

Brazilian Torture: Specifically New, Specifically Terrible

With church and secular officialdom silent in the face
of such outrage, individual Christians must speak out.

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+ THE MILITARY REGIME in Brazil is determined to force that gigantic half of the South American continent into rapid development. One of its chief tools in its endeavor is brutal torture.

From some well informed sources comes testimony that this torture is more frightening than any heretofore inflicted on man. Ivan Illich, who heads the famous Center for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico, declares:

This absolutely incredible corruption is something new which has never been known in modern times. In Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia a person might disappear or be subjected to ghastly imprisonment. I lived under Hitler as a Jew. The cruelty in Brazil, however, is something entirely new — to put an entire people, anyone at any moment, under the threat of torture. What is new is the picking up of people *at random*, having them go through unspeakable torture and then releasing them. The Brazilian officials do not hide them. The Nazis and Stalinists made their victims disappear. The Brazilian torturers release people because this is an effective way of subduing a whole population. The exercise of violence cannot go further.

The new element in the Brazilian situation is the deliberate attempt to use the *fear* of torture rather than torture itself as a tool of ordinary government administration. The random choice of subjects and the blatant return of the victims to ordinary life become means of terrorizing the entire population.

Though this condition has existed in South America's most populous country for a year and a half, few knowledgeable North Americans are aware of it. Scarcely any articles or news releases have mentioned the unspeakable horrors which are taking place. Illich contends that the U.S. press has "simply suppressed" reports on the situation. Yet informed sources agree about its seriousness. I quote Dana S. Green, executive director of the National Council of Churches' Latin American department:

Of all the heart-rending, gut-tearing agony of working with the Latin American situation, there is none so imperative as the Brazilian situation today. We have watched it get increasingly worse. . . .

When people are turned over to the authorities as disloyal to the regime "for interrogation" — interrogation

means imprisonment without recourse for as long as the authorities deem necessary — the authorities have complete liberty to do whatever they wish to do with the bodies and minds of the people they are questioning. Student leaders, people in drama, journalists, teachers, ordinary housewives — anyone who has even thought of dissent against the present ruling force in Brazil is subject to questioning of the most unspeakable kind. And I mean unspeakable. I would hesitate to go into the details in mixed company. Men come out of it dead or demented or physically ruined. . . .

The leaders of Brazil are determined that Brazil is going to join the industrial nations of the world. And anyone who raises questions about the way this goal is being achieved will be removed, either by exile or by the constant threat of such terror as Ivan Illich has described.

Methods Unspeakable

A thick stack of evidence of the torture has been accumulated and sent to the Vatican, and the Latin American department of the National Council of Churches has a copy. Much of the material was condensed and published in France under the title *Dossier Noir de la Torture* ("Black Book of Torture").

Detailed accounts of the methods of torture used are frightening. A person may be picked up and taken to jail. In the interrogation room (in one jail it is only about six-feet square) his clothing is stripped from him and his hands and feet are tied together. A steel pole is passed under his knees and his elbows and he is lifted from the ground. One wire is attached to a finger or a toe, another is placed on a sensitive part of the body — the tongue, the penis, the nose, the anus, the lips or the nipples. An electric shock is then applied. It produces excruciating pain and violent muscular contraction. It is so powerful that if the prisoner's mouth is not stuffed with cloth he bites his lips or tongue so badly that he is unable to speak or eat for several days. People are tortured until they are unconscious, then are doused with water to revive them. While still wet they are given more shocks; the water makes the pain "ten times more intense."

If a man and woman who love each other are captured together the woman may be raped in front of the man while he is being tortured. Children,

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some of them less than a year old, have been tortured before their mother's eyes.

