

A place apart

Michael Howe

TEN YEARS ago there was no radio or electricity in the parish of Puerto Saavedra in the South of Chile. The sense of time was different then: there was morning and afternoon but no hours in the day. People got up very early in the morning before the sun come up and retired at dark. At the request of the bishop, Fr Kevin Mullins and I arrived in the parish at Easter, 1991. We had spent the previous year studying the Mapuche language, *Mapudungun*, in Temuco 600kms South of the Chilean capital, Santiago. At the start it was difficult because we didn't understand the culture.

Learning the Mapuche language was enjoyable. I went to class in Temuco and visited people two or three times a week in different areas of the country. They helped me to write down prayers when I went out to pray with them. I learned from them how to use the language in correct and acceptable ways.

One important thing is to be able to say 'hello' properly. When you arrive at a house you have to ask: how are you? how is your family? how is your community (meaning the extended family)? (This is a formal way of greeting called *pentagu*). After that formality you can carry on with other items of your conversation.

During Mass the priest goes around and says 'hello' to everybody. It is most important to say 'hello.' The Mapuches are very different from Chilean society as a whole in that Chileans greet each other with an *abrazo* (formal hug).

The Mapuches are very reserved and it takes them a long time to develop trust because of the history of injustices that they suffered and the reserve they have learned in relating to those who are not of their race.

Everyone in a community is linked to everyone else in the area. How you relate to one person affects everybody. If one person stops going to Church others will do likewise.

The Mapuches in this area are farmers. They plant wheat and potatoes. They keep pigs and take care of oxen which they use for ploughing. At the moment small farmers like them are in trouble. The potatoes and wheat they sell have very little value. They sell them cheaply and traders make the profit. For several years people grew potatoes at a loss. Ten years ago nobody grew vegetables. Other cash crops require much more work but are being produced for a better return. Apples grow well and are sold cheaply for making cider.

The Mapuche culture sometimes seemed as if it was losing ground but over the last two years there has been an upsurge in cultural activity. The government has recognised the people's right to choose to speak in *Mapudungun* or Spanish. For the first time children are learning their own language at primary level.

Land and family are an important part of their religious values. Mapuches used to hold their land in common but not any more. They have their own titles and have put up fences. When they shared land there was a lot of abuse and problems over land rights. Today jealousy can motivate neighbours to inflict damage on each other. People have been known to change fences overnight or send pigs into others' plots.

There is a lot of violence in Mapuche communities. There are fights within families that are not reported to the police who usually don't find out about them unless someone ends up in hospital. They have

their own laws and their own forms of punishment which are quite violent.

Mapuches are reclaiming their land. They are also trying to purify their original tongue so that no junk words are allowed to corrupt their language. They feel there is a new upsurge too in their search for God. The



Pastor and author, Fr Michael Howe (left) greets people outside the chapel featured on the front cover.



Children in a rural community in the parish of Puerto Saavedra.



evangelisation of the culture or inculturation of the Gospel is still at a nervous stage.

Most Mapuches, even though they are all believers and have faith in God, encounter Jesus Christ and have been baptised but have a problem with the word of God in the New Testament. For them it is an encounter with elements of evil. They have a problem because they don't know how best to understand it.

Our practice has not been to introduce of our own accord the Gospel but ask the people to do so when they feel right about it. I notice interested people gradually taking up the Bible. They want to announce the word in their own

language. It has to be done slowly because it cannot just be a folklore thing; it has to touch their hearts otherwise it is not real. They have to see it for themselves as something that is not imposed on them, or that the Catholic Church is robbing something from their culture to introduce into the Catholic culture. Any change has to come from them. They are highly sensitive. It is a very slow and gradual process.

Mapuches hold on to traditions like killing sheep and offering their blood to the sea. The power of the sea is reckoned to benefit them as it asks God not to do them damage. The sea is alive. There are also spirits in the Earth which Mapuches must respect.



Fr Michael Howe (with glasses) gets his picture taken with children who have made their First Communion.

Mapuche religious practices like calling on the devil to introduce evil spirits into people were common. They believed that if you were sick someone had willed the sickness on you.

Evangelical Christians came into the area and made converts among the Mapuche. However, Evangelical Christians have no hesitation in asking a priest to officiate at a funeral when their own pastor is away.

Mapuches have also a strong relationship with the dead and a fear of them at the same time. When a person dies their remains are accompanied for at least four days. During the wake people stay around the dead long enough to give their spirit time to let go and leave them in peace. The community



Guests are invited to take home food that is not eaten during a festival.

usually comes together, cooks and eats around the coffin and talks about their memories of the deceased.

