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Election of New Pope Exposes Divisions in Mexican Catholic Church

by LADB Staff

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The election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to succeed Pope John Paul II has exposed some divisions within the Mexican Catholic Church and brought to light the uneasy relationship that has existed between the Vatican and some Mexican bishops. The Mexican bishops conference (Conferencia del Episcopado de Mexico, CEM) reacted favorably to Ratzinger's rise to the papacy. Ratzinger has chosen the name Benedict XVI. "We are sure that the new pope will know how to offer the appropriate responses to the challenges of the modern world," said Bishop Jose Guadalupe Martin Rabago, who serves as CEM spokesperson and also heads the Diocese of Leon in Guanajuato.

A Liberation Theology detractor

Still, there is a level of discomfort among some Mexican bishops, particularly Raul Vera of the Saltillo Diocese and Arturo Lona Reyes, who retired from the Diocese of Tehuantepec. Both have been outspoken in their support of liberation theology, whose key principle is the "preferential option for the poor." Ratzinger led Vatican opposition to liberation theology. Critics of Ratzinger say he suppressed, or at least openly discouraged, liberation theology in Mexico and other parts of the world when he headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, his post until he was elected pope.

Ratzinger is said to have especially targeted Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who led the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas between 1959 and 2000. Ruiz pushed tirelessly for the economic and political rights of indigenous peoples, particularly the Tzotzil, Chol, and Tzeltal communities in Chiapas state.

Ruiz and other bishops tailored the principles of liberation theology to local indigenous customs, in what became known as indigenous theology. Ruiz supported many principles espoused by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), which led an uprising in 1994 to protest the government's economic policies and to seek increased cultural and economic rights for indigenous peoples (see SourceMex, 1996-02-21 and 1999-12-01).

Ruiz's involvement with the indigenous communities made him the target of four assassination attempts, the latest of which came in 1997 (see SourceMex, 1997-11-12). The San Cristobal bishop also pushed hard for a peaceful solution to the conflict in Chiapas through the formation of the independent Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI), in an attempt to bring the EZLN and the government together (see SourceMex, 1994-05-18 and 1995-01-11 and 1999-06-17).

Vatican kept an eye on Chiapas bishop

Bishop Ruiz has had his share of run-ins with the Vatican. In 1993, Vatican Apostolic Nuncio Jeronimo Pirigone, who was assigned to Mexico, sought to remove Bishop Ruiz from his post in the

San Cristobal de las Casas Diocese because of concerns that the theologies he supported were not in compliance with the doctrines of the church.

The Vatican backed off after Bishops Felipe Arizmendi and Felipe Aguirre Franco of two neighboring dioceses in Chiapas came to Ruiz's defense (see SourceMex, 2000-04-12). The matter did not end there, as Vatican officials summoned Ruiz to Rome in 1995 to meet with then Cardinal Ratzinger to explain his endorsement of the concept of indigenous theology.

In addition to what it perceived as a Marxist orientation to indigenous theology, the Vatican was concerned about other practices that had evolved in the diocese of San Cristobal, such as allowing permanent deacons, who were married, to perform duties reserved for a priest. Just a few years ago, the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas had the largest number of deacons of any diocese in the world, with deacons outnumbering priests by a 5-to-1 ratio. "Their special brand of evangelism, infused with the tenets of liberation theology as well as pre-Columbian symbols and songs, has not escaped the notice of Rome," said The New York Times in an article published in March 2002.

The daily newspaper La Jornada reported that Ratzinger asked Ruiz why he was not making a stronger effort to ordain priests. Ruiz's response was that there were many men in his diocese who were prepared for the diaconate, but many of these men were already married. The Vatican took no immediate action after the meeting with Ruiz, but in 2002 Vatican officials ordered Ruiz's successor Felipe Arizmendi to stop ordaining deacons for at least five years while the process was under evaluation.

Regarding liberation theology, Cardinal Ratzinger made his position known in Guadalajara in 1996 at a meeting with the doctrinal commissions of the 22 episcopal conferences from Latin America. He raised concerns that liberation theology was taking on new faces, such as indigenous theology, feminism, and environmentalism.

In 1999, Pope John Paul II offered a conciliatory message on a visit to Mexico, saying that indigenous peoples and their culture would continue to play a major role in the contemporary Catholic Church. However, in an interview with reporters, John Paul raised concerns that indigenous theology was inspired by Marxism, a philosophy rejected by the Catholic Church. Instead, he said, the church is committed to "solidarity and dialogue" with indigenous peoples.

Bishop Ruiz takes conciliatory stance toward new pope

Even with the Vatican's efforts to suppress liberation theology and indigenous theology, Ruiz refused to directly criticize the new pope. In an interview with the television network Televisa, he said the reason the Vatican stepped in to examine his activities was because of complaints by members of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which at that time was beginning to lose control of all aspects of Mexican society.

Ruiz sounded conciliatory regarding the selection of Ratzinger as the new pope. "We are convinced that the church will take seriously its primary duty to promote peace and justice in a world torn apart by violence and hate," said the former bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas. The immediate reactions from Bishops Vera and Lona were not as positive as that of Ruiz. Vera was thought to be

Ruiz's natural successor upon his retirement in 2000, but Vera was instead appointed to head the Diocese of Saltillo in the northern state of Coahuila (see SourceMex, 2000-01-09).

