

# The Day I Committed Myself to the Abolition of Torture

Brigitte Vilanova

Translated by Michael Berrigan Clark

From early on I had the desire to be politically engaged. Already in my student days I was tutoring troubled adolescents. I admit it without blushing: I have the soul of an activist—and it is true that the spirit of the 1960s was manifest in all that... After getting my degree in history, I became a public school teacher. Of course, I quickly turned to involvement in the teachers' union, and from my early twenties was an enthusiastic participant in the SGEN-CFDT.<sup>1</sup> I think that fundamentally I'm a down to earth woman, close to ordinary people, to those who suffer, who have difficulties in their daily existence. I completed my entire career as a history teacher for the National Education System in a zone designated as underprivileged.

But one experience in particular transformed my outlook on the world. It was November 1973. Augusto Pinochet had just taken power in Chile—and so began the authoritarian regime marked by multiple human rights violations. I had kept in contact with my high school chaplain whom

I liked very much. On that evening, he invited me to meet with a group of Chilean refugees. I remember very well how little charm there was in that evening. It was a dark, cold, sad day, with a gray sky typical of November in the Paris region. We were dinner guests at a convent. I was welcomed by some rather austere nuns. Once in the dining hall, I was startled by the face of a young Chilean woman. Her features were drawn, she seemed to have wept so much that her eyes were circled in blue. She spoke in Spanish and shared with us the story of her suffering. Her husband and son had been murdered before her eyes. She was not alone. Her friends joined her with their testimony: they had been tortured, their faces still marked by cuts and bruises from beatings.

Their testimony devastated me: I was aware that there were regions of the world where suffering was the everyday lot of the population, but this was only a theoretical knowledge. But from that moment, tangible proof rose up before me: faces marked, disfigured by the

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<sup>1</sup>Syndicat général de l'Éducation nationale—Confédération française démocratique du travail. This is France's federation of unions that includes teaching personnel from elementary through university research levels. —Ed.

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atrocities of torture. Suddenly our Chilean friends stood up and began a simple dance. A dance from their country, a spare, restrained dance, but their faces lit up and their smiles appeared. That dance overwhelmed me: how could these people, who had suffered so much just a short while ago, still manage to find the strength to dance?

I saw a powerful sign in all that: even brought low, humiliated, human beings are able to raise themselves up and remain dignified. From that evening forward, I decided no longer to remain indifferent to the suffering of others, even those geographically far away. At first I committed myself to the work of Amnesty International, a non-governmental organization that takes action on a large scale around the globe. But the desire to live out my commitment in the heart of a community pushed me to join ACAT, the Association of Christians for the Abolition of Torture, in 1980. This is an ecumenical association of Christians including faithful from all three

major confessions. Our action is more humble than that of Amnesty International, but my commitment there [in ACAT] makes more sense. We pray together for those tortured and those condemned to death, and we maintain a written correspondence with them. The connection is direct, often very intense, and real friendship can be established.

I felt a very strong unity between my commitment to ACAT and my entry into the Orthodox Church, which also took place in 1980. In Orthodoxy I found the Resurrection, the raising up of the human being by the resurrected Christ. In my parish I heard Olivier Clément refer to a mosaic found in a small church in Istanbul: in it one sees Christ pulling up out of hell Adam and Eve, that is to say, all of humanity. At ACAT, that is what we do on a somewhat smaller scale: we set people on their feet, we give them back a little hope. A spark of resurrection that I had already sensed on that evening in November 1973 among the Chilean refugees. ✱



**Brigitte Vilanova** was the Orthodox vice president of the Association of Christians for the Abolition of Torture from 2006 to 2012.

Photo by Nina Lefoulon.