

# **Los Olivos Worldview: Case Study Report**

## **“En el Camino”**

**by**

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# Preface

This report is based on research carried out between August 2001 and February 2002 when authority for the study was withdrawn by the Pastor. The research was carried out by participant observation and through the recording of testimonies and interviews. There were of course scores of casual chats with many people when much was learnt.

In this Case Study Report I intended only to write a description of Los Olivos Church in order to condense and make some sense of my findings. I do not intend to enter into any in-depth analysis at this point other than the organising and selection of material. I present the report under the broad theme of “En El Camino” (‘on the path’ or ‘in the way’) and further dividing it into the spiritual path and the ecclesiastical path. This division is my own schema, to facilitate the presentation, as the church does not differentiate.

There will be no interaction with the literature, other than a few references, as I felt that I needed to get down the basic information before entering into dialogue with other researchers.

Your comments, suggestions, criticisms and help are appreciated and invited, especially as they will help me to improve the research method for the continuing months of investigation in other churches.

# 1 Introducing Los Olivos

## 1.1 Situation

The church building of Los Olivos is situated in the northern zone of Buenos Aires. It is placed on the margins between a lower middle class residential area and a much poorer area, what in Buenos Aires is called a Villa Miseria.

The congregation however, is not only from these neighbourhoods, so strictly speaking it is not a local church. The catchment area extends to about one hour's journey all around the church. The streets surrounding the church may have between 20 and 30 parked cars for a Sunday Service so most people come by bus. Quite a number of people actually need to take two buses.

The majority of the congregation would appear to be working class or lower middle class. There are very few people from the Villa and just a few professionals. Quite a number of the women work as housekeepers, a few dressmakers, many are unemployed at present, and many work as housewives, however there are also a few teachers. Amongst the men I met blue collar factory workers many of whom are now unemployed, wholesalers reduced to selling sweets on the buses, a telephone technician and a cable company salesman. Amongst the younger people there are university students. Social status cannot be easily guessed through observing dress styles as the conservative dress code has an equalising effect. Rough calculations from personal observation on a Sunday night gives an estimate of 30% men, however, the young men tend to congregate on the right side and the adult men tend to be busy with various responsibilities during the service.

## 1.2 History

The church traces its history back to 1956 when Tommy Hicks, an evangelist from the USA, held an evangelistic campaign in Buenos Aires, which was attended by thousands of people. This was the first time that evangelicalism made an impact on Argentine society. "During the eight weeks, according to the notices published in the newspapers, attendance reached 200,000 some nights in Huracán, and the total attendance passed two million. About 25, 000 Bibles were sold and about the same number of New Testaments."<sup>1</sup> During this campaign, amongst many thousands of converts, there were a Señor and Señora Regge whom God also miraculously healed.

After their conversion the couple first attended a local congregation of the Union of the Assemblies of God<sup>2</sup> in Garcia Street. The miraculous healing and the changed lives of the couple soon drew the attention of their neighbours to whom they were able to testify to what God had done in their lives. It was therefore not long before Sr. Regge was able to start children's meetings in his own boat-building workshop at the corner of Uzal and Castro, an area, which at that time, was quite poor with unpaved streets. The children soon brought their parents and the couple were able to hold two meetings a week in their workshop. As the numbers of people attending grew they were able to hold four meetings a week. When Sr. Regge gave up his regular employment and dedicated himself, and his building, to the work, the numbers grew quite quickly. The new church became known as Iglesia Evangélica Los Olivos. Regge became the Pastor and the church officially joined the denomination of Union of the Assemblies of God, where he also studied.

By 1974 the church had about 200 members and were beginning to feel cramped in the workshop, even though neighbouring buildings had been bought in order to make more space available. In 1976, due to a neighbour's death, a site across the road became available. The widow approached

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<sup>1</sup> *Historia del Movimiento Pentecostal en la Argentina*. L.W. Stokes. 1968 (my translation)

<sup>2</sup> La Unión de las Asambleas de Dios (UAD)

the church and asked if they would buy it, but they were a poor church and raising the money seemed humanly impossible. They approached the denomination for help but were turned down. The present Pastor recounts how the people dedicated themselves to prayer and within 60 days all the funds needed became available. This money all came from the congregation, who in various ways received sums of money, that they may have been expecting but had given up hope of ever seeing, and they gave this money for the purchase of the site. The quantity of money and the ways in which it became available seemed like a miracle and proved that the purchase was God's will for the congregation. This site, which is the present location of the church building, is one city block long and half a block wide (i.e. 100M X 40M). It therefore had the possibility of extending as the church grew in membership and also allowed the construction of a very visible church red brick and glass building in that neighbourhood. Over the years the church was extended to include a balcony and two wings.

In the middle of the 1980's the church became dissatisfied with their position within the UAD and after many discussions decided to leave and become an independent denomination. This they affected in 1990, one year after the death of Pastor Regge, and formed the 'Foundation Argentina For Christ'<sup>3</sup>. The reasons for this split will be dealt with later.

### 1.3 Church Growth

The 1980's in Argentina saw incredible church growth and is generally recognised as a time of revival. Huge campaigns by itinerant evangelists such as Carlos Anacondia attracted thousands of people to stadiums and tents who had never heard the gospel clearly preached before. Local churches also ran evangelistic campaigns and under this inspired preaching thousands came into the evangelical fold. It is extremely difficult to get accurate statistics as the church only recently started keeping accurate records. The estimates made available to me by the church secretary were:

1960 – 15 members,  
1974 - 200  
1980 - 400  
2000 - 1200

Los Olivos grew incredibly during this epoch and these estimates indicate a growth rate of ???%. Between 1980 and 2000 the church had grown by 300%. The secretary estimated the present membership of the Los Olivos Church to be 1200<sup>4</sup>, based on the number attending on a Communion Sunday and allowing for some extras that only attend a midweek meeting.

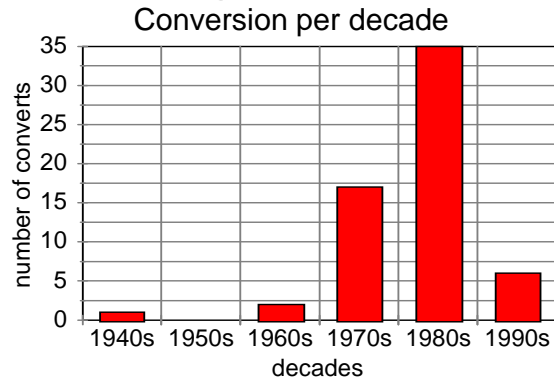
The following chart from the women's group indicates that during the 1980's the number of converts more than doubled from the previous decade and that the 1990's saw a much smaller increase. Without further evidence these statistics cannot be generalized to apply to the Argentine situation as a whole. They reveal only what happened to one department within Los Olivos. The Pastor's wife remembers that when her father, Pastor Regge died, and then Los Olivos separated from the UAD many people left and joined another church of the UAD, however, some of these have now returned. Without more accurate statistics it is impossible to say how these two events are reflected in the estimates now available.

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<sup>3</sup> Fundación Argentina Para Cristo. In this report I have used 'Fundación' to refer to the denomination.

<sup>4</sup> In a personal interview the Pastor estimated the current membership of Los Olivos to be 2,500 people, but the lower figure seems more accurate.

## Women's group Los Olivos



During these years Los Olivos, and then the Fundación, has also been planting new churches, which are in various stages of development. In the Federal Capital there are 9, in the greater Buenos Aires area there are 27<sup>5</sup>, and outside BA there are 55 giving a total of 81 churches. The church in San Juan has 500 members and so allowing for 30 people per congregation brings us to an estimate of around 4,070 congregants.

Although the secretary's figures indicate a membership of 1200, this number of people is only seen all together for communion or a special event. The regular Sunday evening is the largest meeting of the week and on most Sundays there is an average attendance of 500-550 people. This raises the obvious question as to why half the members only attend for communion. My research would suggest that the communion service is considered the most important ritual, so therefore all those who normally only attend a midweek meeting try to come on a communion Sunday as it is considered to be the minimum requirement for maintaining oneself "on the path". It is also possible that the emphasis placed on it by the church leaders reinforces the importance that the ritual already had in Catholicism, converts from a Catholic background therefore can identify with this and come once a month to receive the blessing.

### 1.3.1 Other growth indicators

No. who received Christ in Los Olivos		Baptisms of Los Olivos attendees	Percentage
1999	178	84	47.2%
2000	203	47	23.2%
2001	343 <sup>6</sup>	50	14.6%

It is interesting to note that the higher number of converts does not necessarily mean a higher number of people joining the church. If success were seen as people joining the church, and not just "souls saved", the special campaign year was the least successful of the three years recorded.

<sup>5</sup> Including Los Olivos.

<sup>6</sup> This high figure comes from a special evangelistic campaign.

## 2 Liturgy

Los Olivos is a very busy church with a meeting every evening of the week, plus three mornings, plus the weekly meetings for children, youth, women and men's groups. All the meetings follow a very similar pattern. The basic pattern is varied to some extent for the monthly Holy Communion, monthly Workers meeting, prayer meetings and special annual celebration days.

I present here a description of an evening service, which is mostly based on the diary entry for 30<sup>th</sup> December 2001, as an example of a normal Sunday worship service.

### 2.1 Evening Service.

The large auditorium was no where near full, with only about 400 people present, however, people continued to arrive over the next hour until about 500 were present. I took a place on a pew in the right wing where I had a good view of the platform. People were chatting while waiting for the meeting to start. The Sunday service easily divides into four sections: "Alabanza" or what I have termed "Personal Praise" since the main objective is to communicate personally with God; "Performance Praise" because it is dominated by at least two items of musical performance; the Sermon; the Response.

#### Alabanza or Opening Praise

The Pastor's wife, dressed in a fitted black short-sleeved suit with white blouse underneath came forward to the front mike to open the service. She started by putting up her hands and saying "let us praise God"<sup>7</sup>. There followed a few seconds of praise and tongues on the part of most people in the congregation, however, there were some around me who hadn't finished their conversations. This brief time seems to serve to call people to attention, to end all the diverse conversations and bring people together to worship. She then led us in two choruses which were not in the book. One was quieter and quite contemplative about the Holy Spirit being with his people. Most people readily entered into this attitude and seemed to be concentrating on making contact with God, although not everyone was caught up in this to the same extent.

A young man came forward to lead Hymn 400. "The marvellous grace that Jesus came to give.... Pardoning all my errors, Christ cleansed me from all my evil"<sup>8</sup> (my translation). This was sung gustily. The young man stepped back and the pastor's wife took over once again singing the last verse again.

#### Front

Even before we had finished the hymn people started crowding into the space at the front below the platform steps, but hung back just enough until the prayer table<sup>9</sup> had been carried from the side and put in the centre. It was indeed a small mountain of books, slips of paper and plastic bags containing clothing. Obeying instructions we all raised our right hands to bring our petitions to God there followed a quiet murmur of prayer for about one minute. A brother then came forward to pray and the pastor, the pastor's wife and another man all put their hands on his shoulders as well as on each others. The congregation pressed even closer in order to touch the shoulders of the person in front and in this way the whole congregation was united in prayer. The brother prayed a long and 'powerful' prayer, asking for a blessing on Argentina, on the church, on the Pastor and his family and for all the petitions represented by the notes and clothes, generally for healing and jobs. Instead of being quiet the people joined in, "alabar", "Gloria a Dios", "gracias Señor" mingled with

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<sup>7</sup> Double quotation marks and italics represent my direct translation from Spanish in this instance "*vamos a alabar a Dios*". Single quotation marks and normal type represent a paraphrase rather than a direct translation.

