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By George Rodriguez

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A Toronto, Canada, police officer never imagined a statement he made early this year at a talk for students at a Canadian university would trigger a reaction that has spread like wildfire in that country and abroad—SlutWalking.

Neither did, in Costa Rica, a local bishop and a Mexican cardinal when, months later, they spoke on women’s attire and their role in society, sparking the first-ever Marcha de las Putas a la Tica" (March of Sluts Costa Rican Style)—the local version of the original SlutWalk Toronto.

Media reports said that Toronto police officer Michael Sanguinetti, speaking on personal safety to a small group of students at York University, began by saying, "You know, I think we’re beating around the bush here." He went on to say, "I’ve been told I’m not supposed to say this. However, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized."

Thus, SlutWalking was born, and Sanguinetti’s apology—"I am embarrassed by the comment I made and it shall not be repeated"—under Toronto police internal disciplinary action did not quell the anger his comment had set off.

From Canada, SlutWalking has unstoppably spread to the neighboring US, where marches were held in at least ten cities and, farther on, reaching countries such as Argentina, Australia, India, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Months after Sanguinetti’s expressions of victim-blaming in cases of sexual abuse, Costa Rican Bishop José Francisco Ulloa, during mass the day before the Día de la Virgen de los Ángeles—Costa Rica’s patron saint—called on women to dress "demurely." The mass was held as part of the traditional dressing of the Virgin in preparation for the main celebration, on Aug. 2, at the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles in the central Costa Rica city of Cartago where Ulloa is bishop.

In calling for women’s demureness, Ulloa—a former president of the Conferencia Episcopal de Costa Rica (CECOR)—said that otherwise "they [women] are dehumanized, they are turned into a thing, an object, nothing more."

Mexican cardinal cautions women

The following day, celebrating mass at the basilica as Pope Benedict XVI’s envoy, Mexican Cardinal Archbishop Francisco Robles defined the Catholic Church’s vision of women’s role in society.

With President Laura Chinchilla, Costa Rica’s first-ever woman president, at the ceremony, Robles, who is archbishop of Monterrey, México, said that, regarding women, "we uphold equality in their rights and possibilities. However, we are concerned that women’s emancipation" may mean "that women do not contribute their gifts, reducing their participation to merely emulating men." He went on to strongly emphasize, "That is the worst injustice regarding the genius and the gifts of women."
"Nowadays women tend to follow in the footsteps of men, to think as men do, to solve life’s problems as men do," added Robles, in whose opinion "there is no need for women to think as men. Feminine intelligence and psychology are different from those of the males, but are never inferior. The mission of women is not to highlight virile spirit but to express femininity’s greatness."

The Mexican cardinal said that "the role of women is not to preserve a world made by men but to create a more humane world, offering the richness of the feminine element in all their activities. The true promotion of women will demand that the value of their maternal and family function be clearly recognized with regard to the other functions. It is thus necessary to discover the original and irreplaceable meaning of housework and of the education of children."

"Our society, even if for survival, should see to it that wives and mothers are not actually forced to work outside the house," said to the cardinal.

Two days later, outrage at Robles’ remarks began surfacing.

Quoted by the Costa Rican newspaper, Maureen Clarke, head of the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (INAMU), said statements like the cardinal’s are outdated in Costa Rica. "I’d like to know the bishop’s criterion, because I feel that many of the things the gentleman said have been overcome by our society," she told the conservative, influential morning daily.

SlutWalk held in front of cathedral

Ten days later, SlutWalking took center stage in downtown San José, precisely the day before Mother’s Day—celebrated on Aug. 15 in Costa Rica, and, along with Christmas and Holy Week, one of the most important celebrations for Costa Ricans—marching around the Parque Central, a square in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral.

The idea for holding the march, thus joining SlutWalking worldwide, was to take the insult — popular Spanish for prostitute, slut, whore—reverse it and slap the patriarchal system in the face, according to one of the organizers.

"We women are all susceptible, in the patriarchal system, to receiving this insult, so, we take it, turn it around, and we give the system a slap in the face," Viviana Rovira, a psychologist at the state Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR), told NotiCen during the Aug. 14 march. "And that’s why today we’re marching in front of the cathedral."

"We’ve taken the name Marcha de las Putas, which has been given [to similar activities] throughout Latin America and Canada, and which, at first, local media thought meant sex workers were going to march," Rovira said.

"The Catholic Church hierarchy tells us women that we must dress with more demureness and more modesty. They also say the only space for claiming the true importance of women is in the home and through maternity," added Rovira, who, like many other women taking part in the march, had the word written with a black highlighter pen on her forehead.

"Today, as you can see, many women are here, organized in solidarity...telling...the Catholic Church’s hierarchy...and the state that Costa Rica has signed and ratified different international documents on women’s rights. But, anyway, those forms of machismo violence exist, like the Catholic Church in its Aug. 2 discourse, telling us, ‘if you dress in a certain manner, you’re going to be raped,’” said Rovira. "Well, the truth is that we, the women, have the right to decide about our
own bodies and our own lives. That’s why today we’re fighting not only against different forms of machista violence against our bodies but we’re fighting to claim sexual and reproductive rights as well."

Organizers of this Central American nation’s unprecedented SlutWalk stated in a press release handed out during the walk that "we demand NOW the eradication of all forms of discrimination against women," and that "religious beliefs cannot be placed above human rights or above the international obligations take up by the state." The latter seek to "protect human rights, specifically those...of populations historically discriminated against."

Close to 1,000 people, mostly women, took part in the colorful walk, which for approximately two hours circled Parque Central, many dressed in defiance of the Catholic hierarchy’s advice. Marchers included members of organizations of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement and other human rights organizations.

SlutWalkers noisily chanted slogans and carried hand-made signs, with leaders speaking through megaphones. Dancing, jumping, or just walking, they repeated slogans such as "Naked or dressed, we lead our own lives," "Against the Vatican, clitorian power," "Let’s see, let’s see who’s in charge, the machistas or the March of Sluts," "No is NO! I told you, NO! Which part didn’t you get? The N or the O?"

Cardboard signs had statements such as "If demanding my rights means being a slut, then I’m a slut. So what?", "Monsignor, do little girls provoke abuse?", "If men gave birth, abortion would be legal."

As the march was ending, inside the cathedral, Rev. Francisco Javier Matta, the rector of the cathedral, was celebrating Sunday mass, after which he told NotiCen, "Regarding all this racket that’s been made, as we say in popular terms, I think we must see what’s advice and what’s an opinion."

"I think the church can, and must, advise all men and women on good habits, on leading a spiritual life, a religious life. As parents say, ‘behave,’ but if the child doesn’t obey, you just jerk him by the ear, old style," added Matta. "The church, the pope, the bishops must preach morality, must preach good habits...and in cases like this [the church] knows how to advise, it advises us to love." Regarding the remarks on women’s clothing, he said "Demureness is part of good habits...also of femininity itself."

Two days after the march, quoted Cartago Archbishop Ulloa as saying, regarding the fact that an image of Costa Rica’s patron saint wearing a bra was carried during the march, "This attitude causes me great concern and deep sadness. Although it comes from minority groups, it reflects the degree of decadence of sectors of our beloved Costa Rica, having no tolerance nor respecting Christian sensitivity, which is this country’s majority."

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