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Pedro's story: "Resisting the Intolerable"¹

1. The church, of which I am both a minister and president of the Executive Committee, is one of the smallest protestant churches in Argentina: with a membership of about 1000 people and related to over 2000 people in the service we carry out. Fulfilling God's call, people are the centre of all our efforts; their life, their dreams, their frustrations, their pains and their joys, their hopes and even their miseries. Trade, commerce, justice, injustice, human, social, cultural and economical rights, destruction of the environment; all are deeply related to life and to the possibility of fullness of life for all, which is God's gift to all creation. All this I will relate to the Accra Confession approved by the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra-Ghana, August 2004. I believe this is currently one of the greatest challenges set before the churches today.²
2. The socio-political life of Argentina over the last 30 years is one which becomes a story of 'resistance' and after reading Geneviève Jacques book "***Resisting the Intolerable***" I realized that this is one of the entry points that I propose to share you: in what way the decisions the powers take for their own private gain, produce a whole range of people that are excluded from life, and how with these people many churches have embarked on the process of *resisting the intolerable* to be able to proclaim the fullness of life for all. Let me begin then with the story of Pedro.
3. It happened while I was minister of a church in the Greater Buenos Aires belt, in what had once been a really highly industrialized area. A city of over 600.000 people, and where poverty had now deeply set in; it was a town which also hosted one of the biggest and most expensive boarding schools in Argentina and a very rich and exclusive living area. But the church were I served was on the margins of this town. From the street the church was on back, all were earth roads, and when it rained, muddy roads. The church developed a strong social witness.
4. All this was carried out as church commitment and all families were invited to be a part of the congregation, which was a mission church. Some families got really involved. One day after a Bible Study in Rosa's home, when everybody had left she asked me to stay on for a while. She said to me when all had gone: "Please come to visit Pedro he needs someone to talk to, and who will listen". Pedro had only come to church activities when the children played music at one of the services or the women had prepared the service. He was convinced

¹ Jacques, Geneviève. *Resisting the Intolerable: guided by a human rights compass*. WCC, Geneva, 2007. Risk Book Series N° 117. A book I strongly recommend to understand the whole picture I will refer to in this paper.

² World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), *That all may have life in fullness*. Proceedings of the 24th. General Council (Accra – Ghana), Geneva, Switzerland, 2005. Page 154 ff.

church life was for women and children (you've probably heard about such ideas before!).

5. Two or three days later, when I knew Pedro would be at home, on his own, I dropped in. It did not take him long to start talking, and it was difficult to get a word in edgeways –even for me!. He went on and on. Here goes part of Pedro's story:

You know through Rosa and the children that I am out of work, and I'm also drinking heavily. I'm not proud about this, but what can I do?

... the factory where I worked for over 15 years closed down, nobody knows where the owner is and where the money has gone. We were more or less expecting something like this to happen, so many other factories in the area have closed. It seems that they aren't making enough profit and it is cheaper to import from China than produce here. Because I'm out of work Rosa has had to go out to get work as a maid in three or four houses, people who not being rich at least needed someone to help out.

But then offices sacked many of their employees so Rosa was without a job. The woman of the house could not afford to pay Rosa and so they had to do the house chores themselves. Finally there was no work for Rosa, and as I was without a job there was no money coming in, so the two boys started walking the streets in search of newspapers and cardboard, collecting as much as they could find, and taking it to the man who buys it and so at least some money comes in. But this is why I drink: I was brought up to be the one who kept the family, that is what men are supposed to do, isn't it? To be maintained by my wife is humiliating but to be kept by my children, who have had to give up going to school to walk the streets in search of discarded newspapers, is beyond it... if I don't drink I will fear I will set the shack on fire.

This was not the place or the time to expose the latest economic theory, of which Pedro, Rosa and the children were the victims, together with thousands of Pedros, Rosas and so many other children. Many of whom were part of our local church community, or the life of other churches in so many other towns in Argentina of the time. Pedro and Rosa's life is an open ended story...

