

Sacking of bishop takes church relations in Argentina to new low

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

San José, Costa Rica—Tensions between the Argentinean government and the Roman Catholic Church have reached a 50 year low after the Vatican refused to appoint a new bishop to replace the country's military bishop who was fired by President Néstor Kirchner.

Bishop Antonio Juan Baseotto was removed from his government-funded post after he suggested that Argentina's health minister should be "thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck," for suggesting that abortion in the largely Roman Catholic country should be decriminalized.

The bishop's remarks were met with shock among Argentines who vividly remember reports of death flights during the 1970s military government when hundreds of political prisoners were allegedly thrown into the ocean alive from high-flying military planes.

In response to the controversial bishop's remark, President Kirchner signed a decree withdrawing governmental support from a 2002 agreement signed with the Vatican. That accord provided the military vicariate around \$6,000 a month, \$1,700 of which went to the bishop.

The Vatican responded to Kirchner's action by saying that the decision was a violation of religious freedom. Technically, only the Vatican can remove a bishop from his position.

Abortion is illegal in Argentina, and can be punished by a prison term.

Health minister Ginés González García recently said he was in favor of legalizing abortion. He also recommended the free distribution of condoms to Argentina's young people.

Argentina's last major conflict with the Vatican occurred in 1955 when the catholic hierarchy confronted then-dictator Juan Domingo Perón. That episode led to the burning of some churches by government-supported forces and the expulsion of an archbishop from the country.

Baseotto has long been a controversial figure in Argentina, known for his anti-Semitic remarks and his justification of human rights violations by the country's military dictatorship.

In 1966, during a television interview, he said, "If pornography is good business, Hebrews will sell pornography. If drugs are a good business, they will sell drugs. If they can get more money by blackmailing, they will blackmail, and if they have to destroy their competition, they will do so."

He also justified human rights violations by calling them “excesses that are impossible to avoid in the war.”

Argentina’s large Jewish community has been applying pressure for his removal by the Vatican, a demand renewed after his recent remarks.

Kirchner asked the Vatican to remove Baseotto from his post, but Holy See confirmed his appointment this past Monday, bringing concern from the Argentine bishop’s conference which felt that it should have been consulted on the issue.

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