

### Part 3

#### Religion

##### Religion at home

Chile, like many Latin American countries, is predominantly Catholic. Carlos's parents were Catholic and he was raised as one. He was an altar boy as a child and he used to go to mass every day. Carlos's stepmother was a devout person in her own way. *"My stepmother's Catholicism was expressed by teaching me to pray and say good night by saying the following : **Buenas noches, mamá, que sueñes con los angelitos.** (Good night, mother, and may you dream of the little angels). She used to light three candles every Monday night in a little corner of our very small patio outside the entrance to our tiny room. One candle was to remember my biological mother, who died when I was nine months old. Another was for my adoptive mother's husband, who had also died and the last one was for what she called the forgotten **animitas** (the forgotten souls). My father's religious faith was expressed differently. Like my stepmother he never went to Church. He would, however, make the sign of the cross (**persignarse**) every time he passed in front of a church and every time he saw a **corteo**, a passing funeral, in the street. He was the one who insisted that I should go to mass every day."* In Carlos's home there was the Christian imagery found in most houses of the barrio, such as the Virgin Mary, some handsome Christs and an old image of San Pancracio.

##### Festivities

Most people were Catholic and used to go to mass every Sunday morning at different hours. As a Catholic community, the barrio was involved each year, in the week after Easter, in the 'popular' **fiesta de Cuasimodo** when all the cotees and some homes of the barrio Esperanza and Yungay were decorated with palm leaves to welcome the long procession led by the **cura** (priest) of the **Parroquia San Pablo**, who would bring the consecrated host (**la santa hostia**) to those people who were ill and could not leave their homes. *"I loved the **procesiones** although we had to get up at about five in the morning in order to go to our meeting point at **la iglesia San Pablo**. The procession would depart from there to go to different places. There was lots of praying and singing."*

##### Religion among the teenagers

Perhaps the most important questions springing from the subconscious of a youngster are those concerning the meaning of life, the search for its essence and relationships between people. (**El significado de la vida, la búsqueda del ser y sus relaciones humanas con el proximo.**) In the formative years of a teenager's mind, these questions clamour for clear and prompt answers. But who, or what, will provide the answers? People in the poor barrios are, at a very early age, confronted with hard realities. Not only that, but they often witness strange forms of human behaviour, which are very difficult to understand when proper education does not exist and the Catholic religion has already made its mark on the culture of the people. *"How could we understand and interpret the behaviour of the woman from the **Chiflón** who killed herself, but not before killing her three children ?"* This very tragic episode

took place some time in the 60s, providing extensive material for all the tabloids of Santiago. Some people in the barrio would say : **Fue la voluntad de Dios** (“It was God’s will”). However, in the barrio, the language of God was never enough to overcome problems caused by economic pressure and social exclusion.

### **The role of religion according to Rolando Rodríguez Cordero (Bocaccio)**

Religion in the barrio was ‘the’ alternative that could provide people, and youngsters in particular, with appropriate answers to the many questions raised by life itself. Religion was a solace and psychological support to many young people touched by tragedies from an early age.

*“Yes...it is true that religion provides consolation for many in their everyday struggle for survival. It allowed, however, people to think about life in a very specific way. The Catholic religion does not offer clarity to the young about many things in life. It is a very conservative religion and full of contradictions. The only thing it does is to blur the minds of the young”.*

In the barrio Esperanza , the young had two alternatives in their quest for answers to all type of questions: a spiritual one and a political one. Both had limitations. The political one was inspired by Rolando Rodríguez Cordero (“Bocaccio”) at the Chiflón. This alternative implied a reflection about the role of the Catholic Church in its relationship with the Catholic Chilean working class. Rolando lived in the Chiflón and knew the social conditions affecting the people of this infamous place. He knew that the experiences of the people were part of a wider experience to be found in the tragic history of the Chilean working class. Rolando made people look at Christianity as an important part of Chilean culture, making the point that it was necessary that the establishment of the Catholic Church undergo a change in attitude in accordance with the times and the circumstances of the Chile of the 1970s. Considering the cultural impact of Christianity in Latin America since its arrival in the 15th century, it is not been hard to see that its attitude towards the local cultures had generally been one of total contempt, with few exceptions to the rule.

*“Yes...I always felt that the Catholic religion was far from being universal: it tended to respond more to European cultural values than to the values of multi-cultural societies like the ones found in Latin America. The Catholic religion has a very conservative political agenda which suits the Vatican conservative interests, which are opposed to the social and political realities of Latin America”.*

This suggests that the massive economic structure of the Catholic Church has never been at the service of the poor: on the contrary, History shows that Catholicism in Latin America had always been at the service of the powerful.