The Vatican appointed Arizmendi to succeed Ruiz (see SourceMex, 2000-04-12). Vera indirectly criticized the selection of Ratzinger, which he said failed to address the needs of the Catholic Church in the Americas. "The cardinals were thinking about security," he said. "And they were also thinking about someone who would complete the papacy of John Paul II." Lona Reyes was more direct in his criticisms. "Those who are happiest [about this selection] are the rich and the supporters of the ultraright organizations in the church like Opus Dei and the Legionnaires of Christ," said Lona. But he also emphasized that he would not become a "rebel" against the Vatican. "I will accept the new pope, but I hope he treads very carefully when dealing with the subject of liberation theology, which has become more universal in Latin America," said Lona Reyes.

Arizmendi attempted to define the philosophy of Benedict XVI. "He does not condemn liberation that is compatible with the gospels and the teachings of the church," said Arizmendi. "Rather, he rejects liberation that is Marxist, materialistic, or atheistic."

Arizmendi acknowledged that the Vatican has asked him and other bishops to closely monitor the practice of indigenous theology. "We do not want to condemn it as a principle, but we want to listen to its proposals and incorporate those that are compatible [with the teachings of the church]," said the bishop.

The CEM asked critics not to judge the new pope too quickly. "Our perceptions must not be based on pre-established labels," said CEM executive secretary Jose Antonio Sandoval Tajonar. "We have to wait and see what priorities Benedict XVI presents to us and assume them with a spirit of faith." Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City said he has formally invited the new pope to travel to Mexico in September. This followed the "permanent invitation" offered by Catholic President Vicente Fox to the pope the previous day.

The support for Ratzinger's election is not universal in Mexico and other parts of Latin America, with many critics saying that the College of Cardinals should have looked to a cardinal from a developing country rather than another European. "[Latin Americans] feel a little abandoned," said Daniel Gutierrez, a researcher who specializes in religious studies at the Colegio de Mexico. Gutierrez said Benedict XVI has some big shoes to fill if he is to attain the popularity of John Paul II among Latin Americans. The late Pope John Paul II, who was known as the traveling pope, visited Mexico five times. "[Pope Benedict XVI] needs to continue the trend of being close to the region," Gutierrez told The Washington Post. "If he doesn't do that in the first or second year of his papacy, then the risk of people feeling abandoned will be much greater."

Move to oust Mexico City mayor also creates some divisions

While the Mexican Roman Catholic Church is trying to show a united front regarding the new pope, the CEM is also attempting to defuse the perception that bishops are divided on issues related to Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. In early April, the Mexican Congress voted to strip immunity from Lopez Obrador, following charges that he violated the Mexican Constitution by ignoring a court order (see SourceMex, 2004-05-26 and 2005-04-13).

The decision to allow prosecution of Lopez Obrador is seen as a maneuver by President Fox and members of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the PRI to prevent Lopez Obrador from running in the 2006 presidential election. The popular Mexico City mayor is leading most polls. In response to the congressional vote, the CEM's pastoral committee on social concerns (Comision Episcopal de Pastoral Social, CEPS) issued an eight-page statement criticizing the Fox government and legislators for the action.

The CEPS said voters should have the ultimate word as to whether Lopez Obrador stays on as mayor and runs for higher office next year. The CEM has neither endorsed nor rejected the report from the CEPS, but openly acknowledged that individual bishops hold differing opinions on the matter. Bishop Martin Rabago, speaking for the CEM, said the conference favors "compliance with the law and respect for institutions," two principles that Lopez Obrador is accused of violating.

At the same time, Rabago noted that the CEPS was simply fulfilling its mission of commenting on issues that are important to Mexican society. Lopez Obrador's center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) has organized massive rallies in support of the mayor, drawing hundreds of thousands of supporters both in Mexico City and in other parts of the country.

Bishops differed on whether the Catholic Church should endorse these rallies. Among the dissenters was Bishop Ulises Macias Salcedo of the Archdiocese of Hermosillo, who said the church must not be perceived as taking sides with any political party, in this case the PRD. "Our role is to form a civic conscience, but not to become embroiled in partisan matters," said Macias Salcedo. Macias also raised concerns that the rallies could escalate into violence, disrupting the social peace.

Luis Fletes Santana, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Mexico City, discarded the notion that the huge rallies in support of the Mexico City mayor could result in any violent actions. "Democracy is a newly evolving concept for our country," he said. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 01/26/99; The Washington Post, 04/19/05; The New York Times, 03/12/02, 04/20/05; Associated Press, 04/20/05, 04/21/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/19/05, 04/20/05, 04/22/05; El Universal, 04/20/05, 04/22/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 04/20-22/05; The Dallas Morning News, 04/22/05; Notimex, 04/21/05, 04/24/05; La Crisis, 04/22/05, 04/25/05; Noticiero Televisa, El Pais, 04/25/05; La Jornada, 04/21/05, 04/25/05, 04/26/05)

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