<sup>8</sup> "Maravillosa gracia vino Jesús a dar, ..... Perdonando todos mis errores Cristo me limpió de mi maldad;"

<sup>9</sup> monte de oración

expressions in tongues rising to a crescendo, the sensation of being carried upwards, of supporting the pray-er, of being almost able to touch God, of being united in a spiritual experience was powerful. The whole church seemed to be full of prayer.

The pastor's wife then led us in a celebratory praise song. This is generally accompanied by happy clapping and repeated a number of times. She then said that this evening's greeting would be "Jesus Christ is passing through here"<sup>10</sup>. We gave this greeting to the people around us as we went back to our seats, the women kissing on both cheeks and shaking hands with the men. At this time people seemed to look for friends that they hadn't yet greeted.

### **Performance Praise**

The music started up for "I will praise you Lord"<sup>11</sup> and most people joined in with enthusiasm. This is a happy clappy joyful song, perhaps what Albrecht<sup>12</sup> would call celebrative<sup>13</sup>. It seemed to be to the music of "When I get to heaven I'll put on my crown" which is a children's chorus in Ireland. During the singing the mikes were set up and the choir came on.

**Choir** This small choir of six women and two men had powerful voices and sang an upbeat foot tapping song, but they made no body movements whatsoever. Despite the good performance people did not give it their complete attention; there was a continuous buzz of whispering all around me. At the end people raised their hands in a sign of thanksgiving, as applause is not allowed, and muttered "gracias" or "Gloria a Dios". The director was a young woman and she stood to one side while directing.

**Bible reading** A young man with red hair came forward and we all stood for the reading following the text of Isaiah 6:1-8 in our Bibles. Almost everyone brings their own Bible, as well as hymn books and chorus books, as they are not provided.

**Chorus** We sang a chorus from the book while the next choir came to the front and got ready. It was "Holy Spirit I need you ... fill me with your Spirit Lord.

**Choir** This small choir, or music group, consisted of seven men, including the Pastor. They had three guitars and one wooden drum and sang two songs in the folk style of northern Argentina, which was quite similar to the altiplano music we had heard in Bolivia. They were, "Take me to heaven" and "True Love".

**Hymn** A hymn from the book was then announced but I couldn't find it as the number was not announced very clearly. No one around me seemed to have it either.

**Chorus** "I won't be afraid Lord if you go with me"<sup>14</sup>. During the singing of this chorus five men, each with a large offering bag, came from either side of the platform and lined up across the front.

**Offering** The leader stated clearly that this was completely voluntary and then asked one man to pray for the offering. As they never use the mike for this it is impossible to hear and a lot of people started looking for their money. The men then spread throughout the congregation to take up the offering.

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<sup>10</sup> "Jesucristo está pasando por aquí".

<sup>11</sup> "alabare a mi Señor"

<sup>12</sup> See D. Albrecht *Rites in the Spirit* Sheffield Ac. Press 1999

<sup>13</sup> The singing of these congregational songs or choruses seems to function as transitory rites, as they help cover what would otherwise be an empty space between the greeting and the choir piece. They did in effect cover the entrance and getting ready of the choir. (Albrecht).

<sup>14</sup> "No temeré, Señor, si vas conmigo"



- Choruses During the offering three men came to the front mike to lead the congregation in singing three choruses, these are usually taken from the book. Tonight we sang:-  
*“There is a river of life flowing over me... he heals the sick and gives them liberty”*<sup>15</sup>  
 This is quite a happy celebrative song which was followed by *“When I think on your loveliness, ...I worship you, ... The reason that I live is to worship you”*<sup>16</sup>. This is quite a meditative song and changed the mood completely. People stood with hands and heads raised to heaven, entering into the mood engendered by the song and appeared to be trying to make personal contact with God.
- Tongues We sang this twice, then the Pastor came to the preaching mike, (the second one up) and he continued the song two more times. He then raised his voice a tone and that seemed to be an indication that this would be the last time round for this song. He then went into tongues and the congregation followed him. This became an extended period of praise tongues. The song was very moving and people continued standing with their hands and faces raised heavenward, sincerely seeking to meet God. I also felt myself being influenced by the mood. The Pastor brought this time to an end by saying that we would read the scripture.
- Reading Ps.95 *“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation”*.

## Sermon<sup>17</sup>

He read the first two verses again and said, “It’s beautiful...”

“We are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his hand”. .. Are you aware that you are a member of a people that it isn’t so easy to belong to? It wasn’t easy for the ancient people of God, besides the glory of God, the miracles, .. and every day was miraculous, yet they didn’t recognize this. .... Moses was indignant.

“Their hearts go astray”. God had demonstrated that he was their saviour, he had demonstrated his power, nevertheless their hearts were not for the Lord. .... Moses could not set a foot in the promised land. .... They were a people who easily became idolatrous ... whose hearts went astray. ....

*Do you want the power of God in your life?*

Many voices responded positively to the question. Two other similar questions followed and were responded to positively by the congregation.

The world is without God (with a rising tone of voice) and without hope.

Once again the congregation responds in agreement.

*“They do not know my pathway” ...that is a terrible thing.*

*Are you firmly established on the pathway of God?*

They were a people who had received so many revelations, had gone through so many tests, ... yet their hearts were overwhelmed (fogged?)<sup>18</sup>

*Is your heart firmly established in the Lord?*

Strangely there was no response to this question.

<sup>15</sup> “Hay un río de vida fluyendo por mí, .... Él sana a los enfermos y les da su libertad.”

<sup>16</sup> “Cuando pienso en tu amor tan bello, ..... Te adoro a Ti, te adora a Ti, la razón por la cual yo vivo es para adorar.”

<sup>17</sup> A resume of the sermon which lasted about 30 minutes.

<sup>18</sup> “corazones abrumados”

*Is your heart firmly established in the Lord? .....*

*To know the greatness of the Lord .... The things that Satan offers will trap you ... give your heart to the Lord. .... Read the Bible in spirit and truth. ... For forty years the people went around in circles in the desert..... they never entered into the true rest. ....*

*Are you firmly established in the Lord?*

*Enter into the repose, the rest, the peace that God gives to his children. Where are you going to find anything better? There are offers in this world. Nevertheless they are idols, ..... sorcerers, diviners, they work for the devil, they are all liars..... they will not enter the rest.... There are believers who come to church, but their hearts are astray, they do not know the pathway of God.*

*Are you sure that your heart is in the Lord?*

*There are many who have received miracles, nevertheless their hearts are astray. .... They went to diviners and traditional healers, ..... you need to make sure that you are in the Lord.*

### **Response**

The Pastor then asked for anyone who was there for the first time and who wanted to receive Christ as their personal saviour to take that first step and come to the front. One older lady in white blouse and black trousers went forward. She was accompanied by an usher. The Pastor led her in the set prayer to receive Christ and she went into the side room to give her details to the worker on duty.

“Let us come closer”, he said while making an embracing movement with both his arms. Everyone started to move forward. The trail of people extended up the aisles as many couldn’t actually get to the front.

The Pastor spoke once again about having a sincere heart; this went on for about ten minutes. We then sang “change me” quite a number of times. The music and the soft pleading words seemed to engender a profound desire to reach out to God. Most people were caught up into this receptive attitude, but there were a few women who seem to be more ‘caught up’ than others. One young girl with very long dark hair (mid 20’s) was right in front of the Pastor, I think she is the girl who fell down a few weeks ago. Her brows were pursed in concentration and there was an expression of profound and sincere seeking on her face, almost as if she were in pain. Her arms were stretched right up. An older lady (mid 50’s) with long straight grey hair was right at the front as usual. She also was very intent, her arms extended straight up, swaying slightly to the music, and with a similar expression of deep concentration on her upturned face. There seemed to be a desire on their part to touch God or be touched by God. They seem to be the types who want 100% of the experience; what I like to call extreme worshippers. In reflecting on this what I note is that no one was caught up in joy. No one seemed to be in an ecstasy of happiness only in seeking. However, when the Pastor brought this time to an end they stopped almost immediately and returned to a normal pose. They had not lost control in the experience.

Right at the middle front there were two children. The little girl must have been about six years old. During this worship time she stuck her right hand straight up in the air, like in school, and closed her eyes to sing, she looked just as involved as all the adults, but she couldn’t sustain it. After just a few moments she opened her eyes and looked around self-consciously, she didn’t get involved again. Not everyone was caught up in this mood, many towards the fringes of the crowd remained completely uninvolved, the young people continuing to chat to their friends, and even a few adults in the centre appeared to remain untouched.

The Pastor then spoke again about this not being a one-time experience but a permanent experience. He then led us to sing “We exalt you” which is also a very ‘worshipful’ or contemplative song.

This time however fewer people got 'caught up', they were obviously tired as we must have been standing for about 20mins and it was much hotter at the front than at the side. I saw one lady stifling a yawn.

### **Announcements**

The Pastor brought this final time of worship to an end with the announcements for the end of year meetings. The New Year would commence with a prayer meeting. He mentioned that it was a difficult time for Argentina and we must pray for God's blessing on the year. There was no mention of anything political or any guidance on how people should respond to the crisis.

### **Leaving ritual**

He led us to sing, "I want more of you" and then we departed greeting people around us as we left.

Most people left quite quickly but some lingered to chat to friends, some went to the side to be prayed for by the workers on duty and quite a number line up to greet the Pastor or his wife or to ask for a special prayer. Within half an hour the building was almost empty.

# 3 Los Olivos: Worldview

## 3.1 Introduction.

To make a start at examining the worldview of Los Olivos I am starting with the basic universals as depicted by Redfield<sup>19</sup>. These are the understanding of Self, divided into I and Me in opposition to the Other, the Other is divided into Human and Non-human, the Human is divided into We and They, and also by age and sex, he divides the Non-human into Nature and God, the perception of time and space are also important. These universals come together to give an overall view of that person's, or group's, understanding of reality.

Redfield's model is static as it does not allow for processes of change; however, his universals are a good starting place for description. Here I am only attempting a first description of the Los Olivos worldview, how that is appropriated will be considered later. Not every universal is of equal importance in trying to understand Los Olivos, so some will not receive much attention.

It is widely acknowledged that Self cannot be understood in isolation from at least some of the other universals as a person identifies him/herself primarily according to the groups that s/he belongs to and in relation to the person with whom s/he is speaking. How a person would identify himself to another member of his group would be possibly quite different to how he would identify himself to a person outside of his group. To appreciate how a person constructs his own identity we therefore need to know how he divides up his world.

### Major Worldview Categories

#### The Natural World

The physical reality of the universe is assumed, and all of it was originally created by God. The natural environment however, is of little interest and is rarely mentioned, except in terms of God's creation and his good gift to human beings. The physical land of Argentina is appreciated as being beautiful and with abundant resources to provide a good life for all its inhabitants. A rural community may have had more interest in the land but Los Olivos is an urban church located far from the countryside.

The creation has been marred by the sin of the original couple, with the consequence of both physical and spiritual death. The natural world is now also in rebellion against its creator. This is why the earth now suffers from earthquakes, floods and other disasters, which are not God's fault because he made it good. It was Satan who ruined the work of God.

The original condition of humanity was rarely mentioned, as it is the present state that has to be dealt with. However, it is understood that "the essence of man, spirit, soul and body cannot be divided in compartments".<sup>20</sup> The human is an integrated being and therefore every aspect must be treated as one affects the other.<sup>21</sup> The human creation however, has also been ruined by sin, we are now weak and fragile and "we are rebellious by our sinful nature".