*“Yes...this was always the point of view of Rolando and of many other Catholics in Latin America. There have been, however, attempts to change this order”.*

The Council of Latin American Bishops (**CELAM**), created in Rio de Janeiro in 1955, centred on the figure of Dom Helder Camara in Brazil and Don Manuel Larrain in Chile, and the Second Vatican Council (1962), centred on the figure of Pope John XXIII (**El Papa Bueno**), were major efforts by some members of the Catholic clergy to change the traditional conservative agenda of the Catholic Church around the world. Both councils had an enormous impact on the Catholic community of Latin America and its biggest cultural expression was the so called **Teología de la Liberación**, Liberation Theology. It began in 1968, in the northern Peruvian town of Chimbote, in a celebrated address by the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, entitled “Towards a Theology of Liberation”. In a typical meeting in the barrio Esperanza,

Rolando would raise questions about class relationships among Catholic people. He concluded that the Catholic upper classes and the Catholic landowners were the ones oppressing the Catholic working class. He would say : “*Mira, huevón, esto no tiene nada de cristiano!*” (“This has nothing to do with Christianity, has it ?”). Rolando became politically active as he realised that Catholicism was just another instrument of power at the disposal of the Chilean bourgeoisie. As an activist, Rolando followed in the footsteps of Don Clotario Blest, a Catholic worker activist, who was endlessly involved in the welfare of the Chilean working class. Blest is the second most prestigious Chilean Trade Unionist of the 20th century, after Luis Emilio Recabarren. Blest did his utmost to try to unite the workers of Chile, including socialists and communists, by promoting the idea of having one Party representing all the Chilean workers (**El Partido de los Trabajadores**). He was the first president of **La Central Unica de Trabajadores**, the Chilean Trades Union, founded in 1953.

### **Los cabros de la parroquia San Pablo**

Rolando’s political agenda was a valid mean of understanding the hard life of the barrio. There was also another valid alternative available, which would concentrate on the so called **problemas de la juventud** (problems of youth) and of life itself. This alternative was found in Carlos’s barrio in a more traditional, and somewhat more conservative, Catholic discussion group.

It was a group which also helped to stimulate the minds of the young by discussing typical youth problems, while trying to help others who were in need. “*Some of us were aware of the poverty affecting our barrio, the trend towards delinquency among the young, and so on... and we wanted to do something about it. As young Catholics, we thought that it was our Christian duty to do something positive.*”

The discussion group in Esperanza St. was one of many organised by **la Parroquia San Pablo**, Carlos’s local Parish Church located on the corner of Matucana St. and Andes St. It was not far from **La Quinta Normal**, the park with the popular **trencito**, the small train for children that used to go round and round the park. The group came into being when Don Fernando Ariztía was **el cura párroco** (the parish priest) **de la Parroquia San Pablo**. During the Pinochet dictatorship, he was very active in **la Vicaría de la Solidaridad**, a Christian Solidarity movement, of which the Catholic Church was part. He was, for the people of the barrio, ‘a cool priest’ or, in their words, **un cura choro** - a trendy term at the time for priests who were a little bit more radical in their approach towards the needs of their communities. Because Don Fernando was outspoken against the dictatorship, he was sent by the military, as a punishment, to a small **parroquia** in a tiny town in the middle of the Atacama desert, in the far North of Chile.

At that period, between 1967 and 1973, Carlos worked at the Tizona guitar factory, and after a long day’s work he would go, once a week, to evening meetings in the well-kept citè of the Vargas family. They were a very nice Catholic family, comprising Don Guillermo, who was a Deacon, Señora Rosa, Patricia (Paty), her two brothers and their **abuela** (granny). The discussion group was a pleasant one and consisted of boys and girls between the age of 16 and 18. Some members of the group were students, others were workers or both. The group was very active in dealing with practical problems. “*We tried hard to do something useful for our community: our street, for example, had a lot of old trees and we, as a group, valued them very much because they were an important part of our natural surroundings. In order to make these trees look nicer we used to paint all the lower part of the tree trunks*

*white. As there were so many factories in the barrio, the group used to ask the owners or managers for some contribution. They always responded positively by providing our group with money or merchandise which we converted at Christmas time into presents, clothes and shoes for the poorest children of the barrio, but not before the group had done some house to house research to establish who were the poorest children most in need of help.”*

One day the group arranged a visit to a barrio called **Lo Franco** located very near Santiago’s Central Railway Station. (**La Estación Central**). In this area of the city there was a big house which, in the not very distant past, had been a wonderful mansion with a large patio. When the group went there, the house looked very run down but still showed something of its former glory. It was being used as a shelter for abandoned children and for homeless mothers and their children. This home was run with very limited resources by an old lady, the owner of the house, and by the mothers themselves. Carlos’s group heard about this children’s home and decided to pay a visit.

