“FOR BIG PROBLEMS, SMALL SOLUTIONS.”
EVERYDAY LIFE IN TIMES OF VIOLENCE: A RESPONSE FROM CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

1. SAN JUAN DE LURIGANCHO AND THE PARISHES

1.1 THE GROWTH OF THE DISTRICT AND ITS POPULATION
San Juan de Lurigancho is the most populous district in the country, home to 2.6 percent of the national population. This district in Lima experienced a dizzying pace of growth beginning in the 1970s from the wave of Andean migrants and, shortly thereafter, the arrival of displaced persons from zones of violence like Ayacucho, Huancavelica, and Apurímac. The latter occupied the district’s intermediate and upper zones, forming the following towns: Huanta 1, Huanta 2, Cangallo, José Carlos Mariátegui, and Bayóvar, among others. These places eventually would be identified as “red zones.”

During the establishment of these towns, women began to organize to combat problems generated by poverty, forming public dining halls so as to cover basic nutrition needs for their families. Even before this, in light of the national strike on July 19, 1977, solidarity committees from Christian communities had opened soup kitchens. In this way, community organizations were modeling themselves based on the situations they confronted.

1.2 THE PARISHES’ PRESENCE AND ORGANIZATION
Understanding the magnitude of inequalities, poverty, and violence faced by these recent arrivals, Catholic congregations decided to engage with new residents as they attempted to establish themselves. The church accompanied the people as they sought to make sense of a changing and confusing world, giving a whole new meaning to their life and human development.

However, for such an enormous task, ecclesiastical workers were always small in number. At the beginning of the 1970s there were two parishes; in 1987, this number had only increased to five. These parishes made up the Fifth Deanship of the Archdiocese of Lima which fell under the charge of Monsignor Augusto Beuzeville, Lima’s auxiliary bishop. With the formation of new dioceses in 1996, the San Juan de Lurigancho district passed over to the Chosica diocese. Since then, the district has been divided into twelve parishes, with each one serving the people through its chapels. For the most part, the neighbors themselves constructed them so they could participate in processes of religious formation.

In those days there were some fifty members of the religious order, almost all of whom were foreigners of different nationalities, who had “opted” to “accompany the poor” in their search for better living conditions.

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1 Summary of Luis Mújica’s original text.
2. THE PRESENCE OF VIOLENCE AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS

From the second half of the 1980s and onward, violence became increasingly present, particularly in the upper zone of the district where school walls, street posts, public establishments, and chapels became the “town’s chalkboards.” The Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path (Partido Comunista del Perú–Sendero Luminoso, PCP-SL) painted slogans, warnings, and personal threats. In addition, they placed their flags and torches with the sickle and hammer on hills or other strategic locations to mark the territory of “subversive” groups. Dead dogs also appeared hung with threatening signs. There were letters harassing leaders, pro-Shining Path fliers, subversive marches, the use of loudspeakers for their propaganda in favor of the armed conflict, occupations, pillages of stores and delivery trucks, days of armed strikes, and the assassination of leaders. Parts of San Juan de Lurigancho were becoming “occupied zones,” marked by uncertainty and insecurity, which led to a deterioration of resident relations and life.

The violent presence of both the Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru, MRTA) made problems in the district more severe. Shining Path members tried to infiltrate organizations using a mimetic strategy so as to monitor and control popular leaders, nuns, and priests who had influence in neighborhood, youth, and women’s organizations. From these institutions they also tried to recruit supporters for their violent struggle. With this same goal in mind, they performed “moralizing” acts in some towns by assassinating thieves and delinquents, showing residents how they brought “order” and “security” to the neighborhood.

Gradually, local activities were restricted as PCP-SL expanded its presence in the zone, securing an omnipresent image that intimidated people and created a climate of survival. “San Juan de Lurigancho was the district in Lima with the greatest number of terrorist attacks between 1990 and 1992: thirty-four attacks in 1990, thirty-seven in 1991, and ninety-two in 1992, with 47 deaths” (Layperson).

