Interview: "Torture Report Leaves Unfinished Business"

William T. Cavanaugh
Torture Report Leaves Unfinished Business
Class Exploitation Remains a Problem in Chile

Despite the release of a groundbreaking report that documents the torture of more than 28,000 people during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, many obstacles remain before reconciliation is achieved in Chile, according to a Roman Catholic theologian.

In late November, the Chilean government released a report detailing the torture during the 1973-90 regime of Pinochet. Then, on Dec. 13, the government indicted the general for the kidnapping of nine dissidents and the killing of one of them.

In the report, Chilean President Ricardo Lagos offered lifelong pensions of about $190 per month to the surviving torture victims. But the victims do not want money; they want justice, said William T. Cavanaugh, associate profesor of theology at St. Thomas University, in St. Paul, Minn. Cavanaugh is the author of Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ, a book that focuses on what happened to the Roman Catholic Church in Chile during Pinochet’s dictatorship.

BBC News quoted Lagos as saying, “The report makes us face an inescapable reality—political imprisonment and torture constituted an institutional practice of the state, which is absolutely unacceptable and alien to Chile’s historical tradition.”

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But the wounds have not healed, declared Cavanaugh.

“There’s a kind of institutionalized forgetfulness in the nation-state that wants to erase the past constantly,” he said. “In a sense, in all nation-states there’s a forgetfulness of class in the interest of national unity and the rhetoric that we want to move on together as one nation and leave the wounds of the past behind.”

Such rhetoric may be a way to bury wounds, “but it is not a way to heal them,” he said.

A plea for unity can be a rhetorical tool to reinforce divisions, he said. The total cost of the pensions has been pegged at about $60 million per year and some people have pointed out that $60 million would build a major highway. Now, he said, the victims are being found guilty of denying their countrymen a new highway.

While South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission offers an outstanding model for healing the wounds of war, the situations in the two countries are quite different. In South Africa, the formerly oppressed people are now in power. In Chile, the people who held power under Pinochet remain powerful, said Cavanaugh.

Having worked on a cooperative building project in a poor area of Santiago from 1987 to 1989, Cavanaugh later researched the activities of the Roman Catholic Church during the regime.

In his book, Cavanaugh notes that nearly everyone involved in the Chilean drama was outwardly a Catholic. He quotes a Catholic bishop as saying, “To resist an atheist dictatorship is easy; what’s difficult is to resist a Catholic dictatorship.”

Many church members felt the brunt of oppression and torture, said Cavanaugh, and a group developed within the church called Christians for Socialism, whose members included many who became active in the Communist and Socialist parties.

Early in the regime, the official church was cautious and secretly applauded Pinochet, said Cavanaugh. But that changed when it became apparent how brutal the regime was and how it oppressed people and the church, especially activist priests and nuns, many of whom had to flee the country.

continued on page 11
Torture Report  

By 1976-77, nearly all of the church hierarchy in Chile had come to the full realization of what was going on and had become more outspoken. As a result, the church became the target of harassment and threats, according to Cavanaugh.

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Cavanaugh describes how the church gradually came to reclaim the Eucharist as the means by which God forms a concrete body, the body of Christ, which makes claims on members' bodies as well as to their souls. Eventually, the church began to excommunicate torturers and declare publicly who is and who is not a member of the body. According to Cavanaugh, the solidarity created by the Eucharist enabled Chilean Christians to resist the state's attacks.

As The Economist noted on Dec. 2, the recent report overturns the myth that torture was just the work of sick-minded, over-enthusiastic subordinates. The release of the report has elicited admissions of responsibility from the army, air force, navy and police.

There are lessons from Chile that can be applied elsewhere, said Cavanaugh.

"One of the things we need to do is keep the memory of victims alive," he said. "That is something which ought to be built into the church's mission and something I think we can learn from Chile."

"I think, too, the question of nationalism is an important lesson here. The church needs to be constantly on its guard against allowing nationalism to warp the imagination of the church, to truncate and parochialize the church into something which falls within national borders," said Cavanaugh. "I think that's such an important thing now, especially in the United States, where nationalism and patriotism are being used to such an extent to forget about class differences and to stoke fear and opposition."