*“ It was an important day for all of us because we realised that the Chilean State had no connection with such realities. We brought to that house our good will, our smiles and some presents for the children and we shared with them our enthusiasm, with lots of guitar playing and singing. We went back home with mixed emotions”.*

For Carlos, this group was also very important because it stimulated him to write songs. *“ Yes, it was a time when I wrote quite a number of love songs. Then, all of a sudden, I wrote a song which was different - a song with a social dimension. The song was called “Toñito” and all my friends loved it. It was about a **pelusita**, a homeless child, called Toñito, searching every day for food - the type of child who slept rough under the bridges of the Mapocho river. The food in the song was bread, the symbol of poverty in Chile, but Toñito was also searching for the purpose of his existence in a world that rejected him completely. Nobody seemed to be able to explain to him the reason for his social condition and yet he understood that he was innocent of whatever accusations were directed at him by a cruel world.”*

There were other people in the group who also played the guitar, composed love songs and enjoyed singing them. *“**Los hermanos** Vegas and Pato Gaete were very good singers and wrote beautiful songs. The girls used to love songs and the boys composed love songs to please them ”.* At about this time, Don Fernando Aristía had bought from Carlos a number of guitars for those in the Church who wanted to learn to play. Guitar players were needed to sing in Spanish during the liturgy of the Mass (an innovation of the Second Vatican Council). Pato Valenzuela, Carlos’s kind boss (**el jefe**) at Tizona, allowed him to buy guitars for the group at very low cost.

### **Religion in la Dehesa** (La Dehesa. Today one of the wealthiest barrios in Chile and Latin America)

One day, the group paid a Sunday visit to a very exclusive Trappist Monastery located in what is now **La Dehesa**. *“ We went there for a retreat (**un retiro**). Some adults accompanied us there”.* It was the year when the monks were allowed, for the first time, to speak to one another. Before this, the spiritual relationship among the monks was based on a vow of silence. After a long journey on the bus (**en micro**), which involved crossing the whole of Santiago from the working class area into the **barrios altos**, the group arrived at the **micro** terminal located not far from the foot of the Andes Mountains. From there, they continued their journey on foot for more than an hour along a very dusty road, amid very beautiful scenery. As the tired group made its way towards the monastery in the hot sunshine, they began to notice more

and more that big, beautiful American cars were overtaking them. The group guessed that these long, modern cars were going to the same place as they were and, on arriving at the Monastery, they realised that the drivers of the big Chevrolet Impalas were wealthy church-goers who knew the Monastery as an exclusive location where they could attend a very select Mass. Here are some more observations about the visit: The Trappist community had a wonderful church which looked very modern and functional, from an architectural point of view, with plenty of interior light through large stained-glass windows (**ventanales**). The monks had very fertile land to cultivate, in a wonderful and unspoiled site in the **pre-cordillera**, where the excellent air was ideal for their health. By being located in the middle of the mountains, the Trappists were far removed from the reality of everyday life in the thousands of poor barrios of Santiago. This community, therefore, gave the impression that they did not want to know about the external world, a stark contrast with the group of young people from the barrio Esperanza, who wanted exactly the opposite. This was undoubtedly a rich Catholic community with strong financial backing, which seemed to be at the service of the wealthiest people of Santiago. This Catholic congregation gave the impression to the group that its inhabitants' life-style was far from being austere or simple. The monastery was international, as there were monks of many different nationalities – from Latin America and from the United States. At the time, it was one of the few Trappist monasteries in Latin America. Finally, the Monastery gave the impression that its inhabitants had some sort of exclusive right to delve into a new and unknown type of spirituality, a variety of spiritual experience that they did not want to share with ordinary Catholics. But who provided them with this exclusive right to live a life of luxury? “*From what we saw that day, we all felt ourselves to be very diminished and third class Catholics.*” The second class Catholic lives in the middle-class barrios of Santiago, with middle-class Catholic Churches and middle-class priests.

Coming back from the monastery, the group returned to the real world as they arrived at the small airport of Tobalaba, another type of “sanctuary” for wealthy Chileans, in order to catch the bus to the centre of the town.

### **Good times**

The group, apart from discussing religion and politics and working in the barrio, had time to enjoy themselves and to relate to each other more romantically. They had regular parties which lasted all night. The parties took place at the homes of some of the members, like Pato Gaete in San Pablo Street with Garcias Reyes, or at Julia's in Yungay Street, not far from Herrera Street. Edmundo, an accountant, was always given the task of decorating the main living rooms of these houses to provide a good atmosphere for dancing. Some alcohol was consumed, but in moderation. People began by dancing Colombian **cumbias** and, as the party progressed through the night, the music style would change. By midnight, the music and songs of **Carlos Santana** began to dominate the dancing. “*We loved dancing to songs like “Mira como va” and “Samba pa’ ti”...*”. By four o'clock in the morning the boys and girls were dancing to slow songs and holding each other very close, that is, dancing **acaramelado** (glued together). By five in the morning, people became less involved with the group and some couples would already be kissing, while dancing to the slow, romantic songs of Chilean groups like **Los Angeles Negros** and **Los Golpes**. The songs of Chilean singers such as Buddy Richard and Dany Chilean were also very popular during the break from dancing, around six in the morning. Then, by eight in the morning, the party was over and everyone left for their own home. During these

dance parties, some of the **cabros** and **cabras** fell in love, became **pololos**, got married. Today some of them have grown-up children and some of them are grandparents. “ *My good friend Pato met Rosa; they are still married and have children. Juan Vega met his “Rosita” and they separated soon after Juanito, who was the president of our group, had a terrible accident. Marcelo met Loreto, got married and had children, Gloria met **el flaco** Nelson and got married. **La chica** Franca met **el Chico** Tito, who unfortunately died. Franca eventually married again”.*