On the other hand, the state, which maintained an inefficient presence in areas of local life, began to act with violence in many sectors; instead of contributing to pacification, it further enhanced people’s sense of insecurity and distrust.

3. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES: THE DEFENSE OF LIFE

In this context, Christian communities collectively and slowly constructed a methodology for confronting such life-threatening actions. They did so by incorporating a universal and long-term approach in which they presented justice and peace as values requiring permanent commitment and application both in everyday life and the public terrain. Hence, actions during the internal armed conflict were met with various forms of confrontation. Overall, these actions took place both in everyday life and in the
symbolic sense,² supporting people during difficult times brought on by poverty and violence and, at the same time, rejecting all that constituted the degradation of human dignity.

“Firstly, we care about having a supportive presence among the people. The desire to share their daily life motivates us; their problems, their battles and hopes. It is a presence that supports the people’s efforts to organize and search for solutions to the many needs they have. This supportive presence has its contemplative dimension in that it led us to recognize the Lord’s presence in the life of the people that, often times in the midst of great poverty, includes the values they preach to us.

Secondly, we endeavor to positively embrace the people’s religiosity and provide, in an educational effort, religious services the people request. Specifically with regards to sacraments, we have been able to develop valuable activities that achieve a committed faith and a more dynamic relevance for the church among a diverse set of people.

Thirdly, I would say that all of our efforts were directed toward small communities of youth and adult so as to deepen their understanding of their reality; to contemplate this reality and the inclusion of the people in it in light of God’s word and, in that way, achieve more mature commitments to the transformation of this reality and in the church’s work.”³

The permanence of church members in the zone is a testimony of each actor’s commitment to the transformation of social conditions and the establishment of human relationships in their environment. This translated to the “presence” and “involvement” of church actors (laypersons, nuns, and priests), who, in the beginning, supported the people and their demands to the state to provide basic goods for a modest living. With the heightening of the violence, church actors adopted a position in which they rejected all forms of human rights violations and supported people at risk. The challenge consisted of “being the church, or constructing a Christian community in the midst of that anguish, that fear” (Priest).

Despite the fear, Christian communities, in their task of “defending the rights of the poor and oppressed according to the evangelical mandate,” (Medellín, Paz, 22), tried to organize a response to the disappearances, selective assassinations, attempts on life, and other crimes by institutionalizing the Church Ministry of Human Rights in the zone, to defend life and show solidarity with victims of political violence. In the specific case of those displaced by violence from Ayacucho, Huancavelica, and other places, the Episcopal Commission for Social Action (Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social, CEAS) implemented a project that contributed to its organization, relying on an ad-hoc team and local church actors’ collaboration.

The church’s actions had immediate repercussions, resulting in threats and monitoring. These came as written notes, “strange visits,” or warnings on the walls, and primarily originated from PCP-SL ranks, but

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² Symbolic actions allude to specific events with the people’s massive participation and attempt to impact, in some way, public opinion and the strength of Christian communities’ identity as an organization or institution.

also from the police. Demands to “keep quiet” and for the expulsion of church actors, in particular foreign actors (“gringo fuera,” “yankee, go home”), frequently appeared on walls in the zone. Furthermore, some youth leaders from the parishes also received anonymous threats. In addition to these threats were methods for monitoring (or regulating) members of Christian communities. For example, it seemed that some nuns were monitored due to their consultation work with women’s organizations as the guerrillas considered it a space of great strategic value. The increase in concerns generated a climate of insecurity, making it necessary for residents to look out for one another and take greater caution with strangers who hung around the organizations.

“They tried to infiltrate the parish without much success. After 1992, there were verbal attacks against us and lies accusing us of embezzling donations, etc. Graffiti appeared on church walls that said ‘Yankees, get out of Peru,’ etc. They watched us day and night in an overt and provocative way, sometimes following us as far as Lima without letting us out of their sight. We felt they wanted to get rid of us since they already had so much power in the zone. It seemed that all the organizations were infiltrated and under their power, except the parish. All the NGOs had already retreated. They robbed our house several times; we think it was Shining Path members at least one or two times because they controlled the streets at night, and as PCP-SL threatened thieves, there were almost no robberies. In the end, there were fliers attacking us and direct threats against us: ‘If you don’t leave, there will be bloodshed’...” (Secular missionary)

With the objective of preventing infiltrations within the parish structure, “they called for vigilance” and adopted cautious measures like not allowing those from outside the zone to participate.

