

Human rights activist, Nobel Peace Prize Winner at Dal

by Joan Baxter and Gregory Hamara

On Saturday night while music, alcohol and light conversation flowed freely in the Dalhousie Student Union Building, across the street Dr. Adolfo Perez Esquivel expressed some somber thoughts.

Perez Esquivel, a 49-year old architect and sculptor with a

longstanding interest in human rights and Christian principles, won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for his work with the Peace and Justice Organization in his native Argentina. In 1977-78 he spent 14 months in a Buenos Aires prison where he was tortured and held, without charge, for the work that won him the peace prize.

Perez Esquivel spoke in Spanish to an audience of more than 300, while Dr. John Kirk of Dalhousie's Spanish Department translated. Kirk is a member of the Canadian Association of Latin American and Caribbean Studies that brought Perez Esquivel to Halifax.

Perez Esquivel began his hour-long talk by recalling a legend of the Guarani Indians of Paraguay, symbolizing the ideals of the human rights movement.

The legend tells of a land with no problems, a land of freedom where everyone can live with dignity. The Guarani encourage all people to search for this land.

Hope is tempered with the pain of reality

Throughout his speech, Perez Esquivel tempered this theme of hope with the harsh realities of daily suffering in the Third World. He cited some statistics from the 1980 Latin America Economic Conference.

In the Third World, he said, 250 million people live in slums, 250 million lack schools, 300



Nobel peace prize winner Dr. Adolfo Perez Esquivel of Argentina, seen this week at Dalhousie's Law Building.

Injustice causes economic problems

At the root of these economic problems lie moral problems, he said. Perez Esquivel explained that the abuse of human rights goes beyond incidents of killing, abduction, terrorism and torture. His expression was solemn and intense as he spoke of the

multinational companies to extract raw materials from underdeveloped countries for refinement and profit in industrialized countries. He said the Third World produces 80 per cent of raw materials and consumes 7 per cent of refined products from those resources.

His speech followed a showing of the Amnesty International film 'Prisoners of Conscience' which detailed the plights of two political prisoners, one in the Soviet Union and another in an

Argentinian prison. Perez Esquivel praised the work of solidarity groups such as Amnesty International. Amnesty International pressures for the release of these prisoners with letter and petition campaigns to the governments responsible.

Perez Esquivel encouraged citizens of Halifax concerned with peace and justice in the Third World to support such groups, strengthening ties between Canadians and Latin Americans.

Canadian awareness encouraging

Perez Esquivel was encouraged by the growing awareness of Latin American problems in Canada, giving Canadians a verbal pat on the back for their open-door policy to Latin American refugees. This policy permitted many Chileans to immigrate to Canada after the

military coup in their country in 1973.

But he suggested that Canadians pressure their government to take a stronger stand on Third World problems, independent of U.S. President Reagan's policies which he described as "ridiculously harsh". He said Canada could begin with a withdrawal of support of

U.S. intervention in El Salvador and other Central American countries and with a halt to the sale of the CANDU nuclear reactors in Argentina.

Perez Esquivel warned that there is no place in the world where it is safe to ignore the problems of the Third World. But he reassured the audience in closing that the path to the Guarani land of no problems is one bounded by hope.

Church is an agent of social change

Addressing an audience of over 150 earlier in the day at Mount St. Vincent University, Perez Esquivel spoke out on the growing strength of the church as an agent for social change in Latin America. While conceding that orthodox elements of the Roman Catholic Church still defend the interests of the ruling military and economic elites to the detriment of the impoverished, he emphasized that the nature of Catholicism is rapidly changing.

"The Church is no longer separate from the people, but marching along with the people," said Perez Esquivel, "the church has taken stock of reality."

Part of that reality has been an increased crackdown, by the authorities, on the efforts of "liberation" theologians. Perez Esquivel, described by police at the time as a 'Red Bishop', was arrested and detained in Ecuador in 1976 for conducting "subversive activity".

"When the police burst into our rooms, the only subversive material they left with was the Bible," he said.

Luther King. "They both spoke of strength of will and strength of love. That message is not lost on us," he said.

He also agreed with the dictums of Pope John Paul II that the church should maintain an arms-length relation to Latin America's established political parties.

Theologians are 'potential enemies'

Perez Esquivel said that according to Latin America's military rulers, liberation theologians are classified as 'potential enemies' because they do not fit neatly into the states' pre-ordained polarization of society into "pro-capitalist Western Christians" and "Soviet-inspired Marxists".

"The rulers say they are Christians, but their Christianity exists only to be manipulated. They are true to Christian symbols, but devoid of any meaning or essence," Perez Esquivel said.

Politics is the search for justice

In answering his own question: "What is politics?", Perez Esquivel said that it is the search for justice in any society, and in that manner the church is politically active.

"We, too, search for the common wealth," he said.

Perez Esquivel spoke with considerable pride of the widespread growth, especially in Brazil, of 'ecclesiastical base communities'. These are a variation on the prototypical popular movements of South America. In evidence throughout the rural hinterland and urban slums, these groups attempt to understand the socio-economic problems facing the population, and "about how power can be used to bring about social change".

Methods of civil disobedience are also discussed.

"Our struggle is of an elephant against ants. There will always be more ants than elephants. As ants we must become aware of our latent

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million are unemployed, 550 million are illiterate, 700 million suffer from malnutrition, 900 million are living on an income of 30 cents a day, and 1.2 billion have no access to basic hygiene or clean water.

The debt of the Third World to industrialized countries is \$300 billion. He said the average annual salary in the Third World is 80 times less than in the industrialized world.

In contrast, Perez Esquivel said that arms worth \$1 million are pumped into the Third World each minute.

He refrained from giving more statistics, telling his listeners "I don't want to tire you, but these are things that should not be forgotten."

injustice caused by economic monopolies and social structures that permit a few to profit at the expense of many.

Perez Esquivel said he often asks leaders of developed countries "Why do you sell arms to the Third World instead of selling articles that would lessen daily misery in those countries?" The standard answer is "We cannot risk the unemployment which would result in our own countries from such a massive change in factory production."

Mature approach needed from world leaders

Perez Esquivel called for a mature approach from world leaders to alter the unjust power structure. This system permits

Reagan's policies are "ridiculous and harsh". Canada could help by a withdrawal of support of U.S. intervention in Latin American countries, and by halting the sale of the CANDU reactors to Argentina.

Despite the hardships endured by reformist theologians at the hands of many of Latin America's strong-armed regimes, Perez Esquivel is adamant in his opposition to the use of violence as a means of retaliation. He remains a devout adherent to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin

strength," he said.

Dr. Perez Esquivel was in Halifax for 11 hours. At noon he lit a ceremonial candle for Amnesty International. He is in Canada for six days to meet with members of the Canadian Labour Congress and representatives of the provincial and federal NDP.