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With the political crisis in Venezuela veering toward an unpredictable and potentially violent level of confrontation, the Catholic Church decided late last month to take on the role of peacemaker and managed—at least for now—to defuse the situation.

The efforts came directly from the Vatican rather than from the local Catholic leadership, which has sided with the opposition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) coalition and thus compromised its potential as a go-between. On Oct. 24, Pope Francis received President Nicolás Maduro secretly. At almost that same moment, a special emissary for the pontiff—Monsignor Emil Paul Tscherrig, the Vatican’s representative in Argentina—arrived in Caracas to launch a mediation process “without preconditions and with an open agenda.”

The overtures, as noted by a Catholic affairs analyst with the Argentine news site Diario Registrado, were as “transcendent” as they were surprising. “Such a gesture would have been unthinkable in the era of the European popes, for whom Latin America was the scored prostitute,” the writer argued.

Maduro was also received, shortly afterwards, by the UN secretary-general-designate, António Guterres of Portugal, who said, “The path of dialogue is the only civilized way people have to settle their differences.” The two met in Lisbon on Aug. 25, just one day after Maduro’s visit to the Vatican.

Despite the direct involvement of such global figures, the Venezuelan government and opposition acted, in the days that followed, as if nothing had happened. The two sides kept up their battle of apocalyptic threats and called on their respective followers to take to the streets.

The almost daily demonstrations have not, however, been well attended. “They suggest a certain level of weariness on the part of the people, who have spent the past two years caught between the two sides in this tournament of back-and-forth insults,” a correspondent for the Brazilian daily Zero Hora wrote Oct. 26. The same day, a dispatch by the AFP news agency noted that the two-time opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles had left a demonstration—on the back of a motorcycle—after “participants booed him and called him a traitor.”

Desperate times, desperate measures

The Venezuelan political crisis last turned violent in February/March 2014, when the radical right pursued what it called La Salida (the exit), a plan to “topple the government by any means necessary.” This faction of the MUD, headed by the now jailed Leopoldo López, organized a series of violent street demonstrations that resulted in 43 deaths and extensive material damage (NotiSur, April 4, 2014). The government labeled López a “terrorist” and most of the country’s opposition parties distanced themselves from his positions.

Nevertheless, the government-opposition standoff continued to simmer, heating up slowly but persistently until September, when efforts to hold a recall referendum to remove President...
Maduro from office entered into the final phase. After referendum organizers completed a series of constitutionally required steps, electoral authorities—whom the opposition accuses of acting in cahoots with the Maduro administration—determined that serious irregularities had been committed in the signature collection phase. Some signatures appeared more than once, or were those of people who are no longer alive, they found.

On Oct. 20, as a result, the Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Council, CNE) invalidated the entire process. The government talked about fraud. The opposition responded by accusing Maduro of being a dictator. Some Venezuelan emigrants in Miami, Florida, went so far as to call him “a genocidal tyrant.”

The situation was increasingly volatile and unpredictable, in other words, when the Catholic Church entered the fray on Oct. 24, and Monsignor Tscherrig—together with MUD’s executive secretary, Jesús Torrealba, pro-government lawmaker Élias Jaua, and former Spanish leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, acting as head of a mission from the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Union of South American Nations, USAN/UNASUR)—announced the start of talks.

Two hours before that, the Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly, AN)—Venezuela’s opposition-controlled legislature (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2016)—had completed a tumultuous session during which lawmakers threatened to subject Maduro to a political trial. Another option, they said, was to challenge Maduro’s eligibility to be president based on old media rumors—which some MUD leaders cite as fact—that he was born in Colombia.

Opposition deputies agreed to “fill the streets of Caracas and occupy the country from top to bottom to restore order.” In addition, they called on the international community to “intervene with concrete pressure to ensure the return of democracy” and urged the armed forces “not to accept or carry out orders form the dictator [Maduro].” Capriles went so far as to say, “We’ll march on Miraflores [the presidential palace] if needs be.”