3.1 BUILDING CHURCH MINISTRY IN DAILY LIFE
The local church ministry had to respond constantly and permanently “to the increase in severe and unfortunate cases” (Priest) that complicated the situation in the district. In addition to the violence, there was economic inflation, which deepened poverty levels and generated a breeding ground the Shining Path planned to exploit. Subsequently, the structural adjustment policies Alberto Fujimori’s administration imposed not only destroyed civil society institutions, but also fragmented popular organizations to the point of radically debilitating them, provoking a sense of precariousness among the people who were waiting for a solution at any cost.

Christian communities mounted a series of initiatives oriented toward giving assistance and, in some way, ameliorating the people’s poverty and misery. Above all, they attempted to “mobilize neighbors to help.” Soup kitchens are an example of this. The Apostolic Sisters of the Heart of Jesus, through their complimentary work in San Hilarión, managed to promote the organization of women’s groups and formed the Social Action Commission.

Other central activities consisted of maintaining religious services for the faithful, which were organized virtually outside and with the majority participation of women and children as males went to find sustenance for their families. “The simple act of being present in the zone is a testament of the
commitment and is worth more than a thousand words...It was a presence that worked, that invited locals to try to promote leadership” (Priest).

Moreover, in terms of training, Christian communities tried to keep their members not only active, but also adequately prepared to confront problems stemming from poverty and violence. To this end, they organized activities designed to raise awareness on the situation they were experiencing and to search for the means to creatively confront reality, favoring joint organization and action. Faced with actions by the Shining Path that affected daily life, Christian communities adapted by carrying on with activities as planned. For example, when there were blackouts, they carried out church and educational activities by candlelight in the School of Christian Formation. Participants did not stop attending classes despite the fear it meant for many. With their attendance, they expressed their rejection of, and resistance to, Shining Path’s coercion.

Another important space was church assemblies. Nearly one hundred people from all the parishes attended to exchange news on violence in the zone. Bishop Augusto Beuzeville, with his presence, supported the people’s actions at critical times. They invited professionals from diverse areas of expertise to monthly meetings with the intention of analyzing the social and political situation: “Later on there were reports and actions we had to put into practice. This was very important in that it didn’t occur in other places” (Layperson). There was coordination among church actors early on to address concerns about political violence.

Between 1987 and 1993, Christian communities participated in educational courses and workshops on human rights. In 1990, they studied electoral conditions, and in 1993, church actors signed a letter opposing the death penalty. In other words, the local church was not paralyzed in response to social changes; on the contrary, it tried to respond to what it considered “new challenges and new questions.” In that way, it affirmed its commitment and loyalty to history and the Gospel. Therefore, it was a time where there were signs of violence and death, but also of life and solidarity.

The church’s actions on education not only served to spread its teachings, but also to construct support networks while conducting small-scale activities for the benefit of people who found themselves in danger or critical need. This way of proceeding in the zone was the true basis for confronting any contingency stemming from violent groups’ actions. In effect, church organization through local Christian communities was a kind of strong social network that could resist any attack.

Thus the church constituted a serious obstacle to subversive goals in that its constant presence among the people was symbolically efficient; not only because of the open commitment generating social networks which were then sustained in the service of the poor and needy (which implied the defense of human rights), but also because Christian communities publically denounced human rights violations.

In 1987, after the Deanship’s Church Ministry Week in San Juan de Lurigancho, a Human Rights Commission was established in each parish, trying to coordinate with other institutions with the same aims. Community members’ formation and spirituality were framed from the perspective of active non-
violence; the church promoted various days of national fasting and prayer for life and peace, educated citizens on the Constitution and individual rights, and did everything possible so that defense of life was the central focus of church action in the zone. That same year, the church raised a petition against crimes of due obedience and a campaign for those detained or disappeared in the armed conflict under the slogan Let’s Forge a Free Nation.

