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Guatemala's Catholic Church Elects An Indefatigable Leader; Resumes Social-activist Role

by Mike Leffert

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The left side of Guatemala's bifurcated Catholic Church got a boost in January with the election of Alvaro Ramazzini, bishop of San Marcos, as new president of the Conferencia Episcopal de Guatemala (CEG). Ramazzini will serve in the position for two years. He was elected by a majority of the country's 20 bishops. He succeeds Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada Toruno, who headed the CEG for four years.

Ramazzini thus becomes the church's link with the Vatican and its point man with the government. Like his predecessor, and like Bishop Victor Hugo Martinez before him, Ramazzini has the possibility to be re-elected to hold the presidency for four years.

The election portends a contentious relationship with the government. Ramazzini has been an outspoken advocate for human rights and an effective leader of dissidents fighting for the rights of campesinos, migrants, and the landless poor. He is a vocal and energetic opponent of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) because of its potential to "impoverish the poorest." His opposition has taken him to the US, where he has lobbied the Congress on this issue. Internationally respected, Ramazzini received the 2005 Austrian Konrad Lorenz Award.

This award is presented by the Austrian Ministry of Life after selection by an independent jury on the criteria "protection of life, generational responsibility, and environmental ethics." The award usually goes to an environmentalist or someone whose advocacy work originates with the environmental movement. The choice of Ramazzini was a departure from this custom that could prove problematic for the Guatemalan government. He was chosen specifically for this international recognition because of his fight against multinationals razing the San Marcos countryside in pursuit of mineral wealth (see NotiCen, 2005-10-27).

The Austrian ministry cited, in its publicity for the prize, "the case of a gold-mine construction project that is not only devastating the landscape on account of its extremely environmentally damaging surface-mining activities, but also because cyanide and mercury are threatening to destroy the environment and life essentials of the indigenous population for generations to come. Ramazzini's commitment is an exceptional contribution in the fight for social justice and the fostering of civil courage."

Ramazzini has the government on the ropes

This was not something the government wanted to hear, as the administration of President Oscar Berger battles on for approval of mining concessions whose short-term economic benefits are of more concern than the destruction and contamination of San Marcos (see NotiCen, 2005-01-20).

Shortly after his election, Ramazzini went to the government with a list of particulars. "I presented our concern about rural development, land conflicts, violence, and the misgivings we have about mining exploitation," he told reporters. "What we want is a fluid and constant dialogue to improve the quality of life of those most in need." He was speaking not only for San Marcos, but also for Jutiapa, Alta Verapaz, and Baja Verapaz departments, which are similarly afflicted.

During a meeting with Berger and several of his ministers, Ramazzini also got in some licks about CAFTA, a matter not on the agenda. "I'm not going to participate [in a discussion about it], but I believe that the FTA should not be signed," he said. The government emerged from the meeting with a seemingly flexible stance. Berger said, "We will evaluate the efforts we as a government make for a more just and equitable country." Vice President Eduardo Stein said the concerns of the church coincided with those of the government. The church's demands were principally for legislation that would guarantee responsible mining practices, action to combat extreme poverty, solutions for land conflicts, better security for rural populations, and joint planning for rural development. But the conciliatory atmosphere was just a blip.

Prior to the meeting, the government had gone on the offensive, deprecating the CEG. Former President Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000), now mayor of Guatemala City, had accused the church of having tried to sabotage the peace process that culminated with the end to the 36-year internal war in December 1996. Arzu was president at that time, and Berger was mayor of Guatemala City. They were members of the same party.

Ramazzini found the accusation absurd, pointing out that then Bishop Quezada Toruno was a peace negotiator, central to the process. "The Conferencia Episcopal de Guatemala never tried to stop the signing of the peace accords," he said. "It was always the position that the peace accords should be an efficient instrument to achieve the fundamental changes the country needed." With this as background, it was not long before talks broke down between the government and the church.

Toward the beginning of March, the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) made public a mining-law reform bill that did not include agreements reached in 2005 on suspension of license concession. Ramazzini threw down the gauntlet, giving the government a week to come up with a bill that reflected agreements reached in the Comision de Alto Nivel sobre la Minería (CANM). "If we don't see a positive response to include our suggestions in the reform bill, we will do the negotiations with the Congress ourselves," he said.

Among the issues the ministry's bill left out were: * Establishing a territorial survey system to delimit viable mining areas * Regulating consultation processes as part of the licensing procedure * Setting rules to guarantee environmental protection * Dedicating royalties and taxes to benefit communities in mining regions * Supervising environmental-impact studies by the Agriculture Ministry.

MEM Minister Luiz Ortiz appeared to back down from a fight. He told the media that he never intended to send the bill on without discussing it with CANM. Just because the issues were not included, he said, "does not mean that they are not pending, or that they are not important. I'm confident that, through dialogue, the proposal to reform the law will be enriched."

Ortiz's troubles were just beginning. President of the congressional Comision de Energia y Minas Julio Morales announced on the heels of the minister's statement that the minister would be called before the committee to explain why the CANM consensus was missing from the reform. Stein fell in step with the backpedaling, claiming the announced bill was just "a draft." Shifting blame to Ortiz, he said, "We were hoping that the agreements in the Comision de Alto Nivel would be reflected in the initiative of the Energy Ministry, but if they are not, it has to be revised."