6. This is all true, but how did it reach to such a situation. Let me assure you that different from our childhood fairytales which began "once upon a time..." this life story does have a concrete starting point, which began, in Chile 11th September 1973, and in Argentina 24th. March 1976; by this time there were military dictatorships in Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina.
7. Each of these military dictatorships developed similar economic plans, constructed by the elite of the Chicago School of Economics which drew inspiration from Milton Freedman's theory. Each of these military dictatorships turned to violence to sustain their power and developed the "Plan Cóndor" which brought together military intelligence to destroy all forms of resistance from any sector of each of these countries, and this was done with the concrete help of the CIA, which by then had concrete experience in torture

methods which were taught to the Latin American military forces (The School of the Americas). The *desaparecidos*, the *death flights*, the *Estadio Nacional* (in Chile), the *ESMA (Navy School)* and so many other forms and places which today still are part of the history of our people. What began on those days has had an effect on life for years, and in many ways continues to have effect today. Even if all this happened before the Accra Confession existed, it was situations such as these which led the churches of the global south to demand from the church world wide a clear statement. When in 2004 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches met in Ghana and approved what today is known as the Accra Confession it did so because: “*Speaking from our Reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians. We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization...*” (AC para 16)

8. **What should be clear to all is that it was not a military coup which installed a whole economic policy; rather it was an economic policy that needed the brutality of the military to impose and sustain it because in no other way could it have ever been possible.** This is a perception that has been sustained for ages and which has now been presented by Naomi Klein in her recent book *The Shock Doctrine*³. This was denounced by the disappeared writer Rodolfo Walsh in his “*Open letter to the Military Junta*”, dated in Buenos Aires exactly one year after the military coup: the 24th March, 1977. For this he was tortured and murdered.⁴
9. In this *Open Letter*, Rodolfo Walsh clearly sets out the relation between the economic policies and military repression. After describing the violations to human rights he says “these events, which shock the conscience of civilized world, are not in actual fact the worst suffering you have imposed on the Argentine people, nor are they the worst violations to human rights which you have carried out. In the economic policy of this government one must not only seek the explanation for your crimes but the greatest atrocity which punishes millions of human beings with planned poverty”⁵
10. The military coup installed in Argentina “put into practice a series of economic policies which caused an enormous impact, causing a substantial transformation of Argentine economy...and are the origin of the main problems that the country had to face in the decades that followed”⁶. An economic policy which would have never been implemented by a democratically elected government was imposed on a whole country by the military dictatorship, which sustained these ideas at gun point, creating a Human Rights collapse as had never before been seen in the country. This military dictatorship was built on the lives of the 30000 *desaparecidos* and the exile of hundreds, the silence of

³ Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine*, Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007. I will quote from the translation into Spanish: Naomi Klein, *La Doctrina del Shock –el auge del capitalismo de desastre*, Editorial Paidós, Buenos Aires, 2008.

⁴ Walsh, Rodolfo. *Carta abierta de Rodolfo Walsh a la Junta Militar*, Buenos Aires, 24th. March, 1997. (www.fmmeduccion.com.ar/Historia/Documentoshist/1977walsh.htm)

⁵ Walsh, Rodolfo. *Op. Cit.* Para. 5

⁶ Rapoport, Mario. *Historia económica, política y social de la Argentina (1880-2003)*; Emecé editores, Buenos Aires, 2007. page 645.

millions and the complicity of the principle world economic powers and international financial organizations, such as IMF, World Bank, Paris Club; which continued to approve and guarantee loans to the military junta increasing the foreign debt to astronomical levels, and the participation of a number of people –even from within the churches, who gained power and prestige. To situations such as these the Accra Confession says: “*As markets have become global, so have the political and legal institutions which protect them. The government of the United States of America and its allies, together with international finance and trade institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization) use political, economic, or military alliances to protect and advance the interest of capital owners*” (AC para 14)