The creation is now divided between God and Satan. This understanding is expressed in terms of "El Reino de Dios" i.e. the Reign or Kingdom of God, and "el mundo" or the World. "El mundo" however, is only used to refer to the social world of human beings.

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<sup>19</sup> Kearney, 1984:39

<sup>20</sup> *Proclama*, January 2002:7

<sup>21</sup> Despite this assertion, people are usually referred to as "souls". The aspect of soul would therefore seem to be the most important.

### 3.2.1 God and his Kingdom

God is creator of all that exists he is therefore unimaginably powerful and is “eternally alive”. As creator he is therefore “Father” of all human beings, but is “Father” in a more direct or intimate sense to those who believe for he is also their “Saviour” and has adopted them as his particular children. God and Jesus are both called and referred to as “Señor” or Lord. God is Lord in the sense that he rules or governs, and in this capacity “he is overall” and one day will exercise his lordly right to be judge of all humanity. In character he is “a God of order, holiness and love”.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting the order in which these characteristics are written for they reveal something of the emphasis of the teaching in Los Olivos; certainly God’s love is rarely mentioned.<sup>23</sup> The judging and loving aspects of God’s character are juxtaposed, as a junior teacher said, “God is strict and God is love” also “God loves us but hates sin”.

The blessings that characterise his Kingdom, principally peace, security and prosperity reveal it to be the complete opposite of the World where Satan dominates. “It is not God’s will that we are sad, anxious, sick, depressed, with problems and difficulties. God wants us to be blessed, it is his will that our lives enjoy peace, blessing, health and prosperity.”<sup>24</sup>

God wants to bless and give a good life to his children, but only when the person has totally surrendered their life to God’s will, and lives the kind of holy life that pleases God. Sermon themes therefore deal much more with holiness and sanctification, the living sacrifice, doing God’s will, obedience, the right attitude, the sincere and consecrated heart than with God’s love. God’s mercy is more often mentioned because there is forgiveness and restoration for those who have failed to live up to these demands.

I am sure that no one would deny that God is love, because that is why he sent Jesus to die on the cross, nevertheless, this isn’t the strongest picture that one gets of God in Los Olivos, the impression is more that God is demanding and quite hard to please, but liberally pours out his blessing on those who do please him.

Other heavenly beings such as angels were rarely mentioned. This does not mean that their existence was doubted, but that they simply do not have a prominent place in the worldview.

### 3.2.2 The World and the Devil.

The World, or human society, is understood in totally negative terms. It is “dangerous” and “full of problems and conflicts”. It is “impure” and will “contaminate” those who get involved in it. It is the opposite of the Kingdom of God because “the World is without God” and therefore “without hope”. The Editor of the church’s own magazine expresses this clearly; “In the midst of a society that is characterised precisely by the opposite, [i.e. of the Christian life] that is to say, by living far from the will of God, in sin, in lies, in deception, ... they have lost all their values to such an extent that immorality, corruption, and neglect, prevail..., in times dominated by dissatisfaction, uncertainty, discontent, and intolerance...”<sup>25</sup>

The social world is in such a terrible state because it is the sphere of Satan’s activity. Satan is usually called “el enemigo” or “the enemy” because he is the great enemy of God and also of human beings. People who are not Christians are in the World and subject to all the subtle traps of the Devil because they have no defence against him. They are “blinded”<sup>26</sup> by his tricks, lies and false promises and so instead of seeing the truth they ignore God and concentrate on “satisfying their carnal desires, but in the end they are hurt”. People in the World look for help from

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<sup>22</sup> Quotes from a short article on “Dios creador del universo” *Proclama* January 2002:19.

<sup>23</sup> Out of the 20 sermons summarised none was directly on the subject of God’s Love.

<sup>24</sup> *Proclama*. January 2002:4

<sup>25</sup> *Proclama*. January 2002:1

<sup>26</sup> A member’s words.

curanderos,<sup>27</sup> “sorcerers, and diviners, but they all work for the devil, they are all liars”. People in the World are therefore doubly tricked.

Demons, like angels, are believed in, but are rarely mentioned. Demon possession is accepted as possible but not given any prominence. The emphasis is rather on avoiding the trickery of the Devil.

### **3.2.3 The Believer and the Devil**

An important feature of the Christian life is the constant “struggle against the enemy, the Devil, Satan”. “We are in a constant battle. Be careful, the enemy wants to rob and destroy our lives.” However, the believer does not struggle without divine help, “The devil takes the opportunity to do his thing, but the decision is yours. Remain firm in the Lord, he will help us”. “If we are in the Lord the enemy won’t touch us, he can’t”. Because divine help is available no-one can blame the Devil totally for their problems and failures, they have the responsibility to remain firm and resist.

However, just in case one has become weak and doesn’t have strength to resist the Devil’s traps and temptations it is advisable to stay as far from the World as possible, to avoid its contamination and resulting “anguish”. The above quote from the magazine continues, “in the midst of this situation we must look to Christ, live in his will, satisfied with the present”.

Therefore, the Devil, although powerful and dangerous, is not omnipotent. This has been proven by his defeat by Christ on the cross. Christ’s victory was proved by his resurrection. The Devil therefore cannot touch believers who are walking with Christ because Christ protects them.

### **3.2.4 Dualism?**

Some writers have accused Pentecostals of holding a dualistic worldview, and certainly the division of reality into two opposing camps would seem to bear that out. Causal explanations would also support this stance as little reference is made to the possibility of physical causes, such as germs, or social causes, such as corrupt and oppressive structures. Even if these things are mentioned they are not seen as the ultimate reality, underlying them there is a spiritual power at work.

However, a full philosophical dualism depends on the opposing sides being of equal power and having an equal chance of winning the cosmic battle. This would not hold for the worldview presented by Los Olivos, for although reality is divided into the Kingdom of God and The World, there is no conception that Satan is comparable in power to God, nor is it conceived that he has any possibility of winning the ultimate battle. In fact, although his power is not underestimated, he is weak because he lost the decisive battle with Christ on the cross.

Although this is the worldview presented by the church, this does not mean that its’ more subtle aspects are grasped by every member, nor that every member maintains the same emphasis as the official teaching. My research revealed that there are at least a few members who put a great deal of emphasis on the activity of Satan and in whose personal universe he looms large and ever present.

### **3.2.5 Them and Us**

Only two kinds of people exist in the world, in the words of the Pastor, “there is no intermediate, there is no grey, there is no intermediate between the just and unjust, .. between the believer and the sinner.” The statistics provided by the church secretary reveal an interesting use in terminology; he records the number of “souls” who received Christ, and the number of “brothers” who were baptised. Before conversion people are souls that need saving, they are the objects of the church’s

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<sup>27</sup> Traditional healer.

evangelism, and afterwards they are brothers, part of the family. “Hermano” and “hermana” is also what they commonly call each other, that is, brother and sister.

“Creyente” or believer, is the most common designation used to refer to themselves but it is also used for other believers in other denominations. When asked how they identified themselves to outsiders I was told “cristiana creyente”, that is Christian Believer, or “creyente cristiana evangélica”.

They do recognise that there are problems with all of these words as Catholics reply that they are Christians and Believers; however they do not identify themselves in this way. Any confusion gives an opportunity to explain the faith. The word “Evangelical” is understood in Argentine society as being non-Catholic, but the actual content would not be clear. This word is becoming difficult for Evangelicals to use as it has received considerable bad press.

A number of Biblical metaphors are used to describe the Church, but the family metaphor is the most common. The use of hermano and hermana reinforces this teaching that “we are a family of faith”, that the feeling that members have for one another should be like “brotherly love”. This is one reason for the continuous encouragement to come to church. Because the church is “God’s house”, believers are God’s children, and therefore all the brothers and sisters should come together as a united family to meet their Father God. The beginning and end of each service, when everyone goes to the front and unites by touch, has the effect of reinforcing this feeling of family and unity.

In Argentina the ideal family is close and loyal and the members spend a lot of time visiting each other. Friendships outside the family only become important when other family members are far away. The usage of the family metaphor therefore encourages people to be loyal and to find their most significant relationships within the church. However, these relationships are not encouraged into the kind of friendships where people just waste time together for the mere pleasure of doing so. Visiting outside the church is not encouraged; it is enough that people meet their brothers and sisters in the church.

Non-believers on the other hand are in the World. They “live a sinful life on the broad path that gives birth to dead works. .... The results are deadly: perdition, pain, anguish.”<sup>28</sup> “They are sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>29</sup> Non believers include Roman Catholics, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witness and certain churches which call themselves “Evangelical” but are not true churches; by this is generally meant “La Iglesia Universal Reino de Dios”.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2.6 Self Understanding

Personal identity is understood with reference to the group. People identify themselves as belonging to the wider Christian Evangelical family, but also want to identify themselves particularly with Los Olivos church. People emphasise that they are a member of this church because, ‘it was here that I came to know Christ’, ‘here I found what I was looking for’, here they are confident that there is “sana doctrina” i.e. “sound doctrine”, “here you can trust the Pastor, you hear plenty of criticisms about other pastors but never about this Pastor”, after being away for a while they returned because “other churches are not like this one”. Everyone believed that this was the best church in Buenos Aires and wanted to identify themselves with it.

Sometimes people use Biblical metaphors to describe themselves, for example one lady told me, “I am the only servant in my family”. By this she meant servant of the Lord. This kind of usage

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<sup>28</sup> Proclama January 2002:6

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*:7

<sup>30</sup> The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. This has come to Argentina from Brazil and is not generally accepted by evangelicals because of certain practices.

comes across in the sermons for example, “we are vessels in the hand of God”. The identity of servant or vessel speaks of the complete submission of the believer to Christ’s will. This is underlined in the church by the strict division between those who are “workers” and those who only “congregate”. Those who have not passed through the church’s training programme cannot work in the church, nor outside in the name of the church. Workers are therefore highly respected.

### **3.2.7 Age and gender.**

There is a strong age and gender awareness in the church as all the departments, even the children’s are organized according to these principals. Children are baptized when they are old enough to understand what it means, and can train to be workers from the age of 15, the traditional coming of age<sup>31</sup> in Argentine society. Young people were active as workers in the church and in the mission trips, so ability and dedication are much more important than age.

There is a stricter division between men and women in Los Olivos than in general Argentine society and also in comparison to other evangelical churches; this is symbolized by the form of greeting used between members. In Argentina the common greeting is to touch right cheeks and make a kissing noise into the air. Men generally greet all women in this way; however, in Los Olivos they shake hands, reserving the traditional kiss as a same sex greeting, but on both cheeks.

The subject of the role and place of women could take up a whole chapter so I will just make a few general observations here. Women are expected to find fulfillment in the traditional roles of mother and home-maker. They are also expected to dress conservatively and to show that they are submissive to men by not wearing trousers.<sup>32</sup> This however, is not to deny that women can also be called by God to be pastors of churches. There are several notable women who are pastors within the Fundación. However, they are just that, they are exceptional women with exceptional testimonies and gifts. There are also quite a number of women teachers at all levels within Los Olivos church.

Any depreciation of the woman is therefore denied, however the only woman who has an active role in the Sunday service, other than in music, is the Pastor’s wife, who always starts the service with praise. However, she never prays herself, always calling a brother to do this. Neither do women lead the choruses, the hymns, take up the offering, anoint with oil, pray for the sick or serve communion. Women do some of these things at the smaller services during the week, and on Christian Women’s Day, but never on a regular Sunday.

