

“GENTLE AS DOVES, CUNNING AS SERPENTS”: EXPERIENCES OF THE CHURCH DURING VIOLENCE IN JUNÍN¹

The geopolitical and economic significance of the central region of Peru to the country, and especially to Lima, explains the emphasis the Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path (*Partido Comunista del Perú-Sendero Luminoso*, PCP-SL), perhaps best known as the Shining Path, placed on consolidating its presence in the region. The strategic importance of Junín and the Shining Path's occupation efforts made the department the second most affected in the country in terms of violence. For these reasons, it is important to understand the role of the church during the armed conflict. In this study, we will focus on ecclesiastical parishes, communities, and organizations in the Andean zone of Junín, specifically in the Mantaro Valley and Tarma.

1. DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

1.1. THE CAAS/VISAH/PASDIH

In response to the growing need to confront emerging problems resulting from the expansion of the internal armed conflict in Junín, Monsignor Vallebuona entrusted Ángel Acuña with the formation of the Archdiocesan Commission for Social Action (*Comisión Arquidiocesana de Acción Social*, CAAS) in 1987. In 1992, the CAAS changed its name to the Vicariate of Solidarity (*Vicaría de Solidaridad*, VISAH), and since 1995 it has been known as the Church Ministry of Human Dignity (*Pastoral de Dignidad Humana*, PASDIH). Throughout the years, these organizations have depended on the work of priests, nuns and professionals – many of them young men and women – from diverse areas of expertise, and a core group of committed laypersons. The team set out to adapt to the diverse and changing predicament posed by the evolution of the conflict, relying on consultation from the Episcopal Commission for Social Action (*Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social*, CEAS). Since their establishment, these organizations have dealt with numerous populations affected by the conflict: victims, displaced persons, those imprisoned for terrorism, innocent prisoners, and relatives of victims and prisoners.

The Work of the Archdiocesan Commission for Social Action (CAAS) amidst Heightened Violence

The CAAS's work began during a period in which violence was intensifying in Huancayo and other zones in the Mantaro Valley and first started to appear in Alto Cunas. The CAAS provided legal assistance to detainees from other zones that were transferred to Huancayo, the majority of who had disregarded legal procedures, did not have relatives or contacts in the region and, in many cases, were undocumented and lacking support. Following the increase in state repression, the Archdiocesan Commission for Social Action addressed the problem of detainee disappearance and torture, maintaining a daily presence in Huancayo, Concepción, and Jauja military bases and police stations. CAAS members would first approach the barracks or police station to solicit information about a detainee and, once located, assist him/her in any way possible. The organization confirmed the

¹ Summary of Álvaro Calado's original text.

detainee's state of health as a means of discouraging state actors from using violent methods of interrogation or punishment. In severe cases, the CAAS helped relocate people being threatened outside of Huancayo or the country.

The CAAS also accompanied family members of victims whose bodies appeared near the Mantaro River to identify them in the morgue. Besides lending emotional support to relatives in these circumstances, the CAAS helped prevent new arbitrary detentions and disappearances of the family members themselves who were considered guilty by association by the military and police. Due to the large number of corpses the CAAS had to identify, organization members learned to identify those responsible for the murder based on the markings found on the body.

The Vicariate of Solidarity and the Church Ministry of Human Dignity

In 1992 the regime of Alberto Fujimori imposed anti-subversive measures that increased the number detentions by state forces. As a result, the Vicariate took on the task of defending the increasingly large number of prisoners it considered innocent. The defense of those accused of terrorism before recently created, faceless military tribunals was in itself a challenge.

"On the same day we presented our defense we had to present our questions and our conclusions. That very same day we also witnessed the sentencing; everything in one day. Sometimes it took one day, from the middle of one to the next, but it never lasted long. This gave us the impression that the evaluation of the proceedings wasn't sufficient." (Lawyer)

The Vicariate also assisted relatives of inmates accused of terrorism by creating a fund to offset the decrease in the families' income. To attend to more urgent cases, the archbishop directly channeled supplies through Caritas.

The Church, Human Rights, and Public Opinion

Church members denounced human rights violations, the evolution of the conflict in the region and the social problems inciting it. Furthermore, they defined their position in opposition to the regime's counter-subversive program. They not only took advantage of spaces granted to them by some media outlets, but also participated in diverse ceremonies to promote peace, as did Monsignor Emilio Vallebuona until his death in 1991. Monsignor José Ríos succeeded Vallebuona.

