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Catholic Church Embroiled in Controversy Regarding Drug-Cartel Donations

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican Catholic Church has found itself in another controversy amid allegations that some bishops are accepting donations from drug traffickers. The controversy erupted in late September when Bishop Ramon Godinez Flores of Aguascalientes candidly admitted to reporters that some drug traffickers were giving large sums of money to his diocese. These drug traffickers, said Godinez, were motivated by a desire to be "purified."

Godinez initially defended his decision to accept the money, saying that the church should ignore the origins of donations just as Jesus showed no curiosity about the expensive perfume Mary Magdalene used to wash his feet. "Bad money shouldn't be burned, it should be transformed," said the bishop.

Godinez addressed the press a day later, saying his comments were misinterpreted. "They have said that I said that one can 'launder' ill-gotten money in the church or that the church takes the money of drug traffickers. I never made those statements and they are not accurate."

Bishops conference calls allegation 'groundless'

Still, the statements by the Aguascalientes bishop created such an uproar that officials of the Mexican Catholic bishops conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM) were forced to issue statements denying that the Mexican Roman Catholic Church was in the habit of accepting donations from drug traffickers.

"[This allegation] is not only completely groundless, but also contradicts our important social-assistance work," said a statement from Texcoco Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes, who also serves as the CEN secretary-general. "The Catholic Church systematically rejects whatever public conduct goes against ethics," the bishop said. "This rejection is especially vigorous when it concerns a crime as serious as drug trafficking, which causes very serious damage to families and to the entire social and economic fabric of our country and of the whole world."

Aguiar acknowledged that bishops have no control over relatively small donations but said the church demands full disclosure when large sums of money are given to any Catholic diocese. "As a practical rule the church demands that the donor identify himself," said the CEM secretary-general.

This is not the first time that Mexican Catholic Church has been accused of connections to the drug trade. In 2003, former attorney general Jorge Carpizo McGregor accused Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iniguez of accepting donations from notorious drug traffickers. Carpizo made these charges shortly after Cardinal Sandoval accused him of covering up evidence that high-level officials may have participated in the murder of Cardinal Juan Jose Posadas Ocampo in 1993 (see SourceMex,
2003-10-01). Posadas was murdered as he sat in a limousine outside the Guadalajara International Airport.

The official investigations found that the cardinal was caught in an exchange of fire between members of two drug cartels. Cardinal Sandoval contends that the government theory was wrong and that Posadas was actually the target of an assassination by someone connected with the administration of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (see SourceMex, 2001-06-13).

Godinez's statement and the reactions from the CEM came after Pope Benedict XVI on Sept. 15 expressed his concern about the infiltration of drug trafficking and organized crime into Mexican society. "Let us not forget that one of the roots of the problem is the great economic disparity, which prevents the just development of a large portion of the population," said the pope. Reactions varied among government officials.

**Federal prosecutor downplays bishop's comments**

Attorney General Daniel Francisco Cabeza de Vaca downplayed Godinez's comments. "At this point we are not conducting an investigation," said Cabeza de Vaca. "But we ask bishops, archbishops, any priest to denounce any suspected illegal donation."

Several members of Congress, however, said they would demand that the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) conduct an investigation to determine the extent to which drug dealers are laundering profits through the church. "This is a serious matter when a bishop makes these kinds of revelations," Deputy Rebeca Godinez y Bravo said in reference to the comments from the Aguascalientes bishop.

Godinez y Bravo, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) legislator, is not related to the bishop. Drug cartels may help fund 2006 electoral campaigns Godinez y Bravo said the controversy regarding the donations to the Catholic Church could be a sign that drug traffickers have "begun to infiltrate several sectors of society." Among other things, there are strong concerns that campaign donations from drug traffickers could be contributing to the record expenditures expected in the 2006 electoral campaign (see other article in this issue of SourceMex).

Drug donations allegedly helped finance the PRI and PAN gubernatorial campaigns in Sinaloa and Tamaulipas in 2004 (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17). "The drug cartels have easily made the transition into politics because there is no institutional power that can confront them," said Julio Hernandez Lopez, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada.

Hernandez said the cartels would not only provide funding for presidential campaigns, but would also contribute in less visible ways, such as funding the creation of political-support networks for presidential, gubernatorial, and congressional candidates around the country. Authorities have had a difficult time proving the connections between drug traffickers and elected officials.

There have been a few instances where a connection to the drug cartels has been established, which has damaged the political fortunes of some elected officials, including three governors: Mario
Villanueva of Quintana Roo (see SourceMex, 1999-01-06 and 2000-03-01), Romero de Velazquez of Jalisco (see SourceMex, 1998-02-04), and Sergio Estrada Cajigal of Morelos (see SourceMex, 2004-04-21).

Elected officials are not the only ones accused of connections to drug traffickers. In a sting operation conducted by the PGR, authorities arrested Army Brig. Gen. Ricardo Martinez Perea (see SourceMex, 2001-04-18). The allegations even reached President Vicente Fox's staff, where presidential scheduler Nahum Acosta Lugo is said to have passed confidential information to the Sinaloa cartel (see SourceMex, 2005-02-23 and 2005-04-27). [Sources: El Universal, 02/14/05; Spanish news service EFE, 02/05/05, 09/21/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, The Herald-Mexico City, La Jornada de Morelos, El Sol de Zacatecas, The Guardian-London, 09/22/05; Associated Press, 09/23/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 09/21/05, 09/22/05, 09/25/05; Criterios, 09/20/05, 09/26/05; Notimex, 09/20/05, 09/25/05, 09/26/05; La Jornada, 09/2/05, 09/23/05, 09/26/05]