In the past, when the church was smaller, women were more involved and there were also ordained deaconesses, but not now. However, male deacons still exist. When asked for a reason I was told, “it is a big church ... this is simply the manner in which we organize ourselves”.

The role and place of women is therefore somewhat difficult to interpret, at the moment it seems to me that the conservatism is only overcome in particular cases where God demonstrates that he calls particular women to serve in a non-traditional way. There does not seem to be any awareness of a need to demonstrate sexual equality by encouraging women into ministry or involving them in traditional male roles.

### **3.2.8 The perception of time and space**

Time or “los tiempos” is mentioned fairly frequently in sermons. There seems to be an eschatological and historical understanding as well as an explanatory use.

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<sup>31</sup> At age 15 Argentine girls are given a huge party and allowed to start dating boys. They do not come of age in the sense of being able to vote or of being independent of parents.

<sup>32</sup> A function served by the head covering in other Christian traditions.



By eschatological understanding I mean that God is seen to be in ultimate control of the epochs of historical time, which will finally come to an end with the Second Coming of Christ. The present, or historical time, is usually called simply “the times”. God “has established a time for the preaching of the Gospel”. “The message of God serves for all epochs and times”. As a teacher explained to the women, “we don’t know the times of God, nor of this world. Today is the time to know, to study the Bible, ... we are in a time of liberty.”

There is also an understanding of time that is much closer to the current context. During the months of my fieldwork Argentina suffered economic crisis, bank accounts were frozen, 25,000 businesses closed and the plaza in front of the government house was the scene of constant angry protesters. In the Pastor’s sermons he made frequent reference to “good times and bad times” also “In Argentina the times are difficult”. “We live in times when confidence is not placed in the Lord”. They were definitely bad days for Argentina but the church was encouraged to live confidently putting their trust in God’s blessing. “It is a beautiful blessing to live in this manner, especially in bad times” “God will bless ... he will send bread”. There was great confidence that the true believer “would never lack anything.”

Looking from this perspective the future doesn’t look too good either, “to put hope in the things of this world ... to have projects for the future ... you cannot trust in this”. There is more emphasis on surviving the present, “in the midst of this situation we must look to Christ, live in his will, satisfied with the present”. In regard to the future, it is better for the Christian to place their future hope, of being with Christ, in eschatological time.

The belief that God is in control of the times is one way to explain why things sometimes appear to go wrong or why prayers aren’t answered. In answer to the question, “Why does God not concede every request?” a junior teacher answered, “it is the will of God”, after being pressed further she answered, “God has his time, also the person can lose their time”. This was also an explanation frequently offered by the women in their own meetings.

### Reflection

After working through Redfield’s model I feel that it was rather stiff and inflexible, it was rather like trying to find things to fit into boxes. I feel that a more fluid way of looking at Los Olivos is to use their own scheme and follow that through. This is what I have tried to do in the following section when looking at their own conception of Conversion.

The resulting description, based on Redfield’s universals, is also rather cerebral and doesn’t easily help us make the connection with real behaviour in daily life. Nor does it help us appreciate how a new worldview is acquired, this question I will consider later.

# 4 Conversion

## 4.1 Introduction

Over the years there has been considerable debate both in theological and sociological circles as to whether conversion is a one-off experience or a process. In Los Olivos conversion is understood to be a process, because although “saving souls” is the major objective this is understood to be only a beginning, which eventually leads to lives transformed on earth, and as the present Pastor pointed out to me, “*transformations need time*”.<sup>33</sup>

Conversion is conceived of and expressed in terms of “*el camino*”, which could be interpreted as the path, the way, or the pathway. In their testimonies people say things like, ‘I have been on the pathway two years’. The teachers of the church talk of the Christian life as “*el camino de fe*” or the pathway of faith.

This pathway of faith or spiritual path is understood to be a way of growing knowledge about the Word of God, and greater commitment to Christ. Progress along this path is marked by particular rites and peak experiences. The peak experiences prove that one is still on the path and making progress in the spiritual life.

Running in conjunction with the spiritual path is the path through the church. The two run together but are not identical. Progress on the spiritual path does not necessarily mean progress through the structures of the church. In theory progress through the structures of the church should not be possible without corresponding progress along the spiritual path. This raises the question of how the two are seen to be related, and I hope that by the end of this section this question will be at least illuminated.

## 4.2 Stepping onto the path

After every meeting, except prayer meetings, but including communion, and weddings, people are invited to come forward and “*receive Christ as your personal saviour*”. The Pastor always invites those who are there for the first time and who have never before made this decision to take this “*first step of faith*”. There is very little variation in terms used and when the penitents have all gathered around the front the Pastor leads them in the prayer for forgiveness. This is a standard prayer and the words never vary.

“I give thanks for having received your Word, I believe that I am a sinner, but I ask for pardon, have mercy on me, pardon all my sins, I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour, I ask that you free me from all evil, from every temptation, that I will prosper in everything, that you give me health, bless my house, and save all my family, and I give you thanks for this great salvation. Amen!”<sup>34</sup>

The congregation then all say together, “Christ is my Saviour”.

Although the prayer sounds rather like a formula the mere repeating of the words will not bring Christ to the person. The change is affected only by faith, which is “*meaning it with all your whole heart*”.

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<sup>33</sup> Chat with Pastor Román 03-01-2002.

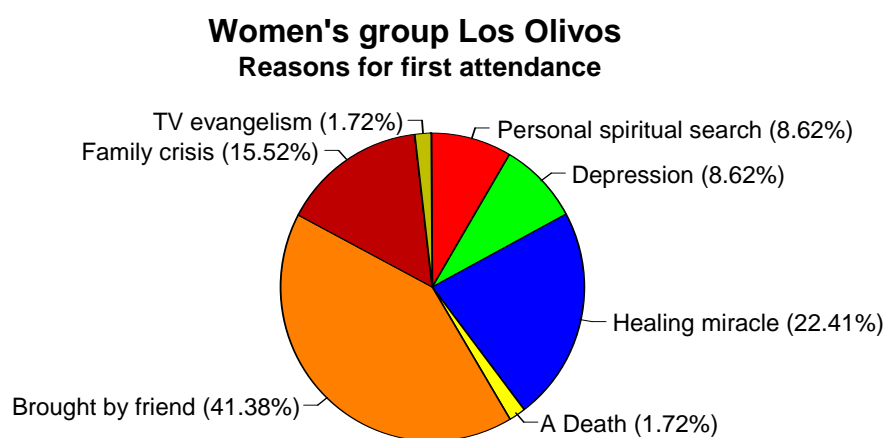
<sup>34</sup> I have translated this from the tract “Hoy” or “Today”.

The church expects that even people who have come for the first time will go forward to receive Christ, even if the sermon has not been a specific explanation of the gospel and the need for salvation, which it usually is not. This seems to indicate that people are not actually responding to the sermon, and raises the question of motivation. Nor does anyone actually check that the people who have gone forward really understand what they are doing. When they go through the door into the side room the worker on duty records their name, address and phone number, but no one sits down with them and explains the main points of the Christian faith or helps them to understand the significance of going forward. This would seem to indicate that from the point of view of the church even a minimal intellectual understanding is not important for receiving Christ. But if that night's message was not actually an explanation of the gospel what were the people responding to?

### 4.3 Motivations.

Testimonies reveal that at least some people actually come with the intention of putting themselves into God's hands, so in a sense the decision has already been made, they are just waiting for the right moment to do it.

The Women's group keeps a file of conversion testimonies of all the members who are also workers in the church. This file had 69 entries. Each entry was a single sheet of paper with; dates of birth, conversion, Baptism in the Holy Spirit and Baptism in Water as well as an autobiographical summary of the person's conversion. These summaries typically covered the circumstances under which the person had originally come to faith, the miracles they had received, the changes that their conversion has made in their lives, thanks to God for what he had done for them and how they mean to continue going forward. The following chart was constructed from the information in this file.



In their testimonies people do not always make a clear distinction between reasons for first attending the church and reasons for going forward to receive Christ. The chart therefore represents what appeared to me to be the main reason for the person first coming to church. It is clear that just over 50% of the women came through a life crisis, such as illness of themselves or a family member, depression, family problems such as divorce or infidelity. The largest single section of 41.38% did not mention any crisis, and just said that they were brought to the church by a friend.<sup>35</sup> However, I should point out that everyone was brought by a friend or relative, this section refers to those who did not state any other major reason for their first attendance.

These statistics would seem to suggest that people do not come 'cold' to church when they come for the first time. They have already had on-going contact with a Pentecostal member perhaps for many years before they actually come. The life crisis could then be seen as the catalyst that finally

<sup>35</sup> No comparable statistics could be made for the Men's group as the permission for my study was withdrawn at the time I requested this information.

motivates them to attend, perhaps after many years of rejecting invitations. This would mean that the person has been prepared by their friend or relative before they actually attend a meeting in the church. They have heard the testimony and observed the life of this friend, perhaps they have even heard the gospel explained to them and when they come it is because they have finally decided that there is no other help for them except to 'put themselves into the hands of God'. This explains why many people go forward to receive Christ the first time they enter the church, even if the sermon is not especially directed at the unconverted, they feel that they have understood at least the basics of it because they have had some previous explanation from their friend or relative.

#### 4.4 Inappropriate Motivations?

In February of 2001 Los Olivos ran a week's evangelistic campaign. During that week 256 people went forward to receive Christ but only 5-10% continued in the church.<sup>36</sup> The statistics provided by the secretary showed that during the whole of 2001 there were 343 "souls" who went forward to receive Christ and in the same year 50 "brothers" were baptised.<sup>37</sup> That is 14.6%. There are undoubtedly many reasons for the high drop out rate, such as travelling distance to the church, but my research would indicate that inadequate understanding coupled with inappropriate motivations contribute enormously to this statistic.

In the women's testimony file three women admitted that they went forward without understanding anything. They acted, perhaps emotionally or impulsively, without understanding the significance of their action. These three later came to a better understanding and remained in the church. However, it does raise the question of how many people actually do go forward without understanding, from the church's point of view, that they are committing themselves to follow Christ.<sup>38</sup> The appeal is always presented in the terms of "receiving Christ" or "accept Christ as your only personal saviour". What would these words mean to someone from a nominal Catholic background? Very often the word "repentance" is not mentioned in the sermon and the first time that the new person hears it is when they are already standing at the front and repeating the prayer after the Pastor. They are therefore repeating a prayer the words of which they either have no understanding or to which they give a Catholic interpretation.

Information gleaned from chats, interviews and testimonies indicates that many people come to the church and go forward to "receive Christ" from very personal motives of which the church would not approve. For example, one woman recorded that she went forward "for shame" or to pacify the neighbour who had brought her. I was told of a man who went forward because he really wanted prayer for his wife to have a baby, when she got pregnant they stopped coming because they got what they wanted. Other people were able to tell me similar stories. Some of these people return to "give thanks" but then never come back. The Women's Testimony file indicates that just over 50% of new people come to church for the first time because they are in the midst of a life crisis and are looking for help. It is therefore not surprising that they confuse "receiving Christ" with receiving Christ's blessing as they would in a Catholic mass. The guided prayer also contributes to this misunderstanding because half of it is concerned about being freed from temptations and receiving blessing for oneself and ones family, the previous confession of sin and asking for pardon is only a precursor to receiving the needed blessing. All of this is easily understood within the prevailing Catholic model.

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<sup>36</sup> This was the estimate given to me by the Pastor during a private interview 29-08-01.

<sup>37</sup> This baptismal figure would also include young people who had grown up in Los Olivos. This may account for the difference in the Pastor's estimate and the secretary's figures.