In 1992, with the beginning of the authoritarian regime, the outlook grew even less favorable for denouncing human rights violations committed by state actors or paramilitary forces. The task became a particularly risky undertaking for church representatives from both sides of the conflict. From the perspective of the state, they were "terrorist defenders," and for the insurgents, they were "disguised repression."

1.2 UCC HUARMY JINALLA SAYARISUN: AS A SINGLE WOMAN WE WILL RISE

As part of its work with those affected by the violence, the CAAS assisted a group of displaced² women and their family members primarily from Huancavelica, which the sisters of the Good Shepherd also helped support. During the first few years, in addition to offering a refuge, the CAAS worked with the women to help them overcome the crisis and better adjust to their new urban context. The CAAS implemented small weaving and handicraft workshops, enabling the women to earn incomes; they also promoted learning activities for raising small animals and a small greenhouse to improve families' nutrition. Additionally, they taught a group of these women to read and write. Through their accompaniment, the CAAS and sisters of the Good Shepherd contributed to the displaced families' recovery of faith and local traditions which helped to recreate their sense of identity and reestablish their social ties. *"Listening to them, making paintings for them (...) They used to go on talking, venting, making each other recall, 'How did you celebrate Holy Week in your town? Let's celebrate it like that here.' 'If you threw a party, how did you do it? Let's do that here'"* (Nun).

Later on, the formation of the Roundtable with Displaced Persons (*Mesa de Trabajo con Población Desplazada*) facilitated the displaced women's contact with other actors like the evangelical church. The roundtable organized discussions with the church during which there were "group prayers" and "evangelical reflections" in an attempt to reconcile the women and their families: *"It was very sad to know that they would never forgive the people who had assassinated their loved ones. That was what the women expressed"* (Nun). The Vicariate of Solidarity and the PASDIH formed part of this roundtable, which later gave rise to the National Roundtable.

The displaced women subsequently established an association called the *Ucc huarmy jinalla sayarisun*, which means "as a single woman we will rise." This association had the characteristics of a Christian-based community (place of welcome and religious reflection on experience, and an interest in proposing future projects).

1.3 THE UNIVERSITY MINISTRY

The University Ministry Team (*Equipo de Pastoral Universitaria*, EPU) was founded in 1988 after the National Youth Conference organized by the Archbishop of Huancayo's Youth Committee. The EPU united a group of students from the National University of Central Peru (*Universidad Nacional del Centro del Perú*, UNCP) from Christian movements, groups and communities such as ESCOGE, Catholic Youth (*Juventud Católica*, JUCA), Christian Life Communities (*Comunidades de Vida Cristiana*, CVX), among others. By the end of the 1980's, the National University of Central Peru had become one of the most important settings of the internal armed conflict in Junín. The Shining Path controlled the campus, making studies at the university an immense challenge for those who did not align themselves with its

² The displaced population started to arrive in Huancayo in the early 1980s, bringing with it the complex problem displacement posed in Peru: the lack of employment in a new urban context that demanded different work skills; the stigma of being native speakers of Quechua and from their place of origin, both of which marked them as terrorists with which few wanted to have connections; the lack of adequate housing; and the suffering itself as recent victims of violence.

teachings. The university later became a target for the counter-subversive strategy, leading to the disappearance and execution of dozens of students.

The Shining Path denounced the religiousness of EPU members as a source of passivity and resignation toward life. They threatened EPU members by placing posters in the university that referred to the Bishop of Huancayo and *“all of his followers”* as *“government spies,”* accusing them of *“colluding with the system”* (Ex-member of the EPU).

Extreme forms of violence became routine in the university, with student death or disappearance generating reactions of indifference or adaptation: *“One death was nothing new; it started to become part of the scenery. There was no more indignation, there was no more surprise, simply, ‘Why get involved here, why even bother?’”* (Ex-member of the EPU).

