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## PROFILE

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# Francisco Aguilera

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### Dialogue with an Adventist University Provost

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**B**orn in Santiago, the capital of Chile, in 1942, Francisco Javier Aguilera grew up in a home where his Catholic parents encouraged him to pursue excellence. Upon completing university studies, Mr. Aguilera joined the faculty of Chile Adventist College, where he taught while completing his doctoral studies. Teaching at our college required a long commuting, since it was located some 400 km. from his home. Later, the Chile Union asked him to serve as special advisor to the Education Department, an assignment in which he took much pleasure, despite his other teaching assignments.

Dr. Aguilera became a tenured professor at the central campus of the University of Chile in Santiago. He has also carried out the many responsibilities of chairman of the literature department in the School of Humanities, dean of the school, vice president for student affairs, vice president for academic administration, and currently provost of the University of Chile. This means that he holds the second-highest ranking position in the national university of his country. He is also an active member of the Las Condes Adventist church in Santiago, Chile.

#### **H**ow did you first hear about the Seventh-day Adventist Church and learn about the Sabbath?

In two different ways, and at about the same time. The first was through my personal Bible study. The second was the witness of some of my fellow students who were Adventists. I began to study the Scriptures as a teenager. I was a Roman Catholic at the time and was struggling with the religious crises typical of youth. My struggles were magnified by several authors, especially those of German literature, who raised deep questions in my mind. It was through personal Bible study, however, that I discovered the true Sabbath.

My other contact with Adventists came through two good friends. They helped me set aside my prejudices against non-Catholics. One of them had been a classmate of mine in high school. We all knew he was different from the rest of us because of his language, his honesty, and sincerity. I became acquainted with the other at the university. He invited me to a meeting of Adventist university

students where we studied the Bible. Soon after that I went to church with him, and I've never left. Those two friends showed me in practical ways that Christianity involves every facet of life—the spiritual as well as the intellectual—and can be seen in a person's behavior.

#### **When did you decide to join the Adventist Church?**

After going to different meetings with university students, attending church and participating in afternoon Adventist youth meetings and other programs for about a year, I decided to join the church. The Adventist university students supported my decision and the young people at the church welcomed me. My classmates also showed me that the Christian's faith encourages greater clarity of thought and helps him face the complex challenges of academic life. Another great motivation was that my entire family also became fervent Adventist Christians.

#### **Did your keeping the Sabbath cause you any problems as you studied in the university?**

Yes, it did. Let me tell you just one of my experiences. The program I was enrolled in at the time was quite demanding and involved many parallel subjects. One of the required courses met only on the Sabbath. I asked the professor of another course to explain the situation on my behalf, since the professor who taught the Sabbath course came to the university only on Saturdays. I did my best to explain why I couldn't engage in academic pursuits on the Sabbath, telling him that I observed it as a day of worship and rest, established and reserved by God for prayer and for the development of a deeper relationship with Him. This professor became an excellent mediator. He arranged a meeting with the other professor, who wanted to know why I had been absent for an entire set of lectures.

After the professor of the Sabbath course learned of my reasons, I was allowed to take the final exam on the Monday after the scheduled Sabbath test date. That Monday, I was handed the essay test question, one which I immediately realized was an in-

credibly complex one, requiring a vast amount of information impossible to call up from memory, much less write down during the allotted test period.

I remember beginning the "impossible" task in complete solitude; the group of presiding faculty members had left the room. I was surrounded by my test notes which I could not refer to, and by the already completed exams of other students within easy reach. When the professors returned, they asked me if I had read any of the other exams. I replied in good conscience that I hadn't, and with no further explanation, I was dismissed.

The next day, I went to see my grade. I knew I had made mistakes on the essay, but I saw that I had been given a high grade. After my initial surprise, I understood that I had passed a bigger exam, one that tested my integrity as a Sabbath keeping Christian. If I had cheated and turned in a perfect exam, I would have been properly branded a fanatic and a hypocrite: a fanatic who insisted on the importance of Sabbath observance, and yet a pseudo-Christian who was a liar and cheater.

**Of the studies you have completed and the articles you have written which, in your opinion, are most relevant to your specialty?**

In graduate school I completed a research degree in literature and philosophy and also a teaching degree in Spanish. During various stages of post graduate studies, I focused on French, Spanish, and general literatures. After these studies, I specialized in Latin American literature, specifically in literary theory and aesthetics, which I currently teach. I could mention two of my articles which recently appeared in professional journals: "Matrices of Meaning in the Narrative Text" and "Toward a Theory of Myth."

**What position do you currently hold at the University of Chile?**

God has truly blessed my professional and academic life.

Since 1974, I've been given larger responsibilities in the university. First as department chairman and in 1978 as dean of the School of Humanities. Later I was appointed vice president for student affairs, touching the lives of 68,000 students. When my term was over, I was designated vice president for academic administration, and now university provost.

**Have you been able to share your faith in the academic and professional circles?**

Of course, in many ways. One of them is my testimony of Sabbath observance to the authorities of the university, and to my colleagues. The university presidents have usually been very understanding and accommodating, often avoiding the scheduling of meetings after sundown on Fridays.

Another way I share my faith occurs spontaneously in my literature classes. As we investigate literary theory, analyze texts, and discuss hermeneutics, religious sources and issues emerge naturally in the discussion. Problems in interpretation allow me to present the Bible as an example. Even in post graduate literature classes it's possible to interest students in Bible study. The University of Chile offered a course on the greatest works of world literature, during which I was asked to speak about the Bible. As a result of this class, several students have visited our church.

**Do you have any advice for Adventist university students?**

Giving advice is difficult because one often tends to use one's own life and experience as a model. I'd much rather encourage Adventist students based not on my life experience but on the blessings I've received.

I often meet Adventist young people who question the possibility of integrating intellectual life and faith, culture and faith, science and faith. This is a negative attitude that can interfere with our opportunity to give a good witness.

University students are very inquisitive and observant, more so than the average person who doesn't engage in academic pursuits. They are quite critical of those who call themselves Christians but do what is clearly unchristian. This type of compartmentalized behavior and faith is a huge obstacle in trying to reach the intellectually motivated university student. This situation can be countered by the witness of a young Adventist who not only talks about Christianity but, more importantly, also lives it.

**Victor Peto**

*Victor Peto is education director for the Chile Union, in the South American Division, and also serves as local representative of Dialogue.*

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