<sup>38</sup> It was impossible to do any direct research on the people who did not return as the church would not give me access to their records.

#### 4.5 Water Baptism: A Step of Obedience

Two or three times a year a large baptismal service is held at Los Olivos for the new converts who are attending this church and also for people from the annexes and local churches of the denomination<sup>39</sup>. In order to be baptised a person must attend three out of the four pre-baptismal classes and be recommended by someone in the church who knows them.

The pre-baptismal classes concentrate on the basic doctrine of salvation, and the death, burial and resurrection symbolism involved in the rite of baptism. This is the convert's first encounter with an orderly explanation of what they have done in going forward to "receive Christ". Here they also receive the first explanation of what "repentance and obedience" involve. The church emphasises that baptism is a testimony that the person has already been saved, it has no saving power in itself, and that since it is a command of Jesus undergoing the rite is a step of obedience. The reasons for going through the rite of baptism are therefore to show others that one is now an evangelical, to show the church that one intends to be obedient to Christ, and to open the gate to the next stage of the path.

The relationship between water baptism and church membership is not direct. A person must be baptised to become a member, but being baptised does not automatically bring the person into full church membership. The Pastor talks about the person 'becoming a member of the body of Christ', however, when questioned one teacher told me that the person becomes a member "of the universal church of Christ". "But not of Los Olivos?" I asked. "No, we wait for about a year to see if they are serious". It seems therefore that baptism gives the person the status of probationary member, which will be ratified after a year if they prove faithful during the intervening time. At the end of the probationary year they will be given a certificate of membership.

Since baptism is not seen as an initiatory rite into membership of the local church there was consequently little teaching on being a part of the community of faith. The class notes supplied by the chief teacher show that 'Unity' was the last point on the agenda, however, in the last class this was replaced by teaching on Spirit Baptism which was not indicated as part of the lesson plan. This would seem to indicate that the individual's experience of Spirit Baptism is considered to be more important than realising one's place as part of the community of faith.

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<sup>39</sup> In the Baptismal Service which I attended 60 people were baptised.

## 5 The Spiritual Path: Steps of Consecration

Many people are content to be baptised and go no further along the path through the church's structures. For them the spiritual path of faith continues through regular attendance at worship services and seeking to experience the presence of Jesus in prayer, praise and in the reading and preaching of God's Word, but without the organised input from further classes

### 5.1 Spirit Baptism

In order to experience God's presence people are encouraged to seek for the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. This was actually the main theme of the last pre-baptismal class. It was introduced at this point to distinguish it from water baptism and to show the still relatively new converts that there was an even greater experience to look forward to. In contrast to water baptism, which is a command, Spirit baptism is a promise. There is no formula to being Spirit baptised, the person must simply claim the promise in faith, but the sign that it has happened is speaking in unknown tongues, or glossolalia. Spirit baptism is THE peak experience. It proves that the person has been accepted by God, and it makes it possible for the person to join in more fully when everyone prays in tongues together during the worship times. It is in a sense the initiation rite into Pentecostalism. It does not however, of itself, open the gate to advancement through the structures of the church.

Although Los Olivos has been a Pentecostal church from its inception, and the experience of Spirit Baptism is taught and its importance emphasised, 27% of the women in the testimony file left empty the space for recording the date of their baptism in the Holy Spirit, even though they were able to record at least the year for their conversion and water baptism. Given the emphasis placed on the experience it is unlikely that the date would be forgotten. What it does show is that the experience is not essential to becoming a church worker, as all the women in the file were church workers.

### 5.2 Sanctification

Living the Christian life is expressed in terms of continuing by faith along the spiritual path towards a deeper sanctification. Sanctification is an extremely important concept for Los Olivos and in some form is the major theme of fifty percent of sermons. Sanctification is understood in two ways. Firstly it is separating oneself from the world in order to be of use to the Lord. Secondly it is the progressive relinquishment of one's will to God's will.

Progress in sanctification is furthered by withdrawal from the world. The world is "full of problems and conflicts", whilst in the world one has "affliction", "anguish" "pressure", and a "disordered life". Worst of all, the world is "dead in sin", and is therefore "without hope". The world with its "impurity" "contaminates" and is therefore "dangerous", so the believer must stay as far away from it as possible. Total withdrawal from the world of course is not possible. People must still work and relate to neighbours and family, however, all unnecessary social contacts are cut. Contact with non-believing family members is a cultural duty, but really "the believer cannot have communion with them".

It is notable that the sermons are not very specific about what the believer can or cannot do in the world.<sup>40</sup> For example the Pastor warns against certain unspecified actions which "do not please God" and that all "iniquity should be left behind" without mentioning any actual examples. The most specific I heard were "carnal thoughts" and "material concerns". He is also warned against

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<sup>40</sup> The classes are much more specific and I will deal with those below.

“subtle philosophies”, “false prophets and wrong beliefs”, and other “religions” that would “deceive” the unwary, but without mentioning any names. The world is described in completely negative terms but the believer’s relation to it is described in vague rather than concrete terms. The believer is “in the world but does not belong to it” she should be like an alien “from another planet,” the up to date version of an older generation’s stranger and pilgrim. He is however, very concerned to warn the faithful that contamination by the things of this world leads to weak and lukewarm believers who have no strength to resist temptation and deception.

More importantly however for sanctification, is the state of the heart, will or attitude. The human will, or heart is by nature contrary to God’s will and the initial decision to receive Christ is only the first step in redirecting the will towards God and his divine purposes. For this reason the Pastor constantly reminds and challenges the people to reassess and consecrate their whole heart or will to God. Such challenges as, “are you sure that your heart is firmly established in the Lord?” or “let us examine our will in the presence of God”, again “are you offering your life as a living sacrifice?” are common and are liberally sprinkled throughout sermons, not just left for a final appeal.

### **5.3 Obedience**

A partner concept with consecration is obedience. Baptism is the first conscious act of obedience, but in order to experience God’s presence the whole of life has to be lived in conscious obedience to God’s will. “Consecrate yourselves in obedience and he will reveal his presence to you”. Obedience is also necessary if the believer is to be used by God, “be obedient. We are vessels in the hands of God”. So important is this issue that the twin concepts of obedience and holiness were chosen as the theme for the Christian Women’s Day in November 2001. A huge banner was specially made and hung at the front of the church displaying the words, “To obey is better than sacrifice” from 1Samuel 15:22, and “perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” from 2Cor.7:1.

No one therefore, can feel self satisfied or content with their spiritual state because there is always the possibility that their dedication and commitment slipped, that they have depended on themselves or on others instead of on God, and therefore allowed wrong, wayward or even rebellious attitudes to enter their hearts. The will therefore needs to be constantly re-examined and trained to obey God’s will.

### **5.4 Leaving the Path**

Metaphorically speaking ones feet need to be pointing in the right direction and the person needs to keep going forward along the path. If one does not consciously and conscientiously push forward then the danger of standing still is that one starts to look around at the world or at their problems instead of steadfastly focusing on Christ. Indeed, “the believer who gets tired or loses patience ... will go through difficulties”. The congregation is constantly warned not to look back. The danger of looking around or looking back is that one might leave the path. In his sermons the Pastor constantly emphasises this danger, using such phrases as “if we turn back we will not please the Lord ... stay on this road and you will arrive at the destination” and “if we turn back we will not please God and we will lose the faith”, “stay firm until the end and you will be saved”. Starting well therefore does not guarantee finishing well and it is only those who are faithful until the end who will be saved.

When questioned on the conditions under which salvation could be lost a noted teacher in the church insisted that it could only be lost by actual denial or apostasy. This however, is not the sense given by the continuous repetition of these themes. The refrain to “remain firm until the last day”, “keep looking at Jesus” etc is the single most common theme in sermons and gives the impression that the salvation gained by faith is easy to lose. An article by the Pastor in the church magazine clearly states, “some believers will not be raptured due to the fact that in their moment they did not

make a firm decision for God”<sup>41</sup>. This is particularly worrying as a person may not be aware of ones danger, “there are believers, they go to church but their hearts are wandering. They do not know the pathway of God. Many have received miracles ... nevertheless their hearts are wayward”. In these contexts the word “believers” is never qualified to; for example, ‘those who think they are believers but are not’, or ‘lapsed believers’, nor even ‘nominal Christians’ nor merely ‘church goers’. It is believed and stated clearly that practicing believers can lose their salvation.

## 5.5 Blessings

To counterbalance the fear that may arise from this teaching there is also a great deal of emphasis on the theme of security. “Can the believer be sure of eternal life? Amen.” “You won’t be condemned, you won’t be judged, that has already passed. ... Don’t say that you will have eternal life, you already have it.” “The believer who lacks security never had the experience”. “There is no condemnation. There is security for those who are in Christ.” So, as long as one remains in Christ there is total security of eternal life.

Nevertheless one gets the impression that the path is indeed narrow and easy to fall off. The church therefore attempts to prevent losses by constructing a protecting fence along the path. The main method of preventing losses is to keep people away from the dangers of the world. To this end people are encouraged to attend church everyday, or at least as many times as possible. One female teacher said to the women, “God accepts no excuses for not being in church every day”. The Pastor is not usually so specific in his sermons sticking to, “don’t give up meeting together”, or “let us meet together in fellowship... building up one another ... in the church there is joy and a blessing when we are together”.

For the believer who walks the path in conscious obedience to God’s will there is the promise of blessing and stability, an essential hope in an uncertain Argentina. “The life of the believer is stable,” “live in tranquility, your life is in God’s hands”, “live in the will of God and you will prosper in everything”.

However, when problems do arise divine help is available. “Life is a sea of problems and difficulties, the believer with his eyes on Christ walks over all these things, but when he takes his eyes of Christ the problems begin”. Eternal life now, means the presence of Christ and his power to overcome life’s difficulties. “We are crushed by problems, but the Lord gives us power and grace to live through the difficulties.” “In every situation the Lord is with us”. In this way the believer can expect to “walk in victory” because she is “sustained by the Lord’s arms”. The believer only has “to ask and the Lord will change everything”, “the Lord will liberate, it doesn’t matter the situation”. In days of deepening uncertainty many Argentines have nothing to depend on except God’s promises.

## 5.6 Conclusion

To sum up, the Christian life is visualised as a path, which is narrow and somewhat precarious, the only way to continue safely along this path is to keep looking at Jesus. However, there are constant dangers and temptations to look back, or look around, to get bogged down by life’s difficulties or to be tripped up by false doctrines. The role of the church is to make the path as secure as possible and to help believers traverse it firmly and steadily without being contaminated by the world through which it passes. With such help the believer should safely reach the destination of heaven, either through death or through rapture.

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<sup>41</sup> *Proclama*: January 2002 p14



## 6 The Ecclesiastical Path: Steps in Discipleship and Service

After baptism the person is encouraged to attend the basic discipleship courses which are held in the church. These courses are not necessary to becoming an official member but they are necessary to open the gate to the next stage of the path, which is to be a church worker. Although the church would prefer people to move straight onto these courses right after baptism not everyone does so. Three classes were running concurrently and a typical class, which I attended, had three new converts, one or two people who had been attending the church for years but never taken the classes, as well as four or five young people who had grown up in the church and were now old enough to be official members. The range of knowledge of the students in the classes was therefore quite diverse, everything being new for the recent converts, but rather simple and ‘old hat’ for the church young people who attended only because they had to.<sup>42</sup>

These classes are organised in small groups with a teacher who has been trained in the Biblical Institute. They are really the first forum for discussion of beliefs and the teachings of the church. However, there is actually very little interaction during a lesson. The teacher closely follows the lesson in the book and asks the students to look up the Bible verses to find proof or examples for the point being made. The student then reads the verse and the teacher makes a few comments. The teacher may ask for questions and explain again any point of difficulty, however, reflection or the sharing of personal experiences was not encouraged.

