

2-19-2009

El Salvador Gets A New Top Prelate With A New Emphasis On The Social Agenda

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "El Salvador Gets A New Top Prelate With A New Emphasis On The Social Agenda." (2009).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9680>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

El Salvador Gets A New Top Prelate With A New Emphasis On The Social Agenda

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: El Salvador

Published: Thursday, February 19, 2009

El Salvador has a new leader at the head of its Catholic hierarchy, a leader likely to reflect a trend away from the arch-conservatism of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) government and of the just-retired Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle. Archbishop of San Salvador Jose Luis Escobar Alas took office Feb. 14, after waiting the obligatory two months since being named to the post in December. Escobar has already come out for greater social justice and against the encroachments of the mining industry. He has also come out in favor of a change of governing party. The archbishop's anti-mining message was prominent in his accession speech, with likely echoes through the region as he spoke to some 400 priests and his counterpart archbishops of Central America, Mexico, and Panama. "To the departing government and the new government, of whatever party it may be, I call upon you not to allow the exploitation of mining of precious metals. I ask it because of the grave damage it would cause to people's health and for the contamination of the water," he said. Some reports said he was speaking directly to President Antonio Saca, seated in the front row of the cathedral. His large audience responded with enthusiastic applause. The day after Escobar's denunciation of mining, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Oxfam released a report in San Salvador, Metals Mining and Sustainable Development in Central America; An Assessment of Benefits and Costs (*Mineria de metales y desarrollo sostenible en Centroamerica, una valoracion de costos y beneficios de la mineria*). The report reveals what Escobar and local residents already know, that mining does not necessarily contribute to the economies of poor countries, while the environmental, social, and cultural costs can be very high. It says that mining, while extensive, "has never played a significant role" in the economies of El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras because the markets in its products "are highly volatile, employ limited labor, and the lifecycles of open-pit mines are short." It also confirms that, far from lifting them out of poverty, mining has only worsened the health and well-being of local populations. Escobar said at a forum where the report was presented, "They are unjust; the 1% or 2% the law demands [in royalties] is insignificant, and this cannot be, that in the 21st century this kind of transaction by transnationals can go on in these poor countries." That did not mean that he was advocating that the country turn its back on its mineral wealth but rather, "If today we are not able to exploit our mines of silver and gold to our profit, in a clean way without polluting the environment, our succeeding generations will be. It is just and appropriate that it be left till then." The day after his investiture, his first Sunday on the job, Escobar took on the high levels of violence in the country and the deformed justice system and disabled economy he suggested are at the root of it. He said in his homily that, to make a dent, the country needs "more just laws and the strengthening of the economy." Police figures show continued rises in murder rates in La Libertad, Sonsonate, and San Salvador since the year began, and Escobar comes in as prisons throughout the country are erupting with rebellion. On that subject, he commented that the problem cannot be solved by "creating more jails in the country if the laws are not more just." The prison rebellion has so far been peaceful, its instigators for the moment turning away from the bloodbaths of the past. Prisoners have written letters and documents protesting policies but have not made specific demands. The rebellion has consisted in refusing

to return to cells, to attend classes or activities, or to show up for court appearances. Just before the mass began, the new archbishop gave an interview to the newspaper *Co Latino*, wherein he noted El Salvador is world famous for its violence. He said the country's history, particularly the Civil War, is largely responsible for the current state of affairs. "Today there are consequences of that, a polarized society, a society with too much poverty," he said. He acknowledged El Salvador is not alone in that assessment, that the whole world is now entangled in crisis, that it is a historically difficult global moment. "Now, regarding the political situation of the country, I think that the political parties, the whole society, must give its best performance respecting the democracy," he said. He encouraged everyone to vote, and called upon the political parties to show a higher level of maturity, working for the common good rather than for parochial interests. Escobar said at his taking of the crosier that he would orient his policy toward and in favor of the poor and most needy, and he asked the assembled to do likewise. "I want to invite everyone to take heed of the urgent necessity to help our poorest brothers and sisters in an effective and affective manner," he told them. He also called upon the Vatican to get moving on the canonization of Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the archbishop who was assassinated in 1980. Escobar left no doubt that he is "one of those priests who expects that he will be canonized quickly." He said to have a Salvadoran saint "would be the greatest joy of the church of this country and the greatest blessing that we could have." In step with the probable political future While the religious aspects of his support of Romero's canonization certainly stand on their own, some saw in Escobar's emphasis a turn leftward in the El Salvador's political future. He hammered that message home in calling not only for canonization but simultaneously for "an exhaustive examination of the person who is being canonized, with all his teachings and all his works, his virtues." Romero has become an icon of the social struggle in the country. Social organizations, as well as Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), frequently use his image in their campaigns and events. A turn toward the left is a turn away from Escobar's predecessor, Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle, of the very rightward *Opus Dei* and ARENA. Saenz was of a different mind on the Romero issue as well, supporting Vatican stalling and calling for more evidence of miracles before proceeding with the process (see *NotiCen*, 2008-04-03). Saenz supported the ARENA position on the Spanish effort to indict 14 members of the Salvadoran military in the still unsolved and poorly investigated assassination of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter in 1989 (see *NotiCen*, 2008-11-20). He had said, "El Salvador's affairs should be resolved in El Salvador," even though it was clear, as Jesuit Fr. Dean Brackley of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) pointed out, that "all efforts to do so have been fruitless." Saenz was rewarded for his devotion to the right and to ARENA by being presented with the order of Jose Matias Delgado, Grado de Gran Cruz, Placa de Plata, "the highest distinction out country grants to citizens who have been identified deeply with the needs of our people," by President Antonio Saca, who is also soon to leave the scene with the expiration of his term and the election of a new president in March. Polls have indicated that the new president will probably be, for the first time since the end of the Civil War, not from the right but from the FMLN, and Escobar has made it known that would be just fine with him. It would be another sign of the political maturity he spoke about. He told reporters, "I believe that, yes, alternation [from one party to another] is important in the country, it is a manifestation of adult democracy, of robust democracy." He elaborated his belief that, with a change of ruling parties, the polarization that has gripped the country would begin to disappear. That, along with establishing an equilibrium among the branches of government, would bring the needed change so that "then we would be in an ideal democracy." Departing from the dire warnings from the church of the past, the new archbishop of San Salvador said that now the church is content to leave political decisions to the people. "If the people elect one party or the other, we

would be happy." As if issuing an order to his own troops, he added, "Of this you can be certain, not only is it my voice but that of my brother bishops, too." He also advised both winners and losers to be modest. The winners must take the opposition into account so that they not think of themselves as "absolute winners" and realize that almost half the electorate sympathizes with the opposition. The losers must be fair in recognizing the victors, taking a positive, constructive role. He clearly was speaking as if he expected that both sides would be new to their roles.

-- End --