the other hand, in the southern state of Chiapas, Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia denounced repression of leftist peasant organizations. In a December 1987 pastoral letter, Bishop Ruiz accused PRI officials of having murdered thousands of the peasants in land disputes.

The 1987 electoral law provoked a new round of controversy. Archbishop Adalberto Almeida Merino of

(Mexico, continued on page 6)

(Mexico, continued from page 5)

Chihuahua said the government "has shown itself to be a party dictatorship revealing a marked contrast between the democratic image which it presents abroad and the limitations which it imposes on its own citizens." A spokesman for the Mexican Catholic bishops' conference pledged, "The Mexican Church will not turn back from its determination to point out injustices when it is a moral duty of conscience to do so." No priests are known to have been charged under the new code.

The ascension of a new Mexican president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, has brought indications of a church-state detente. With his electoral mandate widely doubted, facing newly strong opposition parties in a time of economic crisis, Salinas has made bold moves to broaden his appeal. In an unprecedented recognition of the Catholic Church's existence and influence, he invited leaders of the bishops' conference to his inauguration last December. Since then the government and the church have been holding private talks.

The Rev. Enrique Gonzales Torres, a priest involved in the talks, explains: "We are not seeking a special status for the Church; we just want a greater opening for the Church to contribute to society, like any other private group." Fr. Gonzalez Torres voices hope that "some points of the constitution which violate fundamental human rights -- the right to associate, to vote, to teach one's children... -- might at least be softened."

Evangelicals Vulnerable

Protestant (or evangelical) leaders have not been included in the church-state dialogue. Although they now represent at least five percent of the Mexican population, the evangelicals

are nearly invisible politically. To some extent, this obscurity results from divisions among the evangelicals, and their fear of entangling compromises with the government. But it also stems from their perception of a hostile social environment, and their sense of vulnerability to arbitrary state power.

The Mexican press regularly runs alarmist articles, with titles like "The Sects Invade," warning against the growth of evangelical churches. Both secular leftists and conservative Catholics have condemned Protestant evangelism as a U.S.-inspired and U.S.-financed effort to "erase the national identity." In this climate of suspicion, evangelicals are easy targets for abuse by local authorities.

Particularly in Indian areas of southern Mexico, officials have tried to enforce conformity to religious traditions by persecuting adherents of the more individualistic Protestant message. Over the past 20 years, some 8,000 Chamula Indian converts in Chiapas have been expelled from their communities, with loss of their homes and lands. Other evangelicals have been denied public utilities, refused access to the media, and threatened with confiscation of their churches. A few evangelical preachers have been murdered.

Catholic leaders have sometimes deplored the violence against evangelicals. In general, though, there has not been much cooperation between Mexican Catholics and Protestants in the defense of religious liberty. It would seem that all Mexican Christians should share a common interest in loosening the restrictions that bind their ministries. Surely that will be a long task, requiring concerted effort. President Salinas has given encouraging signs of allowing the Church a longer leash, but whether his administration is ready to let go of the leash -- the structure of anti-clerical laws -- remains to be seen.

-- Alan Wisdom

President Salinas has given encouraging signs of allowing the Church a longer leash, but whether his administration is ready to let go of the leash. . . remains to be seen.

Religion & Democracy

729 15th Street, N.W., Suite 900

Washington, D.C. 20005