### 6.1 Conociendo a Cristo

The first course is called “Conociendo a Cristo” or Getting to Know Christ. This is the most basic course and is published in an attractive booklet with illustrative drawings. It covers: The need to make a Public Testimony, the necessity of not looking back, teaching on Sin, Water Baptism, the Church, Prayer, Bible Reading, and Bible Study. The booklet closes with a list of names of religious organizations that deny one or more of the basic doctrines. After each lesson there is a page of questions which the student has to complete and which will be checked by the teacher.

### 6.2 Declaración de Fe

The second course called Declaración de Fe, or Declaring the Faith, is also published by the Foundation in a short booklet and introduces the student to the following doctrines:- The Holy Scriptures, The Only True God, The Deity of Jesus Christ, The Fall of Man, The Salvation of Man, Ordinances of the Church, The Baptism in the Holy Spirit, Sanctification, The Church, the blessings of the Christian life and the future hope.

Ideally a person should take the lessons in the order given, but in actual fact a person can join in at any point. However, they must finish the majority of these two courses before moving on to the third.

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<sup>42</sup> I do not mean to imply that they all had a negative attitude towards these classes, but there certainly was a high level of boredom for most.

### 6.3 Admission <sup>43</sup>

Admisión is exactly what the name says, it is the preparation course to being admitted into active membership of the church and opens the gate to entering a Department and training as a worker. Unfortunately there is no written material for this course. The aim of the course is to explain how La Fundación Argentina Para Cristo and particularly Los Olivos Church is organized and functions. People will learn about Departments and Ministries and how they personally will fit into the structure. They will also be introduced to the “norms” of the church, which they have to pledge to keep in order to serve as a worker.

Dress norms are particularly important in Los Olivos and this issue is dealt with in a class, however, most people have already noticed these particular customs and have started to conform to them. Men are expected to wear suits and ties<sup>44</sup>, no matter how hot it is, and women must dress only in skirts or dresses that cover the knees and upper arms. Women are not allowed to wear trousers at any time as this is understood to contravene the instruction in Deut. 22: 5. Keeping within these constraints, young women especially, still feel free to dress attractively, even sensuously, in lycra and other clingy fabrics and stiletto heels. Women are not permitted to tint their hair or to cut it short like a man. However, they do not wear any head coverings. Although these customs were mentioned on a number of occasions no reason was ever given other than, “these are the norms of the church”, “those things do not please the Lord” and “there are men present”. Rationalizations such as modesty or decency were never mentioned.

When a person completes all the courses they will have an interview with a teacher and be admitted as an active member to a department.

### 6.4 Departments and Workers

All active members are assigned to a department where they will attend the weekly meetings and be trained in various tasks that the department is responsible for. The departments are: Cristianas Jóvenes – Young Christian Women aged 15-30; Cristianos Jóvenes – Young Christian Men; Mujeres Cristianas – Christian Women (over 30); Heraldos de Cristo – Christian Men (over 30). There are also departments for boys and girls, which are effectively areas of service for the youth and adults.

In reality it doesn't function quite so neatly as this, there is a certain degree of flexibility. For example not all the workers are able to go to the departmental meeting, whilst other people start to attend before they have completed the courses. There were also a few women under 30 who either preferred the women's meeting to the youth, or went to both.

When a new person joins a department they will be assigned a minor task. For example one man was asked to look after a fellow member in a wheelchair, accompanying him to doctor's appointments and making sure he could get his chair to the front of the church during the services. At each Women's Meeting tasks for the week are written on slips of paper and are unobtrusively passed to each worker. These minor tasks include cleaning, bathroom duty during meetings, door duty, taking up the offering or leading the singing in the midweek meetings. Men do similar jobs, including serving communion, and participating in the main Sunday service. No woman, other than the Pastor's wife, has any platform role on a Sunday except choir or music group. This year of training gives the person time to become established on their spiritual path and to show that they are

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<sup>43</sup> I never got to observe one of these classes so this information came from interviews with the Pastor, his wife and several members.

<sup>44</sup> During the time of Pastor Regge a man was not allowed to appear in the street for twenty blocks around the church in anything other than a business suit.

sincere and have a heart to serve. It also helps reveal where their natural gifts lie. At the end of this probationary year in a department a person may volunteer, or be invited, to participate in a ministry.

## **6.5 Ministries.**

The church's ministries are basically divided into evangelism and follow-up. Leaders of ministries are selected by the Pastor under the guidance of the Spirit. It is, generally speaking, the person who is gifted and dedicated to the work who becomes the leader. The leader then organises a rota for a large number of workers according to their residential zone.

### **6.5.1 Evangelism**

Evangelism is organised to take place on a regular basis in hospitals and prisons, there are also special events in plazas and invitations door to door for campaigns. Each year a mission is undertaken. In 2002 the older and young men organized a mission to Monte Caseros in the Province of Corrientes where they reconstructed a destroyed church building and did a special evangelistic meeting in the plaza. They were not able to complete the mission over the weekend and so organised a further visit to complete the work. The women planned their annual mission to co-ordinate with this and participated in door to door visitation and the evangelistic meeting, as well as collecting food and clothing to distribute.

### **6.5.2 Follow-up.**

Follow-up is mostly done via the telephone and is frequently just called the Telephone Ministry. It has several functions. Firstly, it is used to contact the new converts after they receive Christ. Those who go forward will leave an address and telephone number with the person receiving them in the side room. Ideally within a week they will be called by phone to check on their progress and invited to return. If the person lives too far away for regular attendance they will be put in contact with the nearest annex, or if there isn't one near them, then the nearest Evangelical Church. If the person doesn't have a telephone, which is quite frequently the case, their address will be passed to the Correspondence Ministry who will write to them.

Secondly the telephone is used as a prayer line. Members and non-members can phone at anytime to leave a prayer request on the answering machine. An hour before the evening meeting a worker will transcribe all the requests and pass them on to the leader of the prayer meeting who will then read them out and everyone present will pray for them. The leader explained that this was very "well ordered" with separate sheets for "general illness", "cancer", "family" and "marriage". This ministry becomes known to a wider public through the early morning radio message given by the Pastor.

A team of 50 hospital visitors can also be called upon to visit the sick, when requested, and pray for them. This is also extremely well organised with a database of all the hospitals, directions on how to get there, and a comment on whether the area is dangerous area or not.

## **6.6 Biblical Institute**

Workers are encouraged to sign up for classes at the Biblical Institute and to progress as far as their ability will take them. Although the studies are valued in themselves for the deeper understanding gained of God's Word, any teaching ministry within the church requires completion of the whole course.

The first year is considered to be preparatory when the following subjects will be studied: Doctrine 1&2, Introduction to Bible Study, Life of Christ, Biblical Epochs, Christian Service, Comparative Religion, and Principles of Christian Ethics. The intention is not so much to gain a certain academic level but to finish the course. Typically the first year is large but many drop off finding the studies more than they can manage. When the Institute opened in 1983 120 people registered

and 70 finished the year. The following year another 120 signed up, and this pace kept up until there were four years running simultaneously. Almost twenty years later about 50 new people start each academic year, and about 30 finish.<sup>45</sup> The complete student body at the beginning of 2002 was 200 people between all the years.

There follows a six year course called Ministerial Formation. This covers all the books of the Bible plus three courses in Theology, one course each of Biblical Introduction, Homiletics, Hermeneutics, The Church, The Christian Home, The History of the Church, and Christian Education. Numbers decrease with each year and in 2001 only fifteen women and one man finished the fifth year with two young women and one man graduating from the sixth year.

The final year is called Ministerial Perfection or Completion. This has only two courses one each of Homiletics and Hermeneutics.

Graduation from the Institute will make the graduate eligible to teach in the church, for example in the discipleship classes, or as a classroom assistant in the Institute, but it does not automatically open the door to the Pastoral Ministry. In this respect Los Olivos operates with a different model.

### **6.7 Planting churches**

Planting a church and becoming its pastor could be considered as the final step on the ecclesiastical path, but it does not come only from academic study. The calling of God on a person's life is much more important than their academic ability. The planting of a new church is not planned by the evangelism team, but as the Pastor explained, "these works are raised by the initiative of the person who started them". That is they arise from the vision of the individual, either male or female, who, with the support of Los Olivos, goes out and starts them. This calling is understood to be their obedient response to God's revealed will and therefore a part of their spiritual path. This understanding is underlined by the Pastor; to receive the support of the mother church for this venture "there are certain requirements that are appropriate for someone in order to start a pastoral ministry" the new pastor must have good "order in his personal life, a good testimony, be an example of life, and be faithful in tithing". The primary requirements are therefore spiritual not academic.

A church plant goes through three distinct stages before it is considered to be independent. The first stage is the completely dependant church, which may only be a meeting in the worker's home or in another believers home or shed. When this becomes fairly well established Los Olivos will insist that the worker starts to study at the Institute if they are not already doing so. Each level requires two years of study on the part of the new pastor.

To move to the second level and be considered an annex the new work must meet a set of requirements. It must have had 15 baptised members for a minimum of one year and be established in its own building, however, the pastor must have completed his two years of study and maintained a good personal testimony.

The annex becomes a local church when it has its own deaconate, trained workers and the new pastor completes his studies. Ideally it should have about 50 members but this requirement is reduced for the provinces where the population is not so dense.

The church planting model of the Fundación Argentina Para Cristo is therefore quite distinct from that in use by the Historical Churches. It depends very much on the spirituality and vision of an individual and is not hampered by committees, planned programmes and long years of academic training that may dull the original enthusiasm. It responds to initiative and allows for the growth of

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<sup>45</sup> These figures are estimates from one of the Institute directors.

the Pastor, as well as the church, but yet it is still under the guidance of a Senior Pastor and Mother Church until it is mature and able to function as an independent church within the Fundación. This balance of freedom and nurture provides an environment in which young churches can flourish but which also helps to prevent them becoming theologically unorthodox due to the naiveté of a young and untrained pastor. I suspect that this model, and others very like it, have contributed enormously to the mushroom growth of Pentecostalism throughout Latin America.

## 7 Ethos: “El Feeling”

So far in my description of Los Olivos’ worldview an important element is missing. Clifford Geertz uses “ethos”, as well as “world view”, to write an interpretative description of a culture. By ethos he means “the moral (and aesthetic) aspects of a given culture, the evaluative elements”.<sup>46</sup> Although there is certainly a moral and evaluative element to what I want to say, Geertz’ “ethos” doesn’t exactly sum it up. Perhaps what I want to convey is closer to the modern Argentine adoption of the English word “feeling”, which approximates the sense one receives from one’s environment or ambient, such as the “atmosphere” of a place, perhaps also “mode of being” would do.

En Los Olivos this mode of being can be summed up by the word “orden”. This emphasis comes from the verse in 1 Corinthians 14:40 which says, “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way”.<sup>47</sup> This verse is given in the context of using tongues in church worship and this is the also the context in which it was quoted to me in Los Olivos. However, “orden” is also used in the sense of organizing church activities, and in the sense of respecting the hierarchical order. “Orden” however, begins in a person’s private life.