11. The years previous to the dictatorship were years of an intentionally created economic, political, social and cultural crisis, developing a sense of fear and discomfort that prepared the way for the military; this of course was not a coincidence, rather part of a plan carried out to the last detail, which had happened previously in Chile and was later to be used in much of Latin America and many other regions of the world. Argentina was in the midst of raising inflation, recession, deep problems related to the balance of payments; a serious questioning of the role of the State which developed into armed resistance. “The Armed Forces together with the *establishment* which upheld them decided the need to change all this on a long term basis and completely modify the social and political configuration of the country”⁷

12. “The minister of Economy (of the dictatorship) belonged to the agricultural and stock breeding elites, the largest economic and financial groups, and the representatives of foreign capital; his plan was to reduce national industry and the internal market, and as a result the power of the organized labour movement –one of the most developed and organized labour movements of the region. The first measures included the freezing of salaries for three months, elimination of price control, devaluation of the foreign exchange rates, the closure of the National Labour Confederation the prohibition of all trade union activities and the possibilities of any call to strikes... after the initial period they would then more structural changes would follow”⁸. A situation such as this is very difficult to describe to people who have not lived such a reality, but it brings with it the collapse of a whole lifestyle. And together with this the military repression, the *desaparecidos*, the torture, the kidnappings, the rape, the children born in captivity and hand over in adoption to members of the armed and police forces... these children today are in their early 30’s, and the Grand mothers of Plaza de Mayo have recently recuperated grandchild number 90 of about 500.

13. This situation destroyed the country in so many ways, and as Naomi Klein points out, it was part of plan with three stages to it:
 - Creating a *shock* situation: wars, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, creation of chaos;
 - Implementing a *shock* economy which when is resisted by the people, leads to

⁷ Romero, Luis Alberto. *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires, 2001. Page 212.

⁸ Rapoport, Mario. *Op.cit.* Page 646.

- Police, military, prison, interrogation, torture, etc. *shock* treatment to uphold the shock.⁹
14. As pointed out by Geneviève Jacques in the book I have mentioned: “To governments seeking foreign investments (for good or bad reasons) it is absolutely vital to attract multinational enterprises into their countries and to keep them there...in many cases governments are unfortunately willing to sacrifice the protection of human rights and the environment in order to make their country more “attractive” to multinationals seeking territories and markets with as few restrictions as possible on how they conduct their business”¹⁰
 15. This was the reality much of Latin America lived as from the mid 70’s and which continues today in so many different parts of the world. This situation was preparing for what would affect the life of Pedro, of whom I talked about at the beginning of this paper. This is why I have referred to the need to ***Resist the Intolerable***. And I turn again to the Accra Confession when it says in such clear terms:
The signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted. The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life or death. (AC para 6)
 16. The whole situation of a country which was intentionally being devastated brought together committed women and men, who foreseeing the result of what was happening, in 1975 created the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights, in which politicians, teachers, trade unionists and people who were religiously committed got very much involved; and in February 1976 due to the atrocities that were taking place Christians representing different protestant churches and roman catholic diocese came together to create the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights.
 17. The military dictatorship collapsed after the defeat of the Malvinas War in 1982, and election were called for October 1983. The newly elected government faced an insurmountable task: regain credibility for the country in the international arena, consolidate the democratic system and rebuild the economic and social needs of the country. This was very difficult to achieve due to the fact that repression had ‘disappeared’ many of the leaders of the time, others had gone into exile, and those who survived had been deeply affected by this repression, which installed a culture of fear which even today manifests; the leaders who slowly emerged lacked experience and too soon many of them were co-opted by the neoliberal policies of the time. What must be taken into account is that the most committed leaders were the ones who most suffered and those who went untouched were those who by action or omission adhered to the system imposed on the country. Again this points to the suffering of people, and reminds us that we are not talking only about numbers, balance sheets and interest rates.
 18. Soon chaos appeared on scene, particularly due to the fact that the democratic government did as much as it could not to repeat the mechanisms of the past,

⁹ Klein, Naomi. *Op. Cit.* This programme is developed in her book as from page 49 ff.

