

Church, government clash over Catholic statements concerning policy

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Quito's Roman Catholic archbishop has reacted strongly to sharp criticism from Ecuador's president that the church had been wrong in making public statements about government actions.

"The Church does not have to ask permission from the president to express its opinions," said Archbishop Antonio Gonzalez in response to criticism of church leadership by President Sixto-Duran Ballen.

"The church is an independent religious organization which works in support of the needs of the people and teaches the faith." the archbishop said.

The dispute broke out in early June over church criticism of strict economic measures introduced by the government to overcome a massive budget shortfall brought on in part by a month-long border conflict with neighboring Peru.

While exact figures are in dispute, some government officials say the conflict cost around \$350 million.

The measures included an average 140% increase in electricity rates. Officials say the poor will bear the brunt of the increases since that segment of society had received a large subsidy which will be dropped. Quito's El Comercio newspaper said the poorest neighborhoods will experience an increase in rates up to 500%. Business rates were scheduled to increase around 25%.

Meeting on June 1, the Ecuador Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic) said "the poor are carrying the weight of the problem", referring to Ecuador's foreign debt and the costs of the war.

The conference reminded the government that earlier economic measures, introduced in September of 1992, hurt the poor, but that the government promised then they would not repeat those types of strong actions.

Since then, the conference said, the government has continued to increase gasoline prices, in spite of promises to reduce the price if international petroleum prices rose.

The bishops also condemned pending increases in telephone and water rates.

The conference said that the Ecuadorian people "are willing to accept sacrifice (to pay the costs of the war and the foreign debt) if they know it will serve them. We think we need to support our government in its efforts to pay the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank."

"However, our government has to realize that it cannot weigh down the poor with an unreasonable load."

Referring to government privatization efforts, the Episcopal Conference said such efforts would be supported if the results would benefit the people without putting too much stress on them, especially on the poor.

President Duran-Ballen responded to the church's criticisms by saying the church ought to study and understand government policies before criticizing them.

Monsignor Antonio Arregui, secretary of the Episcopal Conference responded by saying that one does not need to be an economist to know that the new economic measures are "difficult and excessive."

Arregui said the church respects the president, and said "The president is a good man and a devout Catholic."

The priest said that while the measures were necessary, the church was criticizing their impact on the poor. "The government should have looked for alternatives," he said.

Bishop Gonzalez reacted to what he considered an attempt by the government to mute church criticism. "We are not subject to any government," he said. "We not only criticize the government when necessary, but applaud them when appropriate, such as during the recent conflict."

Gonzalez said the church criticism of the government economic policy did not indicate a break between the two. Referring to recent church support of a new Agrarian law and legislation which requires two hours of government-sponsored religious teaching in private and public schools, the bishop said that the two institutions can work together for the good of the people on common issues.

The archbishop cited an encyclical of Pope John Paul II which called for the church and governments to work together in favor of the poor as justification for the recent church criticism.

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