Swing and a miss

The unexpected meeting between Maduro and Pope Francis, prepared in secret by the pope’s assistants and only made public when the Venezuelan president arrived in the Vatican, took the opposition by surprise, as did the subsequent encounter with Guterres. Neither of the two global figures took Maduro’s side per say. Nevertheless, the two meetings—together with Tscherrig’s arrival in Venezuela—seemed to ruffle feathers on the opposition side, which reacted with characteristic ineptitude.

The reactions also highlighted existing rifts within the MUD. Capriles and AN Speaker Henry Ramos Allup, for example, took issue with the developments despite the fact that Torrealba, the MUD’s top representative, stood beside Tscherrig (as photos can attest) when he announced the start of talks. They said they were unaware of the Vatican’s overtures until they saw it all on television. They also complained about the chosen site for the talks—the pleasant Caribbean island of Margarita—demanding instead that the meetings take place in Caracas.

In the meantime, the opposition’s goal of subjecting Maduro to a political trial is going nowhere for the simple reason that the Constitution doesn’t provide for such a scenario.

Nor have they made any progress on their inquiry into the president’s place of birth.
The opposition’s call for international support has mostly fallen on deaf ears. The secretary general of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, an active ally of the opposition, has been mum on the Vatican/UNASUR mediation efforts. Only the rightist presidents of Argentina (Mauricio Macri) and Paraguay (Horacio Cartes) have alluded to the possibility of marginalizing Venezuela from international bodies, while Peruvian president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski said he would ask the Ibero-American Summit in Cartagena to issue a condemnation of the Venezuelan government.

The response from the military, for its part, was resounding. Speaking on behalf of the armed forces, Gen. Vladimir Padrino López, the defense minister, described the civil-military alliance as “unconditional” and military unity as “monolithic.” Reading from a text, he said the military “will remain faithful to its most genuine democratic traditions and strict adherence to the Constitution.”

**Signs of solidarity**

In contrast to the opposition, the Maduro administration has received multiple demonstrations of support and understanding that undermine the claims of its opponents. The Bolivian government, an unconditional ally of Caracas, reiterated arguments President Evo Morales expressed before the UN General Assembly in September, when he called for “an end to external political interference in Venezuela’s affairs” and accused Luis Almagro of being a “lackey for the [US] empire.”

In Uruguay, leaders with the governing Frente Amplio (Wide Front) coalition expressed support for the Venezuelan government. The Uruguayan legislature, in the meantime, voted for a resolution stating that “all outside intervention that isn’t directed at bringing the sides together in search of a negotiated peaceful settlement can only aggravate existing tensions, as well as violate the principles of non-intervention and self-determination.”

The conservative government of Spain, for its part, expressed its “positive evaluation” of the release, at the behest of Rodríguez Zapatero, of political activists Gabriel San Miguel and Francisco Márquez (both Spanish citizens) and the transfer, from prison to house arrest, of former presidential candidate Manuel Rosales.

The Maduro administration also received an unexpected boost from Alicia Bárcena, the executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). In statements published Oct. 25 by the Russian news agency Sputnik-Novosti, Bárcena challenged the idea—as put forth by the opposition and echoed by some international media outlets (NotiSur, Aug. 26, 2016)—that Venezuela is suffering a “humanitarian crisis.”

Bárcena made the statements in Montevideo, where she participated in the XIII Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean. She acknowledged that Venezuela’s economic situation is far from ideal: Supply shortages are a real problem and the economy is expected to contract by 4% in 2017, according to ECLAC estimates. She praised the country, however, for making “consistent efforts to diversify its economy, which depends almost exclusively on oil. She also said that Venezuela “still has many elements to be a vibrant and economically thriving country” and is “meeting its external commitments” despite the huge hit it continues to take from low oil prices.

“It’s hasn’t fallen into default and continues receiving financing and credits, perhaps at high costs, but it still receives them,” Bárcena said.