¹⁰ Jacques, Geneviève. *Op. Cit.* page 95.

this allowed for opposition, free thought and as a result of the Human Rights policies of the government, which brought the military leaders to trial, a number of military upheavals which wasted away the power of the president. The economic policy of the new government worked on a much more socially oriented direction, and those who saw their influence questioned became more than nervous.

19. When elections were called the opposition took power and with the new president, at once installed an economic policy based on the traditional neoliberal pattern, following many of the suggestions developed by the Chicago School of Economics of the 80's, which had first been used back in the 70's, but now found in a democratically elected government a possibility to return.
20. To understand the picture that developed you must remember that the country had not yet fully recovered from the devastation of the years of military destruction. Economically speaking what was to come was very similar to what had happened. The economic policy was established by the representatives of multinational corporations, which became clear when the president announced his cabinet, and the ministry of economy was given to the CEO of Bunge Born, the representation of argentine neoliberal capitalism at its extreme. This man died within a week and his successor was also the man who had taken his place in this firm. This provided the government with the support of most of the business organizations of the great economic elite. Their aim was that the State should withdraw from its controlling and levelling functions and leave the market totally free to the new model, based on a market economy, opening of the boarders to importation, price control, closing the export market, drastic devaluation, increase of fuel and all public utility fares, and a limited increase of salaries. As a result inflation in 1990 reached 1343.9% ¹¹
21. What followed was savage programme of privatizations with no sort of restrictions or consideration for the integrity of the people or the country. By 1990 they had sold the national airline, the State Telephone Company, petrochemical industries, two television channels –out of 4-, and had privatized most of the highways. Basically this was done by splitting up the companies and creating not a variety of options but rather circumscribed monopolies in different areas of the country. In this context it is interesting to ponder the issues and questions raised by Robert B. Reich: “Free markets were supposed to lead to free societies. Instead, today’s supercharged global economy is eroding the power of the people in democracies around the globe...Democracy has been enfeebled largely because companies in intensifying competition for global consumers and investors, have invested ever greater sums in lobbying, public relations, and even bribes and kickbacks”¹²
22. The second stage of the privatization plan included rail system, undergrounds, drinking water, sewage system, port facilities, steel industry, military technology, postal system and other smaller companies. Towards the end, the crown jewels: the state petroleum company and the National Mortgage Bank, Most of these privatised firms were bought by a limited number of local economical conglomerates, which then allowed an important number of

¹¹ This and the information that follows can be found in Rappaport, Mario, *Op. Cit.* page 772 ff.

¹² Reich, Robert B. *How Capitalism is Killing Democracy.* Foreign Policy, September/October 2007.

multinationals in as partners. All this was carried out following express instruction from the IMF and the World Bank who then provided the loans for these operations. Once again this increased Foreign Debt to impossible limits.