The EPU adopted an every-day life strategy, maintaining a low profile on campus since it understood how dangerous and useless it was to publicly confront those who challenged university control by resorting to violence. Instead, it approached those students with whom it believed it could dialogue on issues that mattered to them as university students, and assist them – and themselves – with any problem. In this way, the EPU functioned as a reference group that its members and other involved students could turn to at a time when distrust and fear dominated the university atmosphere. *“It was our job, regardless of what happened, and we were the ones who supported them. Many people were surprised, ‘Who are you?’ Then we would say we belonged to our team.”*

The EPU also organized meetings, workshops, and spiritual retreats. On occasion it confronted – anonymously, due to the risk it entailed – calls to violence on behalf of PCP-SL and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru, MRTA*), casting aside posters alluding to peace and denouncing violence.

The violence reached one EPU member. Sendero Luminoso assassinated Jorge Cerrón Acosta, known as “Coco” to his friends, on the university campus on September 30, 1991 when he was just 24 years old. Jorge studied agronomy and worked for Caritas in Huancayo. He was well-known among the students for his work in social promotion for the church. His friends from the EPU believe Jorge was assassinated because he openly spoke out about the irregularities that existed in his department as a result of the Shining Path’s presence.

2. THE CHURCH IN RURAL ZONES

2.1 THE COLCA AND CHONGOS PARISHES

The Colca and Chongos Alto parishes connect 35 villages. From 1972 to 1978 these parishes were led by a French diocesan priest, and between 1978 and 1994 they were under the charge of a Peruvian diocesan priest. In the 1970s, they implemented small development projects with the community’s participation. The parishes subsequently decided that the communities would take on projects that most interested them and that they could further develop. In this setting, social ministry work changed

as it adapted to the possibilities of work in the zone and to the characteristics of the local church, putting emphasis on ministry work in the formation of Christian communities. They additionally visited districts and surrounding neighborhoods, approaching schools to promote the teaching of courses on religion.

Coexistence: Daily Work, Accompaniment, and Questioning

In 1989, residents began to feel the presence of the Shining Path in the zone after the group assassinated 12 authorities from three communities in the Chongos Alto Plaza in April. During a November incursion into the town of Chacapampa, a PCP-SL member accused the priest of being a “friend of [Cardinal] Landázuri,” a “delegate of imperialism” and “a deceiver,” and advised that his presence was not welcome in the political ‘party.’ Shining Path members also repeated the saying that religion is the “opium of the people,” condemning religious traditions like patron saint days and saint and idol worship. They later took the priest aside and asked him, “Father, please, everything you have heard tonight, do not share it.”

Shining Path continued to try and present the image of the church as an “agent of imperialism” or a “spy.” However, in Colca and Chongos, with a local Peruvian parish and a project based on the formation of small communities, PCP-SL discourse did not match up with the reality of the situation. At the same time, Shining Path attempted to impede certain religious activities. Its violent actions resulted in the establishment of a military base in the peasant community of Vista Alegre and the formation of self-defense committees.

The same presence of parochial representatives from Chongos Alto and Colca during the years of greatest violence in the zone engendered suspicion and tension between local church and state actors. As a consequence, the homily became the only space for resistance and questioning of the violent situation, the reasons that had led to it, and the need for personal and collective change to prevent its heightening.

2.2 THE JESUITS OF JARPA

The San Juan de Jarpa parish is located in the Chupaca (Junín) province and serves the Alto Cunas communities. Between 1976 and 1993 the parish was under the charge of priests from the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Ursuline nuns also had a presence here until the second half of the 1980s, working with peasant women on health and nutrition issues, arts and crafts, and training them to run a medical center (the nuns themselves helped establish the center, which still exists today).

Using the local reality as a starting point, the parish tried to attend to people’s different needs. Along with the implementation of health and food services and technical consultancy on production issues, it created a space for dialogue, organization, and planning for community members. The idea was to strengthen production skills and community organization by addressing the following challenges: achieve minimum conditions of subsistence for a broad sector of the peasant population; introduce producers into the market; and develop greater levels of citizenship.

Adult Promotion and Training (Promoción y Capacitación de Adultos, PROCAD)

PROCAD was a peasant oriented educational initiative. Communities sent members to receive training and undertook projects they themselves had developed. PROCAD relied on the participation of professionals and technicians from different areas of expertise known as “professors.” The most important projects were communal stores and farms. Stores allowed citizens to acquire products at a low price, while farms sold their products so as to maintain self-sufficiency and invest their profits in public works. Additional organizations developed from these projects.³ PROCAD’s intervention aimed to improve living conditions in the zone and emphasized the strengthening of communal organization.