### 7.1 Disorder v Order

Fairly frequently the Pastor reminds people how they lived a “disordered life” before coming to Christ and that it is necessary to leave behind activities and even people to put order into ones life, “at least we must part from those who live disorderly because they can contaminate us”<sup>48</sup>. As the Pastor’s wife explained to me, ‘people first need to get their personal lives in order’. ‘Getting one’s life in order’ means sorting out complicated relationships, such as ceasing to cohabit by getting married or separating, and getting rid of unwholesome friendships. It also means not being addicted to anything and anyone with an alcohol or drug addiction should attend the meetings of the “Nueva Vida” or “New Life” group to help them deal with this situation.

Occasionally believers use this adjective to describe their lives before receiving Christ. For example Brother Arturo says, “I lived a very disordered and disagreeable life”.<sup>49</sup> By this he means, “I had acquired various types of vices: cigarettes, alcohol, gambling etc.” A similar description comes from Brother Juan, “I started to experiment with the vile things that this world offers, (dances, gambling, alcohol, etc) and little by little I incurred a disordered life that certainly found me very far from the will of God”.<sup>50</sup> Another told me that he needed “order” in the area of financial administration, as it was this lack that had ruined his family’s life.

### 7.2 Orderly Worship

To the first time visitor the worship in Los Olivos, with its frequent and apparently spontaneous bursts into tongues by almost the whole congregation, may appear unpredictable, disruptive and quite alarming, giving the sense that you never know what will happen next. This impression is totally misleading. As noted earlier, except for special events, the same pattern is followed in every service. The times of speaking in tongues are actually tightly controlled by the Pastor or other worship leader and are never allowed to become disorderly. The music group, and then the congregation, follow the signal of the leader who will indicate when it is appropriate to praise God

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<sup>46</sup> Geertz: 1973:126.

<sup>47</sup> NIV

<sup>48</sup> *Proclama*: August 2001:6

<sup>49</sup> *Proclama*: December 2001:9

<sup>50</sup> *Proclama*: January:17. As both these examples come from the church magazine it is possible that it is an editor’s choice of word.

in this way and will also indicate when to stop. The leader will indicate such a time, for example at the end of a song or prayer, by continuing with closed eyes and uplifted hands and words of praise or tongues himself. The music group follows this signal and keeps the music going until the leader says “gracias, gracias” and lowers his hands, which is the usual signal to bring this time to an end. The congregation is so well accustomed to this practice that it instinctively follows the leader. On the odd occasion when the music group is late in catching the signal the effect is that the congregation is confused and doesn’t participate fully in the tongues praise.

The practice of other ‘charismatic gifts’, except for praying for the sick, is not often seen in Los Olivos. For example during my time in the church I never heard a prophetic message in tongues with interpretation, nor a prophetic message in Spanish, nor were there any dramatic healings or exorcisms. However, a few people told me that the Pastor sometimes operated with the gift of discernment, by which they meant that he said something that especially applied to them that day. Dancing in the Spirit was prohibited, and falling was not encouraged, although I did witness it once. The common charismatic phrase “freedom in the Spirit” was unheard of and when I asked I was told that it meant freedom from sin. There was a conscious and expressed desire on the part of the Pastor to avoid the ‘show’ and the ‘spectacular’ as these tended to draw attention to people and away from God. It is also easy to see that all of the above expressions would destroy the order of a very set liturgy.

### **7.3 Organization**

“Orden” is also important in the sense of organization or organizing. Los Olivos is an incredibly well organised church as can be seen from the above section on The Ecclesiastical Path. The church is organised with the explicit purpose of being a “factory for making workers”<sup>51</sup>. Converts are encouraged to move along this path in an orderly and organised fashion to achieve the goal of becoming a church worker. Since 19?? records have been kept at every stage. There is a record of all who come forward to receive Christ, of all who are baptised, of all who are received into full membership, of the members of departments, of active workers and what ministry they can do. The Institute also keeps careful records of what courses students have studied, of numbers of matriculating and graduating students. All this information is considered to be highly confidential and is not easy to access. No doubt there are also carefully kept financial records but accounts were not made available even to the members at the General Annual Meeting.

### **7.4 The Hierarchical Order**

Los Olivos is the first, or mother church, of the Fundación Argentina Para Cristo, and it’s pastor, is therefore first or senior pastor over all other pastors as well as being president of the Fundación. The pastors of local churches look to him as their pastor and are subject to him, he therefore fulfils the role of bishop. It is not exactly that he answers only to God as there is a “Consultative Body” made up of some local pastors and some long term members. The Fundación has the right to call this Consultative Body to deal with any disciplinary issues. The problem would arise if a disciplinary issue were to be brought against this pastor. Who would then have the authority to call this body to meet?

The pastor also has under his authority the deacons and ministry leaders, most of whom he has selected personally. The deacons are actually selected by drawing lots from a short list provided by the pastor.

The pastor is also chief director of the Institute and the other directors will only make minor day to day decisions without consulting him, this pattern was followed by all the departments and

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<sup>51</sup> The words of the founder told to me by a Director of the Institute.

ministries. So, even though the Pastor had authorised my study in Los Olivos Church, ministry leaders would not speak to me without personally going and getting his explicit permission, many members also refused to recount their testimonies to me without first checking this with the Pastor. I was frequently told that this was because “hay orden”, that is to say that not only is there is an orderly way of doing things, but the hierarchical order and particularly the authority of the Pastor cannot be bypassed.<sup>52</sup>

All the authority, and all the responsibility too, come on the head of the Pastor. It is to his credit that he still manages to appear mild mannered and warm-hearted without being at all overbearing. He is not only respected, but also loved by his congregation. However, I got the strongest impression that no one questions one iota of his authority, and anyone who did could not remain an active member of the church.

## **7.5 To Sum Up**

Something as abstract as ethos, mode of being or feeling is difficult to capture in words. “The Path” and “order” seemed to be the major themes, even values, which guide the church’s understanding, activity and life. The Church and the Christian’s life exhibit order, which is obviously God’s work,<sup>53</sup> in contrast to the disordered World where Satan rules. These words and ideas however, give an impression of hardness and strictness, which must be counterbalanced by the joy people so obviously experience in worship.

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<sup>52</sup> This came home to me painfully when a member thought that I was attempting to go over the Pastor’s head and attacked me vociferously over the telephone.

<sup>53</sup> Possibly referring back to Genesis 1 where God brought order out of chaos.



## 8 Experiencing the Path in Los Olivos.

The majority of people in Los Olivos came originally as fairly non-practicing Catholics. Those I asked said that they had been Catholics, but only because they were baptised in the Roman Catholic Church, not from conviction or practice. Quite a number had practiced some form of Argentine folk religion such as having a devotion to a particular local saint and visiting curanderos when in need. However, I did meet three women who had previously held a strong Catholic faith, and the converted nun, Dora, is famous within the Fundación as she is the Pastor of a very large church in San Juan. I did not meet any man who claimed a previously held strong Catholic faith and practice, but my contact with the men was much less than with the women.

### 8.1 First Impressions

Many people report the strong impact that their first experience of Los Olivos had on them. “I was perplexed and frightened, scared”. “I didn’t understand anything”. “I felt strange”. “I said, ‘there they are all crazy’. I had the idea that all Evangelicals were all crazy. ‘Glory to God’, lifting their arms, no? And everything else too.” (J)

Despite the strangeness of it all many people end with a positive impression and return. For some it is because they “had peace” within the church, or ‘found what they were looking for’. Some saw the remarkable change in a friend or relative, continuing the above quote from J, “I said, ‘What do I care? If my son isn’t on drugs I can walk on my hands .... What do I care?’” Motivations have been dealt with already so I will not go into this further here.

### 8.2 Experiencing Receiving Christ.

First of all, an ethnographic story:-

#### **New Faith**

We sat on a park bench enjoying the early spring sunshine, the breeze was a little cool, but if the sun lasted we would be okay for an hour. J and A seemed an odd couple, he with his thin wrinkled face and missing teeth looking much older than his 41 years. A with her pretty and youthful face framed by rich dark curls seemed almost like a child in comparison. I guessed she was about 24, but I could be totally wrong on this. They sat close like new lovers and occasionally she glanced shyly at me, she had never talked to a foreigner before!

I had just met them last night in church. Observing them from the pew behind I rightly guessed that it was their first time in the church as they were dressed in jeans and anoraks, unlike the smartly suited regular members. Their accompanying relatives helped them find the hymns and songs. The Pastor preached from Jeremiah 17, emphasizing that we must not trust our own deceitful hearts, nor trust in men, but to put all our confidence in God alone. The lady was obviously moved and wiped a tear from her eye. When the Pastor made the appeal for those newcomers to come forward to receive Christ a church worker appeared at their side and ushered them forward. They went gladly and at the front repeated a prayer for forgiveness and salvation. After they entered the side room the whole congregation went forward to unite in prayer. I, however, hung back, taking a position near the door so that I could talk to them when they re-emerged.

So here they were sitting on a park bench talking to a foreigner the day after receiving Christ. I wanted to know a little of their background and what had brought them to the church. ‘*We came to pray for J’s health*’ explained A. ‘*Yes, I had a heart attack in March, and haven’t been back to work. The medicine costs \$140 a month and I didn’t receive any sick pay this month, I want to go back to work*’. ‘*Why did you go forward last night?*’ I asked. ‘*The Pastor preached about the sickness of the heart, and it just seemed like he picked that theme for us, I know he didn’t of course,*

*but it was just like an angel fell from heaven', she laughed in amazement at the memory. 'I was so moved, really touched, so we went forward'. 'When you went into the side room did any one explain to you what this was all about?' I asked. 'No, no, they just took our name and address and said that we should go back to the front so that the Pastor could pray for J's heart condition, so we did that'. 'Do you feel that God has answered that prayer?' I queried. 'Yes, at least he has started to. This morning we felt so different from yesterday morning, so tranquil, less nervous, I have faith'.*

I know that many Argentines get converted through healing miracles, but the Pentecostal church isn't usually the first port of call for help. So I asked, *'before coming to the church did you ask help from a saint or a curandero (folk healer)?'* *'Yes',* replied A, who was definitely the chatty one, *'I have all the saints at home, and I especially have faith in Gauchito Gil (a dead cowboy who has a reputation for doing miracles) I made a vow with him'. 'Oh, what sort of vow?'* I asked. *'I promised that if he got J out of intensive care that I would cut off all my hair and give it to him'. 'And after what happened last night in the church are you still going to do that?'* *'But of course'* she responded with surprise, *'he kept his part so I must fulfil my promise to him'. 'What would happen if you didn't keep the promise?'* *'I would be afraid that he would punish me or J'. 'And after you fulfil this promise will you leave these things aside and follow only Jesus?'* I enquired. *'Yes, after I cut my hair I will be able to let go of these saints and continue with the church'.*

Facing a health and economic crisis A and J came to the church to put themselves into God's hands, believing that if they did this, then God would heal J. They had already been somewhat prepared by their relatives but it is clear that they were still operating within their folk Argentine worldview. They had first tried the doctors, then the Catholic saints and then a local saint but with only partial success, now they came to the church. God is accepted as the most powerful spiritual being, but he demands more than hair, he demands total commitment. They came prepared to pay this price.

Going forward to put themselves into God's hands was a memorable and powerful experience for them. J recounts without embarrassment in his own words, "When I went forward, when he called me, I went to the Pastor to pray, I felt a heat, I perspired, it was a cold divine thing, I didn't feel agitated, nothing .... I felt light, let's say very relaxed and content. It was his touch." A remembers, "I don't know how to explain that moment, I was very emotional, very emotional because the Pastor was speaking as if he had chosen the theme just for him (J).... He chose to speak on the theme of the sick heart<sup>54</sup> ..... I cried when the Pastor was speaking, I said, 'how can it be? This exact theme!' Its true, its true. The first time in the church ....." "it was like an angel came down from heaven".