23. Deregulation, opening of the markets to foreign capital, liberalization of the internal market. All this which sounds so technical has deep effects on the life of the people. The evolution of the distribution of income proves that the lower middle class and the poor people loose out on this, while the richer 10% of population increase their participation. Unemployment and sub-employment in 1989 reached 16.7% while in 1999 it had reached 29.4%. Again it is important to go back to the Accra Confession: *“the policy of unlimited growth among industrialized countries and the drive for profit of transnational corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment...”* (AC para 8) By now Pedro was well out of the market, his family was one of these numbers, and their children were supporting the family. Who was I to moralize on Pedro’ situation?
24. In the late 90’s and years the follow what begins to happen in the region is the “invitation” to become partners of Free Trade Agreements. How can people remain the centre of consideration? Instead of promoting human dignity the FTAs have promoted financial gain and have turned human life into yet another commodity. This invitation to be ‘partners’ has always proceeded from Washington, which finally discovered that they could no longer turn to military dictatorships and so now developed economic plans, which as I have mentioned repeatedly have always been the real reason of all efforts and still today affect the life of the people.
25. Free Trade Agreements are supposed to be Agreements between countries which benefit from these agreements. Seen from Latin America what is clear is that in principle they are not “free” as the countries involved are not on equal standing or have equal opportunities. In 1985 Latin America’s foreign debt amounted to 300.000 million US dollars, by the end of the XX century this had reached to 800.000 million US dollars, in spite of the fact that 913.000 million dollars had been paid¹³. Debt grew in spite of payments and all money destined to cancel the “eternal debt” is money not dedicated to health, education, social services, etc. This is one of the signs that these agreements are not “free”.
26. Distribution of income, unemployment, health situation... all these point to other signs that countries involved do not enter the FTA on an equal standing. The amount of money the USA government dedicates to subsidies of its internal commodities is another example, because the partners of these agreements are not allowed to subsidise their goods. Agreements only involve capital, not people. These “FTA” dissolve all existing national sovereignty, ie. Intellectual Property Rights, Agricultural patents, natural resources, and even national legislation which must be modified to support these “FTA”. Supporting these Agreements stand the World Trade Organization (WTO), IMF, World Bank which have always negatively affected the possibilities of the ‘smaller’ parties of these agreements. In October 2006 while in Chile, Noam

¹³ Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias. *Globalizar la vida plena*. Programa Fe, Economía y Sociedad. Quito, Ecuador. No date.

Chomsky denounced that these Free Trade Agreements only favour the USA and intend to undermine the weaker parts of the agreements, as they “do not provide any possibility of choosing”. Going even further he said “Neoliberalism is the enemy of democracy as it affects the lives of the most vulnerable sectors of society to benefit the stronger ones”¹⁴ Again human life is pushed out of the place God had placed it, human dignity becomes a parody. The Accra Confession warns us: *“this crisis is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization...this is an ideology which claims to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and creation. It makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance, which amounts to idolatry”* (AC para 9 and 10)

27. No country that has been involved in one of these FTA has seen standards of living improve for its people. They have only privileged the stronger and reduced the weaker ones to an even worse situation. The final result has always been more poverty, less health, less education, less access to a better life, less possibility of developing, turning human beings into commodities, because people who have broken health, can barely read or right, live in fear, and have little or no hope for change in their lives become the slave trade of the XXI century, and their numbers increase year by year. They are cheap labour which are used, abused and discarded, soon to be replaced by others.
28. One concrete example I would like to share with you is that of the recent agreement between the United States of America and Perú. This Agreement has produced an internal conflict in Perú, the crucial question is: “who are the losers and who are the winners? The answer is that the winners will be about 2% of producers who represent the agricultural export business; they are the other face of Peruvian agricultural life. This agreement in actual fact excludes 98% of agricultural life. FTAs are a table to which not all are invited to the meal, and even those who are invited do not participate on equal terms: some eat with forks, others with spoons and most guests are invited to watch, not to eat”¹⁵. This again is the story of many Pedros, Rosas and children in Latin America.
29. The Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) has a programme on Faith, Economy and Society¹⁶ and has produced a pack for churches; there it points out how this whole situation is recorded in I Samuel 8, where the people demand a king and are reminded: *“they will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and be his horsemen... he will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards, and give them to his courtiers. He will take one tenth of your grain and your vineyards and give it to his officers and courtiers...he will take one tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves”*. This text rings a very well known bell to the millions of people of Latin America who have suffered under these FTA. They may be legal but they are certainly immoral. The Accra Confession reminds us of our faith stance when it says: *we see the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of*

¹⁴ Chomsky, Noam. <http://clarin.com/diario/2006/10/21>.