The Santa María Association

The Santa María Association was a base community that Jesuit priests from the San Juan de Jarpa parish promoted from 1984 to 1988 in response to the need to have a space for those who did not fit within PROCAD’s work profile (i.e., peasants who finished their schooling and had certain economic skills, as limited as they might be, in addition to requiring a greater time commitment). The Association’s work began around Caritas’ food distribution, taking advantage of the space to offer basic literacy courses, a few small production projects, and to provide access to seeds for planting crops. All of this was accompanied by religious reflection work characteristic of the parish. Even when violence grew and the Association closed, people approached priests wanting to continue meeting.

“The task was: ‘The circumstances under which we live where they’ve killed people we know and don’t know what will happen, but there is always the possibility of more death, do you think the Ten Commandments still make sense? Do not kill, commit adultery, steal, does this make sense?’ They react by saying, ‘Yes, yes of course. That is how we should live (...)’ That meant there was hope (...) The Christian perspective is that ‘it’s worth it to live like a Christian today, live the law of love, try to be honorable people’...” (Priest).

Period of Violence

Before violence began in Alto Cunas, the Jesuits were assessing the transfer of their projects in Jarpa as the period they had established for their work was coming to an end. It was in that moment that the first deaths related to the conflict occurred, leading the Jesuits to make the decision to maintain their and the PROCAD’s presence in the zone.

³ Like the Multi-Communal Association for Commercialization (*Asociación Multicomunal de Comercialización, AMCO*) responsible for the industrialization and commercialization of Andean crops such as maca, quinoa or tarwi, and the Multi-Communal Association of Farmers and Artisans of Alto Cunas (*Asociación Multicomunal de Ganaderos y Artesanos del Alto Cunas, AMGAAC*) dedicated to the commercialization of products made with sheep wool.

In its first incursion into Jarpa (August 1988), PCP-SL assassinated the district governor and destroyed the mayor's house, the municipality locale and PROCAD facilities, as it was accustomed to doing with institutions that supported development. Due to the life-threatening danger PROCAD and the community members faced, the Jesuits stopped their work but continued visiting the zone to attend to their ministry. At the beginning of 1989, two Jesuit priests took on parish work more regularly. This same year, the Shining Path tried to advance to its "strategic balance" phase of more aggressive actions. Instead of conducting a political project with the people as it had done in other zones, PCP-SL instead imposed its presence, did not dialogue, and utilized coercion and fear to connect with peasant organizations and dissuade community leadership. It forced many young people to follow the party and began to control daily life. For example, it sold the farm and communal projects the community created, forced authorities to resign or be assassinated, blocked roads, and restricted free movement of the people, all of which affected commercial trade and, consequently, the standard of living.

Sendero Luminoso also attacked popular religiosity, social ministry work, and the "spiritual work" of the church. It prohibited the celebration of Christmas in the communities and tried to silence church actors. This unique reaction in Jarpa appears to be due to the fact that the zone was strategic for PCP-SL and because of the important role the church played through its work promoting, organizing and training people.

"A row of 10 or 15 [Shining Path members] entered in the middle of mass, each one putting his guns behind the head or back of the people that were there. They made them approach the altar (...) and I continued; I never stopped the ceremony..." (Priest).

Many times Shining Path members sought out priests to condemn and execute them. The response of the Jesuits was basically to question the violence, authoritarianism and inconsistency of the approach the subversives took and their own actions in Jarpa. They did it both publicly and in face-to-face encounters.

"They took me over there, (...) and said from the beginning, 'Today we are going to execute the priest!' Because he is an imperialist, he is the opium of the people, he is exploiting you,' and other things like that. When the women were really scared, they were all crying, even after three or four hours (...) of Shining Path's typical discourse. But the peasants did not understand; the church, this priest was responsible for all of history's evils. Then they sent me to the plaza. 'Take him to the plaza and make sure the people don't leave because we are going to kill him'..." (Priest).

The destruction of PROCAD and the explicit threats toward its employees and the priests led the Jesuits to close PROCAD and terminate the base community's work. They also decided that one of the priests would leave the area. Shining Path members tried to eliminate any form of organization or project that the party itself did not generate. It even used contradictory approaches in that it praised the work it was destroying only to replicate it afterward: *"It is our job to kill you, but tell us everything we need to know so we can do it ourselves"* (Priest). From then on the relationship established with church

representatives was openly hostile and continued to be so during the entire period that PCP-SL controlled the Alto Cunas zone.