Ivan Illich speaks sadly about his friend Dom Helder Camara, Roman Catholic bishop of Olinda and Recife, in northeastern Brazil. Some time ago this eminent, outspoken cleric, whose voice is one of the most prophetic on the continent, was threatened. On the wall of his office were written the names of 25 priests scheduled for assassination before the arm of the ruling regime reached the bishop. The first priest on the list was subsequently tortured to death, his body cut to strips and burned outside his house. Then the second was similarly disposed of. "Number one crossed off, number two crossed off," says Illich, his dark eyes blazing with anger.

Lamentable Silence

In a recent encounter at Yale Divinity School Ivan Illich challenged Dana Green to speak out publicly, to have the National Council of Churches come out with a strong, clear, public condemnation of the evil being perpetrated in Brazil. "Mobilize the entire world in the name of God and in the favor of life against the use of torture as a means of government," Illich pleaded.

The response of the Protestant churchman was lamentably lame. His answers were irrelevant until he was forced by repeated comments and questions to face up to the issue. Then he said that such condemnation as Illich demanded is the job of the world church, not of the National Council (or, by implication, of any of its member denominations or local congregations). "There is no church but the world church," he said.

Green went on to insist that he has no power to act. After a lengthy discussion of bureaucracy he confessed: "The bureaucracy in the state department is not too different from ours [in the N.C.C.]. Nobody is responsible. And I mean this seriously." Then, in an attempt at explanation: "In order to continue the admittedly meager relief program of Church World Service, we have to maintain a relationship with the government of Brazil that is for me abhorrent. One of the great tensions within the National Council of Churches, particularly regarding the programs in Brazil, is precisely at this point." Yet it looks as if the program will continue indefinitely.

The Brazilian administrator of the relief program to which Green referred is a former military man who considers it quite possible, and acceptable, that many thousands of Brazilians will have to be exterminated if his country is to make sufficient technological progress.

Sadly, one is forced to conclude that the impotence of the National Council of Churches and its willingness to compromise with evil governments and ruthless administrators of its own program have rendered it useless as a voice capable of summoning

the churches and the world to vigorous denunciation of the atrocities which are being committed hourly in Brazil. The alternative would seem to be for individual Christians and churches to become informed, then to speak out. The Brazilian people desperately need such pressure on the leaders of the brutal regime which dominates them as non-Brazilians can give. The United States supports that regime when it allots to Brazil more money than it gives to any other nations except Vietnam and India. Our purchase of coffee and other Brazilian products helps keep the economy afloat.

Those of us who are concerned should write letters to our congressmen and to the state department requesting strong pressure on Brazil. We should request from the companies which process and distribute coffee information on what percentage of their product is purchased in Brazil, explaining the reasons for our concern; if some of those companies began to purchase less coffee in Brazil great pressure would be exerted on the regime. We should inform our local congregations of what has happened; we should urge local newspapers to inform the wider populace of the heart-rending tragedy. Action by grass-roots churches might shake the national offices of our denominational and interdenominational agencies from their lethargy.

When a left-winger became president of Brazil a few years ago widespread concern and publicity arose in the United States. But when a right-wing regime rules with brutal and sophisticated terror North American Christians remain silent. Is it that we have ceased to care about people and are only concerned about political dogma? When left-leaning President João Goulart was forced out of Brazil in 1964 before he could become an absolute dictator, people claimed with horror that his regime had compiled lists of people who *would be killed*. Today the military leadership has lists of those who *have been*, are being, or will be tortured, deformed, crazed and/or killed. Why was there such an outcry against left-wing murderers and in the past year and a half none against right-wing murderers?

Brazil has traditionally been one of the most peaceful nations of Latin America. While other countries normally pursued political goals by war and murder, Brazil normally practiced a nonviolent approach to politics. Even military revolutions tended to be relatively free of shooting and terror. People who like myself have lived in Brazil have been deeply impressed by the people's amiability.

It is time for North American churches and North American churchmen to raise their voices against Brazil's "specifically new, specifically terrible" form of government-by-fear-of-torture. Their voices must be heard before the madness of murder, torture and violence infects an entire population and turns a comparatively peaceful populace into an uncontrollably violent one.