In 1994, the church held an assembly with the slogan “Path of Evangelization: Challenges, Responses, and Proposals” in order to reconsider what would constitute Christian communities’ courses of action under the circumstances. Assembly members emphasized “challenges in ecclesiastical reality,” which spoke to the critical situation that caused people to worry about “their own survival rather than helping others; violence infiltrated every aspect of life, dehumanizing us.” Between 1995 and 1997 with the slogan “From the Poor on behalf of the Gospel: Forging Communities that Promote Life,” they established the following priorities: attend to those most marginalized, support the formation of laypersons, use media resources, strengthen the church ministry for families and youth, and coordinate between the church as a whole and the social ministry or church ministry of human dignity. An extremely important space the local church created was the “Church Ministry Commission of Human Rights” that later adopted the name “Church Ministry Commission of Human Dignity” with the establishment of the diocese in 1996.

3.2 RITUAL AND SYMBOLIC CONFRONTATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Christian communities confronted poverty and violence not only with their actions on a daily basis, but also with symbolic actions in the public sphere, using the resources on which they relied: reason, argument, the feeling of rejection and organization. The church made its voice heard rejecting those who caused death and, at the same time, offered encouragement and solidarity for victims. It articulated its message – with dense social, political and religious content – in the public sphere, using symbolic elements like cultural acts, acts of solidarity and marches. While the first acts emphasized raising awareness of the importance of life and peace, those that followed constituted multiple, boisterous and, to a certain degree, therapeutic spaces of demonstrations.

Cultural activities began in the 1980s in Caja de Agua and later expanded to Canto Chico, San Hilarión and Canto Grande. During cultural events, the church touched on “issues regarding the country’s political situation from an ecclesiastical perspective,” singing songs that generally described what was happening at the time. Another important public space was Sunday mass. Parishes often developed discourses in the homilies arguing in favor of life so as to persuade those who were on a path of violence to abandon it.

On the other hand, the long walks and marches in which communities participated exposed a sector of civil society that rejected and repudiated human rights violations. They were difficult to organize in that they had to overcome many fears, but they succeeded. As was affirmed during one of the mobilizations, “Walking for peace means making an effort, taking initiative, uniting and organizing so that conditions in life that allow for peace emerge.”
Two paradigmatic events demonstrate citizen solidarity and consciousness in opposition to the little value for human life. The first was the death of nun Juanita Sawyer and eight jail inmates in 1983 when the prisoners took her and the others hostage in an attempt to escape. They were killed by the police. The following month citizens placed a cross at the site of the assassination that said “Thou shall not kill.” Every year since, they hold a commemoration at the site, reflecting on the contempt for life. Subsequently, another dramatic crime mobilized the people. On September 14, 1991, Fortunato Collazos refused to lend a loudspeaker to a subversive group. When Alfredo Aguirre saw that they were going to kill him, he went to Fortunato’s defense saying: “If you are against my neighbor, you are also against me.” Shining Path members killed him and cut out his tongue. Despite the fact that the people had become aware of the fear, they felt it was time to stand up to violent actors by forming the “Broad Front for Peace and Development.” On October 27, they held a Great March for Peace and Development with a massive presence of people rejecting and condemning violence. A giant poster reproduced Alfredo Aguirre’s words. It was an important point of inflection that allowed citizens to break the paralysis that fear created. It was also a blow to PCP-SL as it saw the population expressing its rejection of the group.

“That march, which a recently created ‘United Front’ and San Juan de Lurigancho’s Christian communities organized, was meant to break the fear that paralyzed us and made us accomplices of the barbarity. Yes, I believe that march that united people from all of Lima’s sectors and mobilized prominent democratic politicians was part of the popular initiatives that finally crushed acts of terror in the country. We felt like a vibrant church, on our way, included among the people, and magnetized by a faith that moves mountains.”