On the other hand, with the installation of a military base in Alto Cunas in April of 1990 and with the support of the military, self-defense committees formed in numerous communities. This finally led to the PCP-SL's defeat toward 1991. However, the presence of church actors in Jarpa, their close relationship with the community, and their defense of human rights also made them seem suspicious to the military, explicitly or implicitly marking them as "Shining Path accomplices and defenders."

"People were able to follow the camouflaged trucks [used by combined forces to raid communities and detain presumed Shining Path members and/or PCP-SL collaborators] that returned and entered the Chilca barracks, the primary battalion there. Therefore, I had the basis to say 'we have proof that a truck entered and left and those are the same ones...' And I told the bishop, and with the bishop, we went to the general. The general, shouting, lost his temper. Shouting, he accused us of being terrorists; he said that we were with them. 'If the Shining Path is there and you are alive, you are on its side...' (Priest).

The conflict in the basin of Cunas continued until 1992, and the military maintained its presence until 1995. During this time, church actors in Jarpa were an obstacle for violence; their legitimacy in the zone and the relevance of an institution like the church made it difficult to openly get rid of them. The church fulfilled an integrating role between rural communities and the region's urban areas, particularly in the defense of human rights by exercising control and denouncing the abuse and use of violence against the people.

2.3 THE SISTERS OF SAN JOSÉ AND THE COLUMBANS IN HUASAHUASI

Priests from the Missionary Society of Saint Columban arrived in Peru in 1950, conducting their work, linking issues of faith with daily concerns of food, health, and social organization.

Their goal was to lay the groundwork for a local church that, later on, the diocesan clergy would adopt. Mission work, originally intended as work with non-believers or those not belonging to the church, was reconsidered: *"...Now we interpret outsiders as being those who are marginalized in society; in other words, poor people, those who are excluded, who do not have status, whose rights are not recognized, often times with absolutely no food, healthcare, education, etc. That is the basic criterion that redefines our work as missionaries"* (Priest).

At the beginning of the 1980s, they took charge of the Huasahuasi parish located in the Huasahuasi district in Tarma. Shortly after, the Columbans invited the sisters of San José to support their work.

In Huasahuasi, the priests organized workshops on carpentry and other trades, while the sisters developed a women's training and organization project. They also devoted themselves to children's

education after school hours. One of their most relevant initiatives was with the mother's clubs as they took charge of distributing food; this served to supplement the food supply for families in the zone.

With the increase in violence in Huasahuasi, nuns began to receive threats to stop distributing food, and priests were warned that their work should be strictly reduced to the administration of sacraments. With the police's abandonment and the authorities' resignation, they decided to remove the priests and replace them with another Columban. The new priest directed his ministry work toward religious formation through the preparation of catechists. In spite of this, he also received threats and was accused of having "black pockets": *"Someone who has money and uses it to manipulate the people."*

In May 1991, under these circumstances and during a Shining Path incursion in Huasahuasi, subversives executed Australian nun Irene McCormack, along with four other people from the community, accusing her of distributing food and being a "Yankee imperialist."

After these events, the Columbans let the parish priest freely decide whether it would stay or leave the zone. He decided to stay, considering his presence necessary in light of what had happened: *"Our role is to accompany our people in the good, the bad and the ugly"* (Priest). The Columbans withdrew from the zone in 1999 when the violence had ended, handing the parish over to the local church.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Tension between Shining Path and church actors varied based on the significance of the church's work in the local setting. Where the church appeared to be a relatively important actor for its work in promotion, organization, and training, it confronted greater violence and control from PCP-SL.

Religious workers who stayed in rural zones during the period of violence supported their communities in different ways, making visible their conditions of marginalization and poverty. The church redefined its role in response to the increasing control conflict actors asserted in the zone. This meant adapting its work strategies in order to achieve a sustainable presence in terms of security, and at the same time, a significant presence for communities that withstood violence.

This presence and involvement that some priests, nuns, and laypersons maintained was expressed in different ways: through discourse, as a method of questioning the situation and conflict actors, or through behavior itself, trying to differentiate themselves from the actors and violent dynamic of the conflict. They also drew attention to human rights violations in order to defend them, and spread information on the situation in their work zones in an attempt to earn respect for the local population.