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Tensions Between Bolivian Government, Catholic Church

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Category/Department: Bolivia

Published: Friday, February 18, 2011

In the latest chapter in the ever-tense relations between the Bolivian government and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI is playing a role for the first time since President Evo Morales took office. The pontiff expressed "alarm" at the passage of an educational-reform law specifying that the educational system is secular and that the state has an obligation to guarantee free education through high school. The new law, which Morales said seeks to establish that education "is no longer alienated, subordinated, or submissive but rather revolutionary, anti-colonial, and liberating," is, however, just one more among the new irritants.

For many, what really brought the harsh reciprocal accusations was the full implementation of the 2006 Constitution (NotiSur, Feb 13, 2009). That document stipulated that Catholicism was no longer the country's official religion and, as a consequence, the Catholic Church would no longer receive financial support from the state and it would lose the privileges that both the institution and its members had enjoyed since the middle of the 19th century when the first concordat was signed by the Vatican and the Bolivian government.

Pope indirectly criticizes Bolivian education law

The pope did not mention this, as he had done at the time the Constitution was approved establishing the Plurinational State of Bolivia, which recognized all religions as equal. On Jan. 10, during the traditional new year meeting with the diplomatic corps accredited at the Vatican, the main thread of the papal speech was the defense of religious liberty as the "universal path to peace" and, in that vein, said, "Acknowledging religious freedom also means ensuring that religious communities can operate freely in society through initiatives in the social, charitable, or educational sectors."

That was only the beginning. The pope then made a clear allusion to Bolivia, saying, "Throughout the world, one can see the fruitful work accomplished by the Catholic Church in these areas. It is troubling that this service which religious communities render to society as a whole, particularly through the education of young people, is compromised or hampered by legislative proposals which risk creating a sort of state monopoly in the schools; this can be seen, for example, in certain countries in Latin America." Both EFE and ANSA news agencies quoted official Vatican sources as saying that the pontiff had expressly referred to Bolivia.

President Morales opted to ignore Pope Benedict's comments. In a message to teachers, he said, "Now teachers will be part of a decolonizing education project," and he added that the new law "strengthens and educates with the knowledge and wisdom of the indigenous peoples of Bolivia, campesinos, Afro-Bolivian communities, in harmony with universal knowledge."

The president only indirectly referred to criticism from the Conferencia Episcopal Boliviana (CEB), emphasizing that, with the 2011 school year, "we will have participatory, communitarian, and productive education. Participatory, because society and the state are responsible for protecting it; communitarian, because it is developed in and for the community; productive, because it is linked to generative vocations and creative work."
Beyond the statements, however, what really concerns the Vatican and the CEB is the end of Catholic monopoly. As of this year, Catholic religion classes ceased to be obligatory in Bolivian public schools. In addition, the new law "guarantees freedom of conscience and of faith, including the spirituality of indigenous nations, and it promotes respect and coexistence among people with diverse religious opinions, without dogmatic imposition."

To head off the discourse of the bishops, who "are knowingly lying," Education Minister Roberto Aguilar said that the curriculum "establishes common courses such as history of religions, spirituality, ethics, and values, but each school is also free to teach a particular religious faith, whether from the indigenous, Catholic, or Protestant tradition, so that families can choose what education they want their children to receive."

Despite the clear text of the law, the bishops persist in complaining that their primary schools and secondary institutes will no longer be able to teach religion as they have done since Bolivia became an independent country on Aug. 6, 1825. The Catholic Church also sees contradictions, claiming that the law says that "the state and Bolivian society must be guardians and defenders of education," but at the same time it stipulates that only the state can train teachers and that, "consequently, with that directive, private teacher-training institutes will have to close."

However, the law does not say that they will. "The Catholic Church knows that it is lying. What the law says is that [teacher training] must be aimed at producing teachers committed to democracy, social transformations, and inclusion," said Aguilar.

Church loses privileges

It is undeniable that education is a critical issue in church-state relations, but what the Bolivian clergy find particularly upsetting are provisions in effect with the full implementation of the 2006 Constitution, especially those bringing a loss of benefits for the institution and the cardinal, bishops, and even the priests.

With an energy uncommon in its writers, the news agency Zenit—an official Rome-based organ tightly linked with the Holy See, wrote on Dec. 1, 2010, "A new crisis exploded in Bolivia with the announcement by representatives of the executive and the legislature that the Catholic Church will have to pay taxes on its real property under threat of expropriation. It is the second crisis since last November." Zenit, referring to when the education bill was sent to the Congress, mentioned "relations that have never been fluid between the Catholic Church and the government of the indigenist coca grower Evo Morales."

The message was surprising both in the agency's disrespectful reference to the president as well as in its affirmation of "the threat of expropriation of [church] real property." It has not referred to the issue again.

In the same article, the agency repeated the erroneous news and listed the inventory of goods on which, as of now, the Catholic Church would have to pay taxes, including 1,469 primary, secondary, and university educational institutions; 1,600 cathedrals, parishes, shrines, and convents; and 250 homes or community centers.

Zenit quoted Carlos Velázquez, executive secretary of the Bolivian affiliate of Caritas, as saying that, given that the constitutional reform that was being debated in 2006 would eliminate all the historic
privileges of the church, "before the Asamblea Constituyente was installed, the CEB asked for a revision of Article 3 of the [old] Constitution."

That article of the 1967 Constitution stipulated that "the state recognizes and sustains [assumes all expenses for] the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion." Velázquez said that at the time the CEB was seeking to avoid the "erroneous interpretations" derived from Article 3, and it suggested to the delegates a new clause in which the church would recognize the new reality but would try to preserve a relationship of privilege with the state.

Velázquez says that the bishops suggested including in the Plurinational Constitution a three-part item: "The state recognizes and supports the Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic religion; guarantees the public exercise of all other faiths; and establishes that relations with the Catholic Church be regulated through concordats and agreements between the Bolivian state and the Holy See."

Under the new Constitution, the state no longer pays the salaries and pensions of bishops and priests nor does it provide other resources to support the Catholic faith. This means that, besides paying real estate taxes, all entities that operate under the institutional structure of the church will have to pay, like any other private agency, value-added taxes (impuestos al valor agregado, IVA), financial-transaction taxes (impuestos a las transacciones financieras, ITF), municipal taxes, licenses for church-owned vehicles, electricity costs in churches and parishes, etc.

Vice Minister of Decolonization Félix Cárdenas left open the possibility that the tax burden could be extended to include taxing services provided by the church, from baptisms and marriages to community blessings and last rites.

The new reality also affects the social status of the clergy. The Estado Plurinacional y Pluricultural withdrew the cardinal's diplomatic passport and the official passports of all the bishops. They had to relinquish them by Feb. 8. Although the same directive applied to direct relatives of the president, the vice president, and Cabinet ministers, the Catholic Church took it as an attack. The documents gave members of the clergy diplomatic rank and representation, along with the immunities and privileges provided diplomats under international treaties (exemption from paying airport taxes and filling out customs forms anywhere in the world, among other exclusive treatments).

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