

Bishop asks Argentine church to suspend priests who worked with military

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--A prominent Roman Catholic bishop has asked the church to suspend any priest found guilty of collaborating with the military in the "dirty war" of the late 1970's.

Monsignor Miguel Hesayne, archbishop of the southern town of Viedma, said "If any clergyman, priest, deacon or bishop collaborated with the military regime's torture, repression or kidnapping, there is a very serious canonical punishment: they should be suspended from the ministry, if it is proved."

Debate over the role of the church during the strong repression of the dictatorship was reopened recently after a former navy officer decided to break a silence pact agreed among military officials and told court proceedings about torture and murder during the civil strife.

Captain Adolfo Scilingo said military chaplains counseled officers who took part in death flights where detainees were drugged, undressed and thrown alive into the ocean from airplanes.

Scilingo charged that church authorities condoned the activities and soothed the consciences of those disturbed by the action. One civil rights group, The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo said priests and chaplains actually helped to extract confessions from those detained.

Human rights groups say that at the height of the "dirty war" against leftist guerrillas, 4,000 people were killed and 10,000 disappeared.

Bishop Hesayne said "It worries me and it has always worried me that some men of the church did not have a very clear idea that torture is never humane nor Christian."

Meanwhile five senior Argentina bishops have issued a public statement of remorse.

In response to the charges of complicity, the bishops said, "We will surely carry on our consciences for the rest of our lives our repentance for not having done much more to prevent young people who belonged to our Church from choosing guerrilla violence, and to prevent the repressors from committing such aberrations against human rights."

Making the statement were Archbishops Bianchi Di Cercano, Jorge Casaretto, Justo Laguna, Domingo Castagno and Carlos Galan.

"This document was written in haste, but was an act of the heart," said Bishop Laguna. "None of us have the ability to resuscitate the dead, but we can try to prevent it from happening again."

The five bishops, along with Monsignor Hesayne rejected charges in the Argentine newspaper "Pagina 12" that the former

Papal Nuncio in Argentina, Pio Laghi, was an accomplice of the military junta and did nothing to stop the human rights abuses.

Laghi, now a cardinal the "Clarín" newspaper he often played tennis with the junta's most famous leader, Admiral Emilio Massera, but knew nothing then about the torture and killings.

Massera, Navy commander-in-chief at the time of the repression, broke years of silence with a brief statement condemning those who criticized the church and the former Papal Nuncio.

"I want to emphatically state that during my time as commander-in-chief all church authorities and in particular Monsignor Pio Laghi, for whom I have deep respect and admiration, concerned themselves permanently about the fate of the so-called disappeared and detained people," he said.

Massera received a life sentence in 1986 for his part in the violence. He was pardoned with other junta leaders in 1990.

Massera's statement was criticized by the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Corach who called it "inopportune" and said the former official

"should not speak."

Despite his pardon, Massera is generally loathed in Argentina, and was recently forced to leave a restaurant with his family when fellow diners recognized him.

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