

Fr. Richard Baumann, SJ, Sarah and Bill Gentle, and Fr. Wicht. Mr. Gentle described Fr. Wicht's speech as "simply fascinating."



The Companions Association



Fr. Juan Julio Wicht, SJ, a university economist in Peru, said: "We Jesuits try to find God in all things, which in modern terms means we try to do works of justice wherever they are needed. Sometimes the need is to analyze an Andean society in order to bring down the cost of living, provide more jobs, and feed the people. At other times we might be called on to accompany those suffering an unjust imprisonment. But it's all one work."

Listeners were spellbound when Peruvian Jesuit Fr. Juan Julio Wicht, SJ, shared his story of 126 days in captivity in Lima. He spoke at the Companions Association Dinner, held for major benefactors to the Chicago Province Jesuits, on September 6, in Chicago.

Fr. Wicht had been attending a gala cocktail reception at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima on December 17, 1996, when 14 heavily-armed Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) militants seized the building, holding all 600 occupants prisoner.

Gradually the rebels released most captives but continued to hold 72 hostages. The insurgents offered to release Fr. Wicht, but he asked to remain. Here he describes what led to his decision.

"I didn't want to die. I was deathly afraid

of being injured or mutilated. So I prayed. It's been many years since I've prayed with such intensity, but all I got was darkness. It was like the Agony in the Garden. . . .

"A break came on the sixth day. The liturgy that day was the most emotional one of my life! I tried to talk to my fellow hostages from the heart. Men with a six-day beard on their faces and tears in their eyes shouted out each response like thunder. General absolution was given and hundreds went to Communion. Faith and solidarity reigned! That's when I made my decision.



Tom and Mary Ann Ahern with Fr. Matthew Gamber, SJ. "Everyone was mesmerized by what Fr. Wicht had to say. How he was able to keep his wits about him and offer encouragement to others was just incredible," said Mrs. Ahern.



Liz Schmidt and Fr. Antanas Saulaitis, SJ. "Both Fr. Saulaitis and Fr. Wicht are noble examples of Jesuit 'men for others'," remarked Miss Schmidt. Fr. Saulaitis was recently named provincial for the Lithuanian (and Latvian) Province of the Society of Jesus.

Still weak and with a thousand doubts, out of the darkness came the words, 'I was in prison, and you visited me.'

"That afternoon the terrorist commandant, Nestor Cerpa, called us together for the list of those to be freed. The faces of those not freed were understandably very serious, but they went around hugging those whose names were called. Cerpa got to the W's. He read off my name. I said, 'I'm a priest. I want to stay here with those who cannot leave.' In the applause and embraces that followed I felt like I was being embraced by God himself."

Peruvian commandos stormed the residence via underground tunnels on April 22, killing all 14 terrorists and releasing all but one of the hostages unharmed. The rebels' demands had been for safe passage to a haven in the Amazon jungle and the release of about 400 comrades held in various jails.



Along with representatives from St. Ignatius College Prep and Loyola Academy, two students from Cristo Rey Jesuit High School attended the event. They are, from left, Armando Velasquez and Jorge Rios.

Bob Clifford, Development Executive Board member, has become personally committed to Cristo Rey Jesuit High School as his firm, Clifford Law Offices, in downtown Chicago, sponsors a work/study position.