Different mobilizations or activities the people conducted in San Juan de Lurigancho were tokens of the awareness of and solidarity with what was transpiring. The Christian commitment acquired a concrete expression in the people’s daily life instead of isolating them from national and international social processes. Local civil society made its own the symbolic expression proposed by Christian communities in opposition to all of the violence that was occurring, not only in San Juan de Lurigancho, but also in solidarity with Ayacucho, Huancavelica and Huánuco.

3.3 LIFE AMID THE VIOLENCE
The impact of violence on personal life was intense in that it overrode both the people and organizations’ ability to comprehend and respond. Under these circumstances, they made an effort to understand the phenomenon of violence, organizing meetings or taking advantage of spaces for discussion in order to research the violent protagonists’ behavior. Furthermore, they relied on the collaboration of a group of people and institutions that tried to mitigate the effects of the violent climate on individuals.

“Personal life was strongly affected; it was like a psychological war against us. We knew that, as foreigners, we were in PCP-SL’s line of fire. The police and military also suspected us; they didn’t understand why we were staying in the ‘red zone.’ According to them, that was only possible if we were involved; that’s what they told us one time...The Bartolomé de las Casas Institute with Maria Ángela Cánepa gave us psychological support during the most difficult phases, which was very helpful.” (Layperson)
The support church actors received was established at various levels and equaled the need to examine the human dimension that had been neglected; for example, the fear and uncertainty people felt. Despite this, the church in San Juan de Lurigancho was able to support itself because the Christian communities and majority presence of laypersons made it more dynamic; they were the ones who implemented the different activities, while the priests and nuns, who were few in number, played “supporting” and “guiding” roles. “We understood ourselves as on-site workers, living together with the people. We can’t say that it was in some way clericalism. Yet while we were, for the most part, foreigners assuming responsibility alongside the local people, we had an important role” (Priest).

This church was present and “made sure it was utilized” (Priest), doing whatever necessary to stand up “in defense of life.” This was “the reputation we wanted the church to have in San Juan de Lurigancho: You will not kill prisoners, you will not kill in times of political violence, and you will not kill with hunger. It’s more than that; in defense of life and its dignity” (Priest). Moreover, the church’s actions aimed to sustain the residents and communities’ hope.

“In order to express hope, we planted many peace trees. In order to remind us of our mission as the church during inhumane times, we planted the seeds of peace in many places. In order to not let misfortune get the better of us, we realized many solidarity collections. In order to not forget the disappeared and assassinated, we filled the walls with their names and chanted for them in litanies. When terror became our daily bread and fear paralyzed, the many small gestures of comfort to those in mourning, of welcome to displaced persons, of visits to detainees, of food to the hungry, of accommodation to those persecuted, of wakes for the dead, they said compassion had not died” (Church actor).

CONCLUSION

The Christian communities’ itinerary in San Juan de Lurigancho in Lima can be summarized in the following phrase: “For big problems, small solutions.” Poverty and various forms of violence – the biggest problems – increased alarmingly during the armed conflict. Small solutions were the actions that Christian communities that had “opted for the poor” implemented, oriented and sustained in the hope of seeing social transformation since they believed poverty and violence were conditions contrary to God’s plan. These actions developed on a daily basis, in the public sphere against violent factions and in
favor of life and peace, center on church actors’ presence and involvement with people from the district.

“Now I ask myself what would’ve become of our district if church actors – priests, nuns and laypersons – hadn’t been here confronting this situation... I believe the seeds of life we were sowing, not only in those decades, but also in the church’s construction process itself in those places, during the military dictatorship, etc., express a faith and a practice confronted at different times, and it responded in the most intelligent way. It was small-scale, incessant work to be sure, but for how modest it was, it was done in an organized and coordinated way at the dean’s level. It wasn’t easy to defeat and live with fear, but even like that, we were able to continue being faithful to the gospel and faithful to a clergy practice that incarnated ministry work in the spaces of the poor.” (Church actor)