Women look after the preparation of meals. Potatoes and meat are boiled. There are no fridges in the countryside so meat is killed and eaten fresh and some of it cooked and stored a cool place. Some is smoked or salted.

People bring gifts of food and wine for the celebration of the wake. If you go to funerals everybody wants you to eat. Affection is shown by eating. Food that is left over is distributed among the mourners while the wine that is left over remains with the bereaved family.

There are good customs in the culture. You can take home



Fr Michael Howe (right) salutes a leader of the Mapuche community.

with you a plastic bag full of goodies that are left over from a festival meal. Often I come home with a big bag of meat and bread. Everybody takes their bag with them when they go visiting and if food is left on the table it is the practice to take it home. There is usually more than everyone can eat because a pig or a bullock has been slaughtered for a ceremonial meal. Big helpings are taken and as much bread as you can grasp in your hand.

For me the most difficult thing about being with the Mapuches is making the Gospel relevant to their culture. I don't know if my preaching is touching them, if the Gospel is in tune with what they experience in their lives. Sometimes I have the feeling that the Gospel is perceived by them as something foreign and experienced as

First Communion in Chile

In the 1960s the Catholic Church in Chile, in consultation with many parish groups, drastically reformed the celebration of First Communion and Confirmation. Up until that time small children were prepared for First Communion in a period of a few weeks and without the participation of the parents.

The radical new approach introduced a two-year programme of preparation. In future parents were required to enrol their children in the First Communion group in the parish when they reached the age of 10. For the following two years, during the winter months, parents and children would have regular, but separate meetings in neighbourhood groups to learn from the Bible, the teachings of the Church and to reflect and pray.

In a typical 'Columban parish' in Santiago about 24 such groups functioned in any given year. Since the programme began over 30 years ago hundreds of thousands of adults and children have participated. The principal reason for Chile's vibrant Church today is the large number of lay people who are well educated in the faith.

Preparation for First Communion and Confirmation is largely parish based. During the month of January as many as 2,000 adults and youth participate in summer schools organised by the Archdiocese of Santiago to prepare themselves for voluntary work with groups in the parishes. ■





Fr Michael Howe chats with parishioners in Puerto Saavedra.

damaging to their culture. Perhaps that is why they don't seem to let the Gospel touch their lives.

The isolation of this place is difficult but at the same time I have found that experience of living in a situation far from the modern world is good for me. It is a place, where over a number of years, I can see myself growing slowly in my faith, in my relation with God and in my appreciation of nature.

The most heartening thing is the trust people show in me. The bond between me, them, their culture grows. When people are comfortable with each other there is trust. The Mapuche's word is important and what they say they will do. They are a dependable people; when they say yes they mean yes and you can count on them.

When they feel that I am with them in their culture, their hearts are open. When I sit down at a table with them there is a sense of belonging that echoes the Gospel that says those who have left home, brothers and sisters will receive a hundred-fold. Being one with people in the faith is the most freeing part of my life here. ■

Fr Michael Howe first went to Chile in 1978.



Fr Michael Howe talks with a group of youth outside a chapel in a Puerto Saavedra parish.

Editorial

Sacred places speak of God

THERE are corners of our world that claim special status in our lives. They stand out in memory as the settings of our joy or pain or where we have felt awe or sensed the presence of God. Buildings, shrines, grottos and many other locations are marked with the seal of the sacred. They invite us to be sensitive to and respect their significance.

All religions have their hallowed sites. People hold them in high regard because they consider that they are linked to a spirit, a deity or a saintly person. Many indigenous peoples attribute sacredness to inanimate things like rivers, forests, lakes and rocks. They believe that the power to bless or curse flows through them. From them people draw security and hope. Shakespeare observed: "All places the eye of heaven visits are to a wise man ports and happy havens (*King Richard II* 1.iii.273).

Always they are pointers to a spiritual power or presence that intuition tries to grasp. When St Paul visited the city square in Athens (*cf. Acts 17:16-34*) "he was outraged to see the city so full of idols" but he found a niche there that was reserved for the "Unknown God." That was the take-off point for St Paul's preaching.

The Churches that missionaries build, whether cathedrals or grass-roofed chapels, are centres where Christians gather to sing and pray together. As buildings set aside for prayer, they enjoy the regard and affection of the faithful because many key moments in their lives are directly associated with them. Their baptisms, marriages and family funerals were celebrated there.

Even those who do not share our faith respect the buildings we reserve for worship. The poet Goldsmith noted that churches were venerable places where "fools, who came to scoff, remain'd to pray" (*The Deserted Village* 1:177).

An age prone to viewing things in dollar signs could easily miss the sacredness of places where generations keep their faith with God.