

that challenging character of newness which once provoked both enthusiasm and persecution. But that indeed would be Good News to theology.

## **Military Repression in Brazil**

### **Report of Fr Tito de Alencar Lima, O.P.**

‘ . . . I persisted in denying, and they continued to give me electric shocks, kicks, blows with a rod and punches in the ribs.

Once Captain Albernaz had me open my mouth to “receive the sacrament of the eucharist”. They put in an electric wire. My mouth became completely swollen, preventing normal speech. They shouted accusations against the Church, saying that priests are homosexuals because they do not marry. At 2 p.m. they finished the session. They brought me to the cell where I lay stretched out on the floor.

At 6 p.m. they brought me something to eat but I could not swallow a thing since my mouth was one big wound. A few minutes afterwards, I was led to the interrogation room for an “explanation”. There I found the same team of Captain Albernaz. They asked me the same questions and repeated the same accusations. To explain my resistance to the torture, they concluded that I must be a guerilla and I was hiding my participation in attacks on banks.

The questioning began again, in order to make me confess my share in the attacks: electric shocks, kicks in the genital organs and in the stomach were repeated. I was beaten with small planks of wood, cigarette butts were snuffed out on my body. For five hours I was subjected to this dog treatment. Finally they had me walk the “Polish corridor” (a torture consisting in having the prisoner pass between a double file of soldiers who are beating him all the while until he falls unconscious). I was assured that this was just a sample of what would happen to the Dominicans. They had intended to have me hang all night on the “pau de arara”, but Captain Albernaz objected: “No, that’s not necessary. He’ll stay here with us for a few days. If he doesn’t talk he’ll be broken from within because we know how to do things without leaving visible traces. If he survives he’ll never forget the price of his boldness.”

In the cell I was unable to sleep. The pain was getting worse and worse, my head seemed three times the size of my body. I was in agony at the idea that the other brothers must be subjected to the same suffering as I. It was absolutely necessary to end all of this. I did not feel I had enough strength to endure any more suffering in the state I was in. There was only one solution for me: a self-administered death.

In the cell filled with filth I found an empty sardine can. I began sharpening it on the cement floor. A prisoner in the next cell, having understood my decision, asked me to calm myself. He suffered more than I (having had his testicles crushed) and yet had not despaired. But in my case it was a question of preventing others from being tortured and of denouncing before public opinion and before the Church what goes on in the prisons of Brazil. I was convinced that this could not be done without sacrificing my life. There was a New Testament in my cell and I read the Passion according to St Matthew. The Father required the sacrifice of his Son as a proof of love for men. I fainted away in pain and in faith.

Friday morning I was awakened by a policeman. A new prisoner was at my side: a young Portuguese who was weeping under the effect of tortures he had suffered at dawn. The policeman warned me: 'You have today and tomorrow to decide to talk. If you don't, the "Rough Band" will repeat the same treatment. They have already lost patience and are ready to slaughter you bit by bit.' The thoughts of the previous evening recurred. I had already marked the places on my veins where I would cut myself. I continued to sharpen the tin can. At noon they brought me out of my cell for a shave. They told me I would be returned to the detention house Tiradentes. I shaved myself poorly and returned to my cell. A policeman passed by. I asked him for a blade to finish shaving. The Portuguese fellow was asleep. I took the blade and plunged it hard on the lower side of the left pulse. The deep incision cut the veins and the artery. The blood spurted down on the floor of the cell. Then I went to the toilet hole to allow my blood to flow faster . . . when I regained consciousness it was on a bed in the Emergency section of the Hospital. The same day I was brought to the Military Hospital. The Army, fearing repercussions, told no one what had happened. In the corridor of the Military Hospital, Captain Mauricio said in despair to the doctor: 'Doctor, this one must not die. We must do everything to avoid it; otherwise we are lost.' In my room the Bandeirantes Operation placed six soldiers to watch over me.

The next day the psychological torture began. They told me: 'Things are getting worse for you because you're a priest who's attempted suicide and terrorism. The Church will excommunicate you', etc. They wouldn't let me sleep. They spoke loudly at all times, they played, they told me strange stories of flying saucers, etc. I realized at once that they were attempting to absolve themselves of responsibility for my action and thus tried to drive me mad.

On Monday, February 2, during the night I was visited by the 'judge' accompanied by a priest of the monastery and an auxiliary bishop of São Paulo. They had been informed by prisoners of the detention house Tiradentes. A doctor of the Hospital examined me in their presence, showing them the wounds over my whole body, the stitches made at the Clinic Hospital and the marks of torture.

The 'judge' said that this was madness and that he would seek out those responsible. I asked him only not to be sent back to Bandeirantes Operation and this he promised.

I was well treated by the soldiers of the Military Hospital except by those from Bandeirantes Operation who were guarding my room. The Sisters of St Vincent de Paul gave me all the assistance necessary. But the 'judge's' promise was not kept. Early Friday, February 27, I was brought to Bandeirantes Operation. They shut me up in a cell till very late at night without a chance of taking anything to fill my stomach. I felt dizzy and weak since I had lost much blood and my wounds began to close. During the night I was taken to Tiradentes, the detention house where I stayed for several months.

What happened to me was not an exception, but the rule. There are very few Brazilian political prisoners who have not suffered indescribable tortures. Several, such as Chael Schreider and Virgilio Gomes Da Silva, died from the effect of their tortures. Others have become deaf, sterile, and with other physical defects. The hope of these political prisoners is based on the Church, the only institution in Brazil not under control of the Military State. Its mission is to preserve and promote the dignity of man. Where there is a man who suffers, it is the Master who is suffering. It is time for our bishops to say: 'Enough!' to the torture and injustice of the régime before it is too late. The Church cannot shirk this: we carry the proof of torture on our own bodies. If the Church does not show itself in this matter, who can? Or will it be necessary that I die to bring about such an attitude?

At this time, silence is an omission. If speaking out is a risk it is even more a witness. The Church exists as sign and sacrament of the justice of God in the world.

'For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. We even felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.' (2 Corinthians 1, 8, 9.)

I make this appeal and this denunciation to avoid the news tomorrow of another death under torture.'

*(Note: pau de arara = parrot's perch. The victim is made to sit down, his hands tied in front of his knees and a bar thrust through the legs behind the knee-joint. The ends of the bar are then supported on two tables and the victim is left hanging, suspended above the ground, head facing the floor.)*