4-12-2000

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by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2000-04-12

In late March, the Vatican appointed Bishop Felipe Arizmendi to head the embattled Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas state. Arizmendi, who has headed the Diocese of Tapachula in the southeastern coastal region of Chiapas for nine years, will succeed Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who reached the mandatory retirement age of 75 (see SourceMex, December 1, 1999). Arizmendi, considered a moderate, has criticized the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) for choosing to continue an armed rebellion. But he has also spoken out against the government and church authorities for their attempts to discredit Ruiz. In an interview shortly after his appointment, Arizmendi pledged to continue the work begun by his predecessors Ruiz and Coadjutor Bishop Raul Vera. "Our challenge is to defend the rights of the poor and the indigenous peoples of the region," he said. "And we will do this with great enthusiasm."

Appointment received with cautious optimism

Members of the special Chiapas legislative committee (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) endorsed Arizmendi’s appointment. Sen. Higinio Martinez Miranda, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), said he was certain that Bishop Arizmendi would continue to promote new dialogue between the EZLN and the government. Arizmendi said he endorses calls to greatly reduce the military presence in Chiapas, but he has also urged the EZLN to show a sign of its commitment to a peaceful solution to the conflict in the state. "A dialogue and a negotiation have to have the involvement of both sides," Arizmendi told reporters. "Both the Zapatista army and the federal army have to reach certain accords so there can be a reconsideration of the military presence [in Chiapas]." President Ernesto Zedillo's administration declined to comment directly on the appointment, even though Arizmendi is said to have the approval of the government. "This is an internal matter of the Catholic Church, and therefore the government will not offer its opinion on the appointment," said Humberto Lira Mora, deputy secretary for religious affairs at the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB). The Zedillo government is reported to have lobbied heavily against appointing Vera as full bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas. Instead, Vera was assigned to head the Archdiocese of Saltillo in the northern state of Coahuila (see SourceMex, January 19, 2000).

The Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada reported Arizmendi's appointment with cautious optimism. "Even though Arizmendi has shown some conservative tendencies, he is well versed on the conflicts in Chiapas and has shown solidarity with the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in the face of aggressions from local authorities and paramilitary groups," an editorial in the leftist newspaper said. The weekly news magazine Proceso said Arizmendi and fellow Chiapas Bishop Felipe Aguirre Franco of the Diocese of Tuxtla Gutierrez stood firmly in solidarity with Ruiz when the Vatican's Apostolic Nuncio Jeronimo Prigione unsuccessfully tried to remove him from San Cristobal de las Casas in 1993. In a letter, Arizmendi and Aguirre Franco praised Ruiz's commitment
and dedication to the area's indigenous communities. In 1994, SEGOB secretly asked Arizmendi and Aguirre to serve as mediators in the growing conflict with the EZLN, thus leaving Ruiz out of the equation. Proceso reported that the two bishops alerted Ruiz about the government's intentions. The three Chiapas bishops then issued a statement telling the government that the EZLN uprising should "serve as a warning of the danger of abandoning the country's marginalized groups." La Jornada said Arizmendi's appointment was positive, considering alternatives the Vatican might have chosen. "The Catholic hierarchy could have well taken advantage of this opportunity to name an individual who has closer ties to the so-called club of Rome," said the editorial. "This individual could have potentially dismantled or significantly reversed the community networks that had been created with the faithful of the diocese, the majority of whom are poor Indians." The strongest endorsement of Arizmendi came from retiring Bishop Ruiz. "We cannot hide our joy," said Ruiz, who praised the newly appointed bishop for offering his support during very difficult situations.

Arizmendi, scheduled to assume his new post on May 1, has for the past year served as secretary general of the Latin American bishops conference (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, CELAM). He has said he will leave this post to concentrate fully on his new role in San Cristobal de las Casas.

(Sources: Associated Press, Reuters, 03/31/00; Los Angeles Times, Excelsior, Reforma, Notimex, Proceso, La Jornada, 04/02/00; Novedades, 04/01/00, 04/03/00; El Universal, 04/03/00)

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