¹⁵ Castillo Jayme, Jackeline. *Un tratado con maltratados*. Entramado –May 2008. Creas, Buenos Aires. <http://www.creas.org/entramado/entramado.htm>

¹⁶ Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias, *Globalizar la vida plena*. Programa Fe, Economía y Sociedad. Materiales para la reflexión y la acción. Quito, Ecuador. No date.

economic globalization and geopolitics backed by neoliberal ideology. This is a global system which defends and protects the interest of the powerful. It affects and captivates us all. Further, in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon –Lk 16.13- (AC para 14)

30. With all these people excluded from the possibility of life in fullness and reduced to mere survival, the churches were challenged. Human Rights had been the issue of the 70' and 80's because of the military dictatorship, this was true, and remains a valid issue, what now developed was the need to tackle the social and economical rights, to work for the dignity of people. And once again the churches played their part, and are still involved in these issues. As Dr. René Krüger once wrote: "As churches we have a highly theological mission before us: we can and we should publicly denounce the destructive effects of the totally free market. We should and we must point out that Mammon without control destroys life. We should and we must denounce the market idolatry, we must denounce that the alternatives today are not "capitalism or communism", "conservative or revolutionary", "West or East", "North or South", rather it is "**God or Mammon**". This can only imply a clear "NO" to globalized neoliberalism¹⁷.

31. I want to conclude this paper with examples of how the churches have become involved and had worked with the people who are the first victims of this entire economic situation. I will quote from the 2007 general report of the Projects Area that the Reformed Churches in Argentina prepared to present to the donor agencies which help in so many of the projects that are going on. Within the sea of injustice that surrounds us, these actions may seem mere drops, but I can assure you they have changed lives in more ways than one, and these are the ways that churches believe they can resist the intolerable.

- Each of these actions are people oriented, in which the lives of women, children, adolescents and the elderly are considered as central in response to the call made by God. All these actions are planned, monitored and evaluated. Their aim is to relate to the context and to the neighbourhood and the impact it creates. We have created education programmes which help children to finalize their primary education; this involves teachers, recreation and nutrition. It also involves working with parents so the children are not seen as a way out to cheap labour. In one of our congregations with the help of the municipal government a symphonic orchestra has set up a branch in the area and the church lends out its premises for musical classes and rehearsals. This is so different for them and they participate with enthusiasm and the support of their families.
- The Methodist Church working in a very much deprived area began a workshop on art in glass, and it has been a great success as the people involved have been able to sell their handicrafts.

¹⁷ Krüger, René, Prof. Dr. *La Biblia toma partido. Fundamentos bíblico-teológicos para decir "No" al neoliberalismo globalizado*. Unpublished paper. 2003

- There is the case of work with one-parent families and this has needed specialized help which involved the church, the schools and the psychologists of the town. The church in Buenos Aires has developed a programme with the homeless –mainly but not only, men- they have prepared one of the bathrooms for showers, a room with washing facilities and these people can come for their shower, wash their clothes and dry them with no risk and eat a “home-made” meal, the children are part of a school extension programme which helps out with homework and the women have developed a sewing cooperative..
- Some of the main areas which have challenged the churches are those of health, hygiene and sexuality. This is a rather specialized area so work is carried out with nurses, doctors, health specialists, the local hospitals and church volunteers who accompany particularly women and adolescents for their first trips to the State hospitals which attended them at no cost.
- The newest project in one of our smaller congregations is the one related to domestic violence and this has exposed in the town a reality which even the municipal government knew little about.
- In some case the churches have linked to the Universities offering these experiences for students of Social Service to get involved as practical for their studies. This has often resulted in courses being offered to the churches in art, music, story telling, so the love of God becomes a real and meaningful reality.

32. We all live in this same threatened world, neither you nor I are strangers to God, and we are faced with the challenge to live our faith in a relevant manner in the crisis of our times. There is a South situation in your North which as Christians you must speak to and commit in faith to its eradicate. The same way as there is a North situation in our south which must be denounced in no uncertain terms- We should work together to the transformation of this world so that life in fullness for all creation is not a good idea, but a reality. *By confessing our faith together we covenant in obedience to God’s will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships. This binds us together to work for justice in the economy and the earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings. (AC para 37).* So be it with the help of God, and **only to God** be all glory.