A day later, Berger joined the march. He clearly wanted to avoid international interest in the mining problem. "It shouldn't be politicized," he said. "If we want investment we don't have to be sending these messages to the international community that we are confrontational." He repeated the message that the mining bill was just a draft that would not be sent to Congress and gave assurance that "Bishop Ramazzini is my friend, and I promised him that we would take his opinions into account."

Social activism in a divided church

Ramazzini seems to have made his mark in his initial outing as CEG president. Cardinal Quezada Toruno gave him full support from the pulpit for his handling of the mining problem and his so-far-successful staring down of the administration. The bishop's ascent to higher office also has ramifications for change within the church itself. The Catholic Church in Guatemala has for years been divided between nonconfrontational conservatives and socially minded progressives. Ramazzini's election signals a possible return on the part of the church to greater political involvement and social activism.

But it also awakens the possibility of opening an even deeper divide between these tendencies within the institution. For the moment Ramazzini appears to have general support, even among the archconservative Opus Dei factions. Church officials have taken the early position that the elevation of Ramazzini is really just a continuation of recent policy.

Brother Santiago Otero, ex-adjunct secretary of the CEG, told Inforpress Centroamericana that the new president represents a continuation of policy under Quezada, "as can be seen in the documents of the [archdiocesan] curia, a very active posture toward reality and a very marked social concern."

Bishop Victor Hugo Martinez, president of the CEG before Quezada's term, agreed. "The line is the same," he said. "There is no change, but rather more emphasis on specific situations."

For Jesuit historian Ricardo Bendana, however, there is indeed a change. He called the election, "A selection that presumes to recover part of the initiative that had been lost with the strategic assassination of Bishop [Juan] Gerardi, which provoked a certain retraction that has been maintained until now" (see NotiCen, 1998-10-15 and 2002-02-03) Bendana sees the Guatemalan church as far less conservative than that existing elsewhere. He said the church in Guatemala is largely progressive, or "centrist and left." He said, "You'd be hard-pressed to mention two who are conservative [in the extreme sense]. They all have social conscience. There is no right right."

If there were a right right, the place to look for it would be in the ranks of Opus Dei. But even there, said Pedro Donis, director of the Opus Dei information office, "The bishops as pastors cannot feign ignorance of the obligation to guide and help in those situations of civil order that especially affect the faithful on questions of justice and dignity, for example. It is their obligation." He supports Ramazzini "on the subject of defense of the human dignity of the most vulnerable Guatemalans, from the mining, the migrants, and other needs."

Ramazzini has been a vociferous defender of the rights of Central Americans migrating north. Where Opus Dei might shun overt progressive politicking elsewhere, in this country, said Donis, "it is a question of understanding well that what is being put in practice is the social doctrine of the church."

This is very close to the opinion of liberal theologian Fernando Bermudez, a lay missionary who coordinates the human rights program of Ramazzini's Arzobispado de San Marcos. "It is not a political line, but what is in the gospel. It is the social doctrine of the church. The right wanted to isolate Christ in the sacristy, reducing its [the church's] action only to the spiritual, and not helping with the problems."

Victor Ruano, priest and ex-director of the Seminario Mayor, welcomes the direction the church is taking, or resuming. "It seems stupendous to me, all the more I consider it just and necessary that the church participate in political issues because, in reality, these are human issues, and everything human pertains to its interest and concern. If the church intervenes, it is because it must defend and promote the dignity of persons and peoples, above all, when we see that the authorities do little to defend the interests of the people and bow in servility to the powerful."

This return to social activism, however, cannot be extrapolated to moral issues. Here many of these same church officials are conservative. Bandana explained, "We are very traditional. There is a mental conservatism. There are points that are non-negotiable, like abortion, even though you can see some opening, as in the treatment of divorce. Here it appears that the bishops are more advanced than the laity." There are, without question, movements within the church that fit the mold of right-wing ultraconservatism. Among them are the many Semana Santa Hermandades, the Heraldos de Cristo, and others. But probably what most keeps the church from more serious division is the huge gains made by the evangelical sects in recent years.

With the sects' emphasis on salvation apart from social commitment, the shrinking church has been pressed back into its role as the socially committed religion. Seen from that point of view, Ramazzini is a product of the times. The Guatemalan church turned from ultraconservatism in 1976, when it ended its silence on official abuse with the publication of the pastoral letter *Unidos en la esperanza* (United in Hope). This marked a turning away from the traditional alignment of the church with right-wing power, exemplified by Mariano Rossell, archbishop of Guatemala from 1939 to 1964, who favored the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz (1950-1954), and Mario Casariego, his successor (1964-1983), who expressly forbade speaking of social justice.

After the death of Casariego in 1983, the church took on the issue of land tenancy among the poor with the publication of *Clamor por la tierra* (Cry for Land) and began to pay the price for its

advocacy with the assassinations of clergy that continued up until the murder of Bishop Gerardi in 1998.

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