This peak experience set A and J on the pathway, but they joined a small local Pentecostal congregation as Los Olivos was too far and they had no money for the bus fare.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The Pastor had actually preached about the spiritual condition of the heart.

<sup>55</sup> I visited A and J at monthly intervals to track their progress. On the first occasion I discovered that a major worldview reorientation had taken place. The shelf where the images of various saints had previously stood, now only held a few ornaments. What had happened? The local Pastor's assistant had paid them a visit and had seen the images. He then explained that evangelicals don't keep saints that they depend wholly on God. A would not allow him to take the images but insisted that if the head Pastor came he could take the saints away. He did so, prayed a blessing on the house and she didn't ask what he did with them. When we talked about intermediaries she now denied that they existed whereas previously her cosmology had been full of saints acting as intermediaries between her and God. She had accepted what the Pastor told her about saints and acted upon it thereby confirming her new identity as an evangelical and finding that all was well was able to go forward receiving more worldview reorientation.

On my second visit I found that A had cut her hair. She had talked to the local Pastor about her promise to Gaucho Gil and he told her that every pact with the devil had to be fulfilled or neutralized. The difference in worldview here is that the Pastor equates Gaucho Gil with a demon and not with a sympathetic saint. However, he still believes that the pact is something real that cannot be simply ignored. It has to be dealt with. This Pastor told me that A did not have enough faith to simply neutralize the pact with prayer and for this reason he advised her to fulfil it and be finished with it.

Ga, who came to the church angry with God, but impressed by what he had seen in a friend's life, has been an Evangelical for six months. He attended only on a Thursday morning and did not take any classes; he still found it difficult to articulate his experience of coming to God. "Well, I came, and this... how do you call it? .... Well, you give yourself over to God, as the only saviour, and well... That day I felt something like a tickle, and I said, 'something happened here'. And well that was the truth. There was the Lord working in me."

### **8.3 Experiencing Water Baptism**

When new converts join a pre-baptismal class they tend to have very diverse ideas of the significance of baptism. When the teacher asked the class "Why do we want to get baptized?" the class responded with a variety of answers, "To be purer", "To be children of God", "For healing", "To take a step of faith" "The water cleans me". None of the answers were correct and the teacher went on to explain the symbolism and significance of baptism. What is interesting about these answers is that most of them reveal that people were expecting the rite of baptism to do something, rather than simply mean something. This is not surprising coming from a folk Catholic background where the ritual was understood as being a powerful rite which made one a Christian. The teachers are aware that people sometimes come with a quasi-magical view of baptism so they are careful to explain that the rite is symbolic and does not save or heal.

After the four classes people had learnt to interpret the rite symbolically. "The Catholics they give you a little squirt, nothing more. But here its like a resurrection, you are submerged and you are reborn" (Ga). "For me it signifies obedience" (G1 Five months later). "I really felt that truly I died to the old man and was reborn a new man. .... It was that I started to be reborn and was going to be another man" (Jo three years later). People are using the language of symbolism but some still feel that the rite actually did something, it made a difference to them internally and in relation with God.

Although beforehand everyone says that they were nervous or anxious, afterwards they insist that it was a "beautiful experience". For all it was a memorable and important day in their lives.

### **8.4 Experiencing Spirit Baptism**

The church teaches that Baptism in the Spirit is the promise of God to be claimed by every believer. Receiving this blessing does not depend on achieving a certain level of knowledge or sanctity. A junior teacher explains, "It is for every believer. Don't say that it is because I am new that I can't. It is to be a witness. It is necessary in order to go out and preach". G1 is trying to explain why she has not received this blessing, "I think that there is still something lacking in me that I need to firm up, because when the Holy Spirit comes, it's said, we have to be totally pure".

The church actually teaches that the Holy Spirit comes to a person upon receiving Christ but recent converts do not generally understand this. "...there I accepted Christ in my heart, intimately. And afterwards I started to pray, and to ask, and all the rest, ...one prays to have this blessing of receiving the Holy Spirit, and I received the Holy Spirit." (Jo). Most of the more recent converts talked about "receiving" the Holy Spirit whereas the church's teachers talk about being "baptised" in the Holy Spirit. "My first baptism was in water. I still hadn't received the Holy Spirit"(Jo).

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit is for many the peak experience and often its impact is life changing. "Well, I felt like a fire, truly, and a thing that .... I cried, and cried and cried and I couldn't stop crying. And when I could stop crying ....I felt, how can I say, like I was floating in air. It was like the feeling, truly, as if I had really let go of a weight". "Really, its as if the presence of God was in me" (Jo). Afterwards, "You have the presence of God, really, he gives you this peace" (Jo). He also reported the new fervour he felt in prayer.

## 8.5 Experiencing a changed life

From the point of view of the church the aim of receiving Christ is firstly to save one's soul from perdition, but also to transform one's life in this world. It is the second aspect that most people are looking for, their lives are difficult and they feel powerless to change or to cope with their circumstances. No one told me that they came to the church because their soul needed saving, it was their life that needed saving.

Gl came to Christ in a situation of great personal anguish, as her partner had cheated her. Before starting to attend the church she said, "I asked God if he would give me strength to do what I was able, [now] that my life had changed, being in the path of the Lord, that he give me strength to leave my world. That's what I did, I left." She then went to the church and received Christ. "Today I give this testimony that I'm not the same person as before. My life has changed totally, I don't feel that anguish, I don't feel jealous, I don't feel desperate, I don't feel the unease that I had before. I've changed in everyway." "I give thanks to the Lord for all this transformation in my life. He has transformed my thoughts, my way of living, and my way of dressing." Gl credits God for all the change, however she did put considerable effort into changing her life. "I tried to get out of all that liberalism; the fiestas, the vices, the cigarettes, the strong character, the anger, the spontaneous rages that I had, those desires to be conflictive, this was the first change in my life". The strength to make these changes however came in answer to prayer and therefore also came from God.

Gl is now so grateful to God for the inner peace that she is willing to obey the church in everything. Some changes were implemented because of what she learnt during classes and from her partner, a lapsed Evangelical. "My partner [told me]... that in order to go to the church I should wear a skirt. Afterwards I learnt the reason, in the preaching..... So I understood that the trousers, the tinting, the make up, were not pleasing to the Lord, so I divested myself of all this." "It didn't cost me because I knew that without all these rules you can't please the Lord".

Within five months, through attending meetings, and the baptismal and discipleship classes, Gl has absorbed a great deal of the worldview of Los Olivos along with its accompanying terminology. She constantly refers to "el mundo" and "el camino" and firmly places her former life in the World and her new life on the Path. She has not yet understood the teaching on the Holy Spirit, and still thinks that she must purify herself in order to receive the Holy Spirit. However, she immediately picked up the emphasis on conforming to the norms, which she calls rules, in order to please the Lord.

Ro in contrast, looks like a typical porteña,<sup>56</sup> with her flowing bleached hair, her suntanned face lit up by a huge bright smile, and flared trousers, she exudes character and independence. She came to the church three years ago under quite different circumstances from Gl. After lighting up a cigarette, inhaling, and apologising to me because God has not 'liberated her from this vice' she gladly goes on to talk of the changes that have taken place in her life. "I was really bad, under a deep depression. I didn't have interest in anything.... I went to psychologists, psychiatrists .....A lady told me about the church and I came. The third time I came I changed completely from day to night. I'm not the same Ro I'm another person..... I came to the church and things changed in me that I hadn't asked him for. I hadn't asked him for my health, for example, or my form of being. I was a person with a very strong temperament, very jealous, quarrelsome and possessive. All this left me. .... Those who knew me noticed this. .... God knew what I needed. He started to work in my life in this way. Now I'm fine. Joyful."

Ro did the four classes for baptism and attends once a week on a Thursday or Friday, she has not taken any other classes and therefore cannot be a worker. Ro has not seen the need to change her

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<sup>56</sup> Buenos Aires city woman.

style to be part of the church, partly because she thinks that to wear only skirts to church when that is not her normal attire is a pretence and she doesn't want to be hypocritical, also there is no point because God knows what she wears at home. Also from her perspective all these women workers are old and that is why they have grey hair and wear long skirts. This is an understandable interpretation because very few younger women attend the morning or afternoon meetings. An older woman did once tell her that she couldn't come to the church in trousers so she asked the Pastor about this. "Pastor told me that this hadn't anything to do with it. That I could tint my hair and that I could come in trousers. What is important is what one has in one's heart". Ro therefore discards outward appearances as in anyway related to pleasing God. It all depends on the inner heart.

There emerge two rather different worldviews, at least in the understanding of what God is like and what pleases him, and on what it means to be a Christian, and both from the same church. How can that be? There are two easily identifiable reasons for this difference. The first is that the Pastor is never specific about details and examples as other teachers. In his sermons he talks in general terms, outlining principles and ideals, this allows a certain flexibility of personal interpretation. The principles become norms and rules in the discipleship classes, which are taught by others, and Ro has never attended these classes. Secondly, it is held to be quite true that no woman has to wear a skirt in order to attend the church because "The church is open for everyone". It is only workers who have to agree to keep these norms, no matter their age, if they want to continue to be workers. Those who do not keep the norms are understood as being 'not so far along the path, but everyone progresses at their own rate'.

## 8.6 Conclusion

Worldview begins to change at the point where a peak or powerful experience opens the person to the idea that perhaps there are realities of which they were not formerly aware, or that their previous explanations are inadequate. The heightened emotions and accompanying bodily sensations of the experience bring home this reality and help the person feel that they have been touched by the Divine. Once this openness has been achieved the new reality, just glimpsed from the fringe, now beckons them to enter fully. With the decision to commit themselves to this new and more effective way of relating to God, and being touched by him, people learn quickly through observation, participation and listening.

From their first time in the church people are observing how others behave. They note the manner in which hands are raised, with palms forward, and after the prayer to receive Christ they come out of the side room observe the worshippers gathered around the front and copy what they are doing. Generally speaking they look self-conscious and uncomfortable and do not raise their hands very high, but they always do it in the distinctive Los Olivos way. They therefore start to participate from the very beginning in the forms of worship even if they still don't understand what it all means.

The second time in church most people tend to come more conservatively dressed, this helps them feel less conspicuous and therefore more comfortable. Their comfort zone develops as they learn to greet people in the correct way, and the feeling of newness diminishes as they learn the songs or buy the hymn and chorus books,<sup>57</sup> which increases their level of participation. Being able to predict what will happen next also increases ones ease. Participating effectively, that is, feeling like you can enter into the modes or attitudes of worship without feeling merely like an actor reinforces the reality of God's presence in the ritual and reaffirms the truth of the new worldview. However, what I personally found was the greatest asset to feeling a real part of things was when the women

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<sup>57</sup> There is no over head projector nor are chorus sheets or hymn books provided. Perhaps a relic from the oral traditions of an earlier epoch.

workers started to recognise me, remember my name and come over to greet me. This recognition says to all those around, 'you may not know me, but I am not a stranger, I am known'.

This process of learning to act correctly, of participating in the ritual, of feeling comfortable, of recognition, makes one feel at home. This feeling of being at home, of being in the place where you belong, creates identity and aids learning.

Many aspects of worldview are simply absorbed, but much is learnt through direct teaching in sermons and classes. People come to respect the Pastor and other teachers as they have helped them to find God and to sort out their problems, these teachers also know so much more about the Bible and are close to God so their explanations are accepted without question. As new people start to use the terminology and the explanations, so owning them, they become ever more real to them.