

TWO CEREMONIES*

Héctor Soto

Various thousands of Chileans, who were the objects of illegal harassment during the days of the military government, are nowadays walking around the streets and carrying out their activities absolutely normally. They have apparently managed to put that all behind them. On the other hand there are others who remain scarred by the experience and will never be able to overcome it. I do not know if the commission's report on political imprisonment and torture during the dictatorship manages to explain the effect that this sordid chapter of political violence amongst ourselves had on each and every one of us. I hate to think that the document is only going to be seen as a systemised list of the tortures applied by the security organisations on their victims in order to repress any subversive action as well as the peaceful behaviour of the political opposition. In any case, whether the commission's work will contribute to truth and reconciliation or not, the report makes us think that we, as a society, are within the most traumatised group. Because of this, the effort for truth and reconciliation is a positive one. The text will make various contributions. In the first place it will bring compassion for the victims and a recognition from the country as a whole of their suffering and pain. It is fundamental that these people know that Chile is accompanying them in their distress. At the same time the report should make it known to the authors and their accomplices that these practices can never be justified and that for behaviour like theirs there will be neither peace nor ethical impunity.

From now on what is also important is the "never more", the proposals for completely eradicating violations of human rights so that the political system can be purged of any future temptation in this area. Although political scepticism recommends more caution here —because nobody can assure us that these events are not going to be repeated— these gestures are definitely necessary and healthy for national co-existence and will discipline our institutions as well as our ideas as regards the limits of power.

Is this the final chapter in our political transition?. It is difficult to know but everything makes one think that there is still a lot to do. For all that we Chileans have believed at various times during the last few years

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that the process is drawing to a close, it is clear that these things do not finish at a predetermined date or hour.

Periods of history seldom conform to an official chronometer. But, however that may be, we are going slowly in our efforts to leave our black past behind. We have delayed, for the moment, more than Spain, more than a reunified Germany, and more than a Russia freed after 70 years of a communism that was both totalitarian and recognised as criminal. Comparisons, we know, are odious. Nevertheless the fact remains thought —provoking when we take into account that a high proportion of public opinion would not hesitate in considering our political transition as being successful.

A stimulating reading of affairs would lead people to think that we come from an exemplary democratic tradition and because of this we respond to, and are in charge of, superior ethical standards. Perhaps also because of this our transition has to make excuses and ask for pardon a lot: maybe we will have to go on making gestures of expiation and elaborating successive reports that open another stage to the truth. We need the support of declarations, of making restitution and of symbols that help us to compose ourselves. We were playing with fire for 20 years and ended up by being burnt, but now what interests us is to unravel the skein of responsibilities. We surely need to know that we did thing very badly in the past but that now we are doing them rather better.

In this context, General Emilio Cheyre hit the mark by understanding that there is no other way for the Army to restore their prestige than through a definitive and frontal break with l'ancien regime, of which he was also a part. If his is a triumph of pragmatism or good conscience, it does not matter much in the practical sense. He did what he had to do. And he did it well. After recognising the institutional responsibilities of his branch of the Armed Services in the violation of human rights, the General had an audience with the Pope. Almost at the same time, Bishop Valech handed over to President Lagos the volumes of the report on torture. Rome and Santiago. Two parallel ceremonies for a transition period